



An Insight into the Socio-Economic Profile of Urban Street Vendors of Assam

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Abstract

Street vending is a visible component of informal sector economy and government treats the street vendors as illegal 'encroachers'. Street vendors contribute to an economy in terms of revenue generation, creation of employment, growth of industries, capital formation etc. Street vending is an easy source of livelihood for most of the street vendors. Majority of the street vendors are relatively poor and they primarily come from marginal populations in India. The number of street vendors in Assam is mounting up every year and it has been posing a threat to the district administrators and public as a whole basically in urban areas. The working conditions of street vendors are not sound and they do not have social security measures to lead a decent life. The social economic profiles of the street vendors are often not adequately explained in the mainstream economics literature. The study takes into account of 400 sample urban street vendors in three municipal cities of Guwahati, Tezpur and Jorhat of Assam (India) to analyze some socio-economic aspects of sample urban street vendors of Assam.

Keywords: Street vendors, employment, informal sector, capital formation, social security

1. Introduction

National Commission on Labour defines street vendors as those self-employed workers in the informal sector who offer their labour for selling goods and services on the street without having any permanent built-up structure. According to Bhowmik (2006) [4], "Street vendor refers to a person who offers goods for sale to the public at large without having a permanent built-up structure from which to sale". Thus, Street vendors constitute a visible segment of informal sector that form a remarkable part of total workforce of unorganized sector in Assam. They are basically migrated unskilled and uneducated rural people whereas a section of urban poor and educated unemployed people also tend to undertake street vending as a source of sustenance.

Street business activities require low investment to start, expand and continue the business. It requires no procedural steps to follow. Due to acute economic hardships in an economy like high unemployment and poverty, there may be continuous large scale rural-urban migration and cross-border migration for which people are compelled to engage themselves in activities like street vending (Boake, 2011; Dendukuri, 2014) [6, 7]. Street vendors sell perishable as well as non-perishable goods. It involves enormous physical labour. Some street vendors are supported by children or aged people either being family members or wage earners. Street vendors primarily belong to low income group who are closely connected with small suppliers and small buyers.

Street vendors prefer some strategic points or places to vend where there is heavy traffic, people walk from one place to another, main roads, bus stand, train stations, areas proximity to office and educational institutions, shopping centres, big malls etc. (Mitullah, 2005). Street vending is an easy opportunity of earning in the city (Kusakabe, 2006) [9]. It is not only a source of self-employment for the urban poor and rural migrants, but it also provides 'affordable' and 'convenient' services to a majority of urban population.

Street vendors have limited access to regulated market mechanism, viz. adequate space to render business. They hardly get any support from the government for training and education and financial help from institutional credit sources. They render street business activities mostly in dirty and unhygienic working conditions (Sekhani and Medipally, 2019) [16]. Being an important segment of unorganized sector of an economy, street vending activities are remaining mostly non-registered and non-recognized by the government.

This paper deals with socio-economic conditions of sample street vendors of three municipal cities of Assam viz. Guwahati, Tezpur and Jorhat. The study concerns about the social conditions of sample street vendors where social profile of the sample street vendors are discussed. More specifically, the paper analyzes certain aspects of social conditions and basic social profile of the sample vendors such as composition of age, sex and caste, status of religion and educational attainment, migration status, marital status, state of domicile, location and structure of housing of the sample vendors.

2. Objectives

The objective of the study is to explain socio-economic profile of urban street vendors of Assam.

3. Methodology

The study is exclusively based upon primary data in which 400 samples urban street vendors (200 samples from Guwahati, 100 samples each from Tezpur and Jorhat municipal

Table 1: Activity wise distribution of sample street traders

Sample Vendors	Vegetable	Fruit	Fish	Meat	Stationary	Food	Garment	Service	Total
Number	79	52	53	28	46	88	37	17	400
Percentage	19.75	13	13.25	7	11.5	22	9.25	4.25	100

cities) of Assam have been interviewed. The samples covers both stationary and mobile vendors, male as well as female vendors, which are classified into eight distinct categories as shown in Table-1 that depicts the sample framing of the study by category of work performed by sample traders. Convenience sampling and descriptive statistics are applied for the analysis to test the hypothesis and achieve the objectives of the study.

4. Review of Literature

Most of the street vendors are relatively poor and they come from marginal populations (often international or internal migrants) and engage in street vending activity by bare necessity rather than by choice (Bhowmik, 2005; Anjaria, 2006) [3, 1]. Economic recession and downturn leads to rise in unemployed people in an economy and some of them are compelled to adopt street vending for income earning and livelihood. Closure of industries, downsizing and mergers, retrenchment of workers from formal sector are also responsible for street vending activities as a last source of livelihood (Bhowmik, 2006) [4]. After the East Asian financial crisis of 1997, a section of people of Thailand were compelled to undertake street business due to economic recession and financial crisis of mid 1990s (Walsh, 2010; Kusakabe, 2006) [17, 9]. People who render street business activities are not required to learn about how to start the vending business and depending on what one wants to sell. Moreover, it is possible to lead a minimum standard of living by adopting street vending business. In some cases, female street vendors support to their family income when husbands are unable to afford their entire household expenditure alone.

Street vending becomes a prominent business activity as a means of livelihood to become independent and a source of self-employment among the underprivileged group in an economy. In Thailand, street vending is not only a choice for the urban poor, but it is considered as a prime and attractive means of sustenance for the educated middle class (Kusakabe, 2006; Saha, 2011; Ndhlovu, 2011) [9, 15, 11]. The youth in Sub-Saharan Africa have been increasingly engaged in the informal sector to enhance their livelihoods (Joseph, 2016) [10]. Majority of the street vendors belong to the age group of 16 years to 35 years in most of the developing and underdeveloped countries. In India, street vending is the last option for most of the unskilled and illiterate urban poor as a source of livelihood They primarily carry out street vending activities alone at their workplace whereas sometimes they are assisted by children or aged people either being family members or wage earners (Robert, 2012; Dendukuri, 2014) [12, 7].

Street vendors are not able to access the benefits of such social security measures introduced by the government to lead a decent life (Bhowmik, 2006; Saha, 2010; Kumar, 2015) [4, 14, 8] and only few of them have limited access to social security benefits. In case of social protection, only a small percentage of vendors get access to state sponsored social protection regimes (Roever, 2016). They borrow money for social security so as to meet basic healthcare and medicine, daughter's marriage, education expenses of their children and so on (Anjaria, 2006; Saha, 2011) [1, 15].

Urban street vendors are vulnerable to verbal abuse and harassment from public officials, frequent raids and confiscation of their goods since they do not possess vending license (Bhowmik, 2005; Berry, 2009; Njaya, 2014) [3]. They have non-cordial and hostile relation with the police and municipal officials which are acute in the over-populated cities like metropolitan city of Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata etc. Mobile street vendors move from one street to another or one place to another place of the same street to get rid of police patrolling and their atrocities and other municipal officials. They become more vulnerable to natural calamities, unfavourable weather conditions and accidents in the workplace (Tamirat and Nega, 2015). They move from one location to another amidst adverse weather conditions such as heat, cold, rain, hailstorm and wind. Sometimes they utter loud voices to attract buyers and increase sale. They tend to reduce the price of their goods to attract the customers from other vendors or from fixed shops (Bhat and Nengroo, 2013) [2]. There are absence of basic amenities such as toilet, drinking water, storage and shade in the market place of the vendors. Consequently, they are compelled to tolerate physical pain by taking less water or vending under the scorching sunrays (Mahadevia *et al.*, 2016) [10]. Municipalities often take resort to harassment, threats, intimidation, sudden raids, abuse and physical torture and collect bribes from the street vendors (Bhat and Nengroo, 2013) [2].

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1. Composition of Sex of Sample Vendors

As revealed in figure-1, 77.5% of the sample street vendors constitute male whereas only 22.5% of the respondents of the study area constitute female. Street vending is basically a male-oriented occupation in Assam. Although street vending is a male-dominated business, most of the male sample vendors are supported by their family members including their wives, children or relatives by any means who may not be present in the vending site. It means female participation in street vending business is not ruled out in Assam.

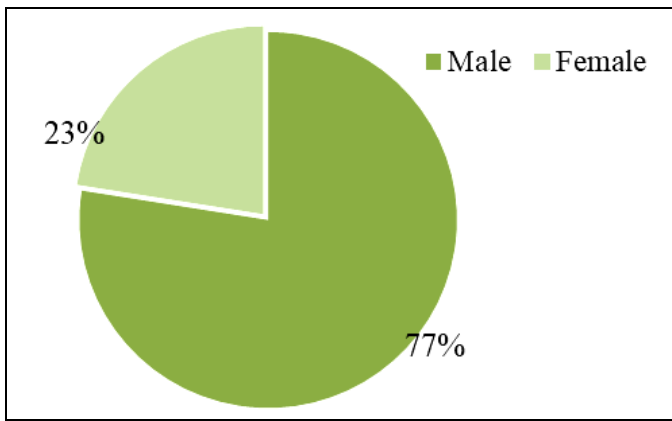


Fig 1: Sex composition of the sample vendors

5.2. Composition of Age of Sample Vendors

As revealed in figure-2, majority of the sample vendors belong to the age group of 26 years to 40 years which constitutes nearly 64% of the sample street vendors. This is one of the most active age group of the total workforce and participation of this age group in street vending activities shows the existence of high level of unemployment and lack of job opportunity in other sectors especially in the formal sector.

There are only 1.8% of the respondents below the age group of 18 years and 2.5% in the age group of 61 years to 70 years. There is no sample vendor above 70 years old. It means sample street vendors above 60 years are negligible in the state.

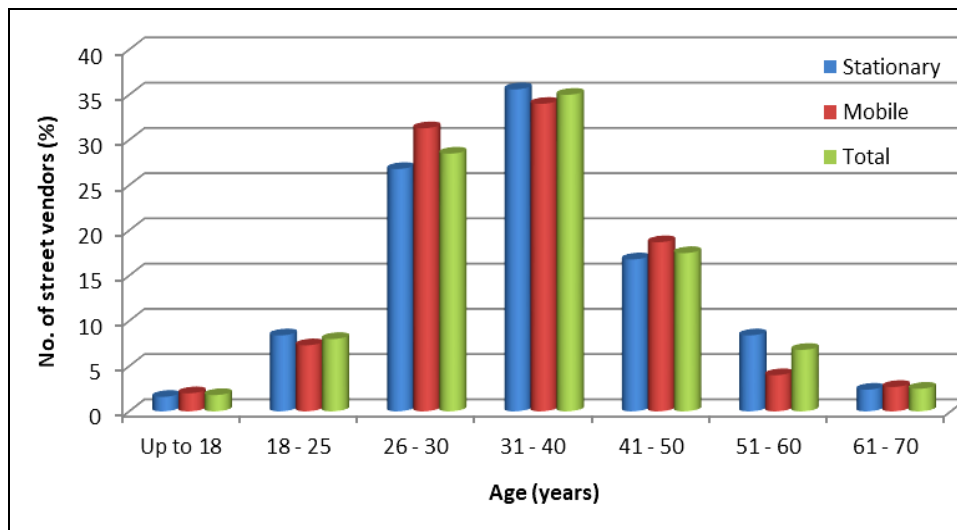


Fig 2: Composition of age (years) of sample vendors.

5.3. Composition of Caste of Sample Vendors

The study entails other important socio-demographic features of the sample vendors such as caste composition, marital status, religion etc. Table-2 reveals that 55% of the sample street vendors belong to general category, more than one-fourth of the sample vendors belong to other backward class (OBC) whereas other categories like schedule caste (SC), schedule tribe (ST) etc. constitute comparatively less in the total sample vendors.

Table 2: Distribution of caste category of sample vendors

Caste	Type of Vending				Total	
	Stationary		Mobile			
	f	%	f	%	f	%
General	140	56.0	80	53.3	220	55.0
SC	27	10.8	21	14.0	48	12.0
ST	14	5.6	7	4.7	21	5.2
OBC	67	26.8	34	22.7	101	25.2
Others	2	0.8	8	5.3	10	2.5
Total	250	100	150	100	400	100

Source: Field Survey Note: 'f' stands for frequency and '%' for percentage

5.4. Composition of Religion of Sample Vendors

As depicted in figure-3, almost 71% of the sample street vendors constitute Hindu religion, nearly 28% comprises Islam and less than 1% of sample vendors from Christian and

other religions like Jain. Thus the study reveals that most of the sample vendors belong to Hindu religion followed by Islam.

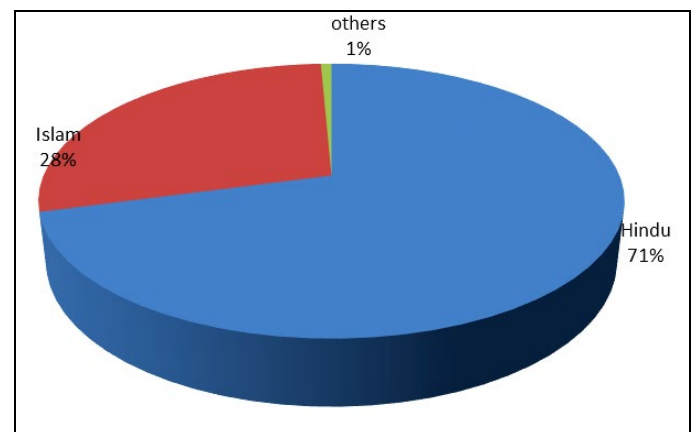


Fig 3: Distribution of religion of the sample street vendors

5.5. Marital Status of Sample Vendors

The study reveals that three-fourth of the sample vendors are married. On the other hand, as revealed in figure-4, unmarried sample street vendors of the study area constitute 25% of the sample street vendors. It means most of the sample street vendors of the sample municipal cities of Assam are adults who render street vending business as a source of livelihood.

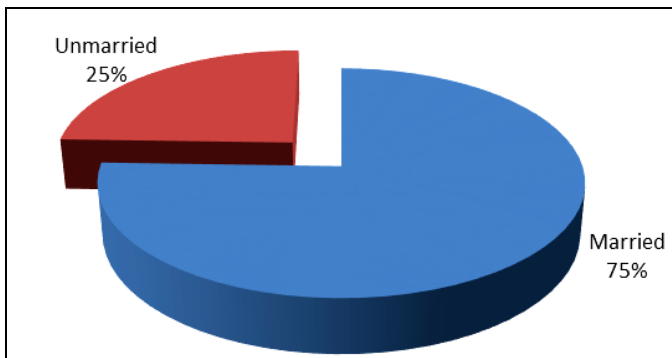


Fig 4: Marital status of the sample street vendors.

5.6. Status of Family System of Sample Vendors

As demonstrated in figure-5, almost three-fourth of the sample street vendors of the study area follows nuclear family system whereas the remaining one-fourth vendors are still adhering to the joint family system. It demonstrates that the traditional age-old joint family system has been gradually disappearing and eroded among the sample street vendors and adherence to nuclear family pattern is prevailing more among the sample vendors of the state.

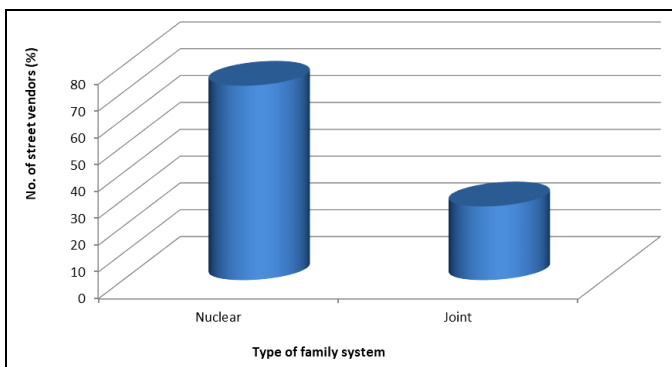


Fig 5: Type of family system of the sample vendors.

5.7. Educational Attainment of Sample Vendors

As shown in figure-6, nearly 13% of the surveyed street vendors of the study area are illiterate. However, 36% of the sample vendors have obtained education up to lower primary and Middle English and one-third of the total sample vendors have studied up to secondary school. It means majority of the respondents of the sample cities have low level of formal education. On the other hand, nearly 3% of the sample street vendors have attained graduation and post-graduation. It signifies that the number of sample vendors having higher educational qualification is negligible in Assam.

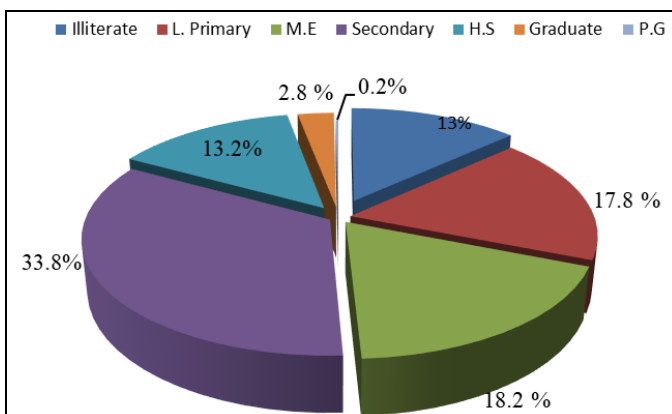


Fig 6: Distribution of sample street vendors according to educational attainment

5.8. Sample Vendors' Stay in the City and their Status of Domicile State

Table-5.2 reveals that only 18% of the sample street vendors of the study area stay alone in the city to carry out street vending activities whereas 82% of the sample vendors stay with their family while pursuing street vending. Moreover, they render street vending activities in urban areas basically by taking room on rent or sharing basis.

Table 3: Distribution of status of stay of the sample vendors in the city

Status of Stay in the City	Type of Vending				Total	
	Stationary		Mobile		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Family	211	84.4	117	78	328	82
Alone	39	15.6	33	22	72	18
Total	250	100	150	100	400	100

Source: Field Survey, Note: 'f' stands for frequency and '%' for percentage

6. Conclusion

The study reveals that street vending is a male-dominated business although some of them are supported by their family members including their wives, children or relatives by any means who may not be present in the vending site. The participation of the young age group in street vending activities reveals the prevalence of high level of unemployment and lack of job opportunity in other sectors especially in the formal sector. Most of the sample vendors belong to Hindu religion and the traditional joint family system has been gradually disappearing and eroded among the sample street vendors. The study also reveals that majority of the respondents of the sample cities have low level of formal education.

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