



## Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-XII, Issue-II, January 2024, Page No.276-282

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

---

### Culinary Culture and Identity of a Place: Socio-Political Analysis of Street Foods of Kolkata

Dr. Sriparna Chatterjee

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Matiaburj College, Kolkata. India.

#### Abstract:

*India cherishes a great tradition of foods and has remained a destination of culinary delights for food lovers across the world. Street food carries an important connotation, especially in the urban context. From creating job openings for thousands to endorsing and retaining the popular culture of an area - it decorates the urban canvas with numerous colours. Primarily the street food business was meant for the marginalized and socio-economically backward classes and their target customers too belonged to the lower strata of society, Over time the street food business has become a popular one attracting both vendors and customers from different layers of society blurring the class division. With the advent of globalization, the street food business has received a new zeal and the Government is also taking the initiative for its promotion and betterment.*

*The paper will attempt to explore the nexus between culture and street food and try to reveal how significant role street food business is playing in glorifying the popular culture, heritage and identity of a place. An attempt to scrutinize the impact of globalization and global culture on the exclusive character of street food will also be made. The idea of city space, the responsibility of authorities, and the policies and programmes spinning around street food will be another vital sector of investigation. City Kolkata is the area of the case study to evaluate the hypotheses and look for coherent decisions.*

**Keywords: Street foods, Gastronomic tourism, Popular culture, Identity, Policy, Globalization.**

---

The culture and character of a place can be defined by multiple aspects amongst which food, the primordial necessity of human life is one of the greatest factors. Culinary delights have fascinated people across the globe over time and taken a leading role in shaping the course of everyday life. Food is recognized as a significant cultural artefact throughout the World. India has always mesmerised its people and tourists from overseas with its great heritage of different types of foods and has promoted the notion of gastronomic tourism to a great scale.

Street foods of India demand special attention in nurturing the rich culture of food, especially in the urban context. The study of street food is primarily been told from the aspects of hygiene, nutrition and hospitality but the story has many layers within its cover. A wonderful blending of class, culture, heritage, space, sociability and politics can be traced in the fragrance of street foods.

Street food has remained an integral part of our society, culture and heritage for time immemorial. In terms of diversity and abundance India's street foods are extremely an eye-catcher for the world. As per the definition provided by WHO in 1996, "Street foods or street vended foods are defined as foods and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors in streets and other public spaces for immediate consumption or consumption at a later time without further processing or preparation." Street foods are different from other ways of eating outdoors like picnics, since their nature is not temporary. Street foods are especially an urban phenomenon and their existence is continuous except for changes in character and content over time. Street foods are the reflection of a variety of traditional foods with diverse tastes and flavours. These foods are found in almost every corner of the city and sold by hawkers or food vendors in portable carts. The main unique selling point (USP) of street food is its cheaper price and availability in a shorter period which is truly beneficial for a thousand of consumers leading a fast life.

The history of street food is century old and over the world, the culture of praising and relishing street foods can be traced. Price affordability, mouth-watering taste, easy accessibility and variety have made them favourites across the globe. Apart from these factors, street food promotes popular culture, provides a distinctive identity to a particular space, and cherishes its tradition, heritage and customs. Street food epitomizes a distinctive culinary culture of each region and particularly of a space. Street food is one of the best ways to discover the culture of an area. It protects and promotes the history and tradition of a place. The culture of a particular space greatly influences the origin and continuity of the street food. It illustrates the culinary heritage of a space and the common practises, tastes and beliefs of its people. This great nexus between street food and popular culture encourages tourism and makes an area widely popular. In a way, street food is a lens through which the unique flavours, traditions and social dynamics of different regions and communities can be explored. People come and taste the local flavour, and enjoy the spirit of the place through these mouth-watering dishes. Street food highlights the exclusive flavours and ingredients of a specific area. It reflects the choice of food of the people of that locality and contains a local spirit. It nurtures the culinary heritage of a particular region as many street foods have deep-rooted historical and cultural implications. The traditional recipes and cooking methods are passed on from one generation to the next, creating a legacy. Since most street food stalls are situated on busy roadsides, different types of people come and enjoy food, and this fosters a community feeling. It plays a vibrant role in community cohesion and a feeling of carnival always persists.

Moreover, Street food generates job opportunities. Since the cost of starting a street food business is low, therefore thousands of unemployed and non-technical workforces can join this venture to earn their livelihood. The street food industry offers a substantial volume of employment habitually to persons with little education and training. Multiple factors are associated with the growth of the street food industry for example- unemployment, increasing demand for cooked food, movement of people for various reasons and finally the spree to get culinary items at a cheaper price.

Street food in this context reveals a unique class structure. Since the sellers are primarily the marginalized and in many cases migrated people from different places thus it can be said that the street food business serves the lower strata of society by providing them an opportunity for upward mobility in terms of earning. Interestingly the customer base of street food is wider as it serves multiple layers. The economically backward section gets the privilege of having food at a cheaper price, but people from different strata owing to their busy lifestyle or passion for cuisine, love to have the taste of these tempting foods. In this regard, the equalizing nature of street foods is appreciated as it serves a wide range of people irrespective of their social or economic background. Thus going beyond taste and tradition street food celebrates sociability.

Nowadays with the popularity of road trip culture by the bikers and four-wheeler riders, the Street food industry has got a new zeal. The number of food stalls has proliferated in different locations to cater to the needs of these travellers, for many of whom travelling means exploring places with authentic local food. With the advent of globalization street food industry has undergone a makeshift as overseas foods are making their place in the food stalls along with local ones. Sometimes global foods are customized as per local demand creating a blending of tastes. The mixture of different kinds of foods represents cultural integration and social acceptance of different kinds of foods. Moreover with the growth of social media food and travel-based content are becoming increasingly popular. Food Bloggers and Vloggers are creating content on street foods of different areas and spreading them with the right information and enthusiasm among the larger sections of society. Thus many unfamiliar, newly developed food stalls also suddenly becoming popular and earning better than before. It is generating an interest among the commoners to explore more such food hubs to taste delicious foods. For example very recently in Kolkata ‘Nandinir henshel’ in Dalhousie office area or Lalu Bhulur Ghugni near Sovabazar Ghat, has gained immense popularity after coverage by the You Tubers and different food bloggers. Many people are exploring these new destinations to taste delicious foods.

Though street food vendors comprise a large part of the urban population and serve the community on a great scale, often they face multiple hazards relating to business from administrative and societal levels. The socio-cultural and political ambience under which they work often poses a great risk to their livelihood. Often they are evicted by local govt. authorities for multiple reasons ranging from the occurrence of any mega event in the city or beautification project. Often their displacement causes confiscation of their properties. The Street Vendors Act 2014, which is meant to provide identification and guarantee space

to urban street vendors, is completely silent on such issues. The way the Act is playing out, it appears to be more exclusionary for the street vendors. Also, the vendors of street food are too poor to be able to pay for the obligatory hawking licence and that, in itself, makes them members of an underclass whose very existence is denied by law.

Moreover, the lack of proper infrastructure is another major issue. The supply of clean running water for drinking and cooking, lack of fire fighting equipment and waste disposal system augments the problems. Common allegations raised against street food stall vendors are- encroachment of roads, selling foods in an unhygienic manner, and not maintaining proper nutrition levels. Many urban elites believe that the existence of street vendors is not aesthetically decent for the city and that occupying pavements creates a nuisance in civic life and needs to be banned or restricted immediately. Though not all allegations are baseless, at the same time it is important to remember that in a democracy everyone has the right to earn their livelihood and the matter of community welfare or benefits should be kept in mind. Civic authorities also sometimes take drastic steps against street food vendors depending on the purpose. Needless to say such aggressive policy results in counter aggression only. Article, 19 (1) (g) of the Constitution of India provides the right to practise any profession or to carry on any occupation, trade or business, to all citizens. In Article 39 of the Directive Principles of the State Policy, it has been stated that “ The State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing— (a) that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.” The issue of vending in public spaces has now become questionable all over the globe. A much pertinent question is coming up who has a right to the city? More than sixty per cent of the World’s workers and ninety per cent in developing countries are informal workforce majority of whom work in the cities. Street vendors, waste pickers, and food sellers make their livelihood in public spaces, particularly on roads. The United Nations’ 2016 Sustainable Development Agenda directs governments to respect and support their livelihoods. Therefore every citizen has the right to earn their livelihood and they do enjoy their right to the city, and right to a place. What is required on the part of the administration is to make an inclusive policy and bring a change in policy regulation. Abrupt eviction and robust penalties will only create an annoyance. A more accommodative, compassionate policy regulation is essential to ensure overall growth and satisfaction.

A major complaint against the street food vendors is they do not maintain proper nutrition level, hygiene and standard of food. Since many of them are poor and uneducated, they have limited knowledge of food safety like environment, sanitation, hygiene, safe food handling, handwashing, food service, mode of food display, source of raw materials, use of water etc, therefore the matter of major public health risk is associated with street foods. It has been observed that with the growth of street food culture, in many countries of the globe, the policymakers are trying to formulate and implement a more accommodative policy for street food vendors focusing on the quality and nutrition of the food, proper infrastructure, solid waste management system, hygiene, sanitation, safety standard and providing training.

Govt. of India is also taking various steps and initiating new schemes for the betterment of the street food business. Indian street foods have been recognized globally for their delicious taste and flavour. In the year 2023, Kolkata street food was recognized as one of the popular destinations by the International food website 'Eater'. According to Eater, "In picking 2023's dining destinations, we thought not just about hit lists and must-try dishes (although those are important, too), but also the aspects of meals that make them feel immersive: the people, environment, culture, and history behind foods that force us to pause and tempt us from pre-planned paths." Multiple culinary threads have made Kolkata a popular destination among foodies. Kolkata has a rich trend of food culture and has remained travellers' delight for ages. Especially the lip-smacking street foods of Kolkata bring all sorts of foods in one place from biriyani and Chinese, to local ghugni, jhalmuri, telebhaja and many more. Along with sustenance Kolkata's street foods are a personification of the city's soul. They narrate stories of cultural unifications and the ravenous craving for life and all its flavours. The city's affection for food, its opulent past, and the consolidation of different cultures have resulted in a lively and vigorous food culture that continues to evolve with time. Street foods have always been a part of every culture from time immemorial, however, it has now evolved into a much more serious business internationally, with consumers now getting to taste street food from around the world in their areas. Every city has its street hub, In India Delhi's Chandni Chowk to Mumbai's Khau Galli these places treasure the local culture with a blending of regional and global cuisines. Kolkata has several street food destinations. Park Street's hot Kati roll to New Market's food lanes, Papri chat of Gariahaat, Kebabs of Zakaria Street, Authentic Chinese of Terita Bazar the list is infinite. Nevertheless, the biggest concern relating to these street foods is basic hygiene practices which mark the food unsafe.

Initiatives have now been taken on the Governmental level to make the street food business safe and hygienic. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is implementing a "clean street food hub programme" by identifying street food clusters across the country. The objective of this movement is to uplift food safety and hygiene in street food vending through a cluster approach. It would be jointly audited with State authorities for cleanliness and hygiene. Clusters would be encouraged to comply with certain standards and those meeting the criteria would get a "Clean Street Food Hub certificate". The Health Ministry, in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, has asked States and Union Territories to develop 100 food streets in 100 districts across the country. This project aims to encourage safe and healthy practices to reduce food-borne illnesses and improve overall health outcomes, said the Health Ministry.

The communication further said that safe food practices would not only boost the "Eat Right campaign" (the Eat Right India movement is an initiative of the Government of India and the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India [FSSAI] to convert the country's food system to ensure safe, healthy and sustainable food for all Indians) and food safety but also improve the hygiene credibility of local food businesses. Other benefits would include local employment opportunities and improvement in tourism potential. The initiative will

be executed through the National Health Mission (NHM) in convergence with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and with technical support from the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). The States and Union Territories will get Financial assistance of ₹1 crore per food street/district. The project visualizes 100 such food streets in 100 districts across the country. Support will be given under the NHM in the ratio of 60:40 or 90:10. The condition is that customary branding of these food streets needs to be finished as per FSSAI guidelines.

The State Government in June 2018 planned to construct five food zones in Kolkata from where the renowned street foods of the city would be sold hygienically. The scheme is targeted towards foreigners, who love street food but often hesitate to consume those which as per their standard are made in an unhygienic manner. The five zones would be located at Dharmatala, Dalhousie, the area around Victoria Memorial, Jorasanko and Millennium Park. According to a survey carried out by Kolkata Municipal Corporation, which would also be a part of this project, foods like doi-phuchka, telebhaja and jhalmuri are especially popular among foreign visitors. On the positive side, Govt. and different private entrepreneurs are conducting training workshops for street food vendors to improve the concept of hygiene, sanitation, and food safety. States and Union Territories can also conduct training programmes for street vendors on food safety, maintenance of hygiene, and waste disposal. The Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) has organized training workshops for street vendors as a part of their yearlong CSR initiative. The project “Apish Parar Khabar” (food of Office area) or the Dalhousie Street Food is aimed at empowering Kolkata’s Street vendors. The basic idea was to introduce the concepts of sanitation, health, hygiene, environment, food safety, entrepreneurship and culinary skills to the street vendors. They trained almost 80-100 street food vendors in five training workshops.

The street food business of our country especially in Kolkata is emerging as a trendy business globally and fostering gastronomic tourism. The authorities from all levels need to stimulate the endeavour by supporting it financially, technologically and innovatively. If nurtured properly this business can weave harmony and collaboration among the authority, traders and consumers and celebrate economic, social and cultural welfare on a global scale.

**Reference:**

- 1) Achaya, K. T. (1994). *Indian food: A historical companion*. New Delhi: Oxford Press.
- 2) Banerjee, Sumanta (1989) *Parlour and the Street: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*. Calcutta: Seagull.
- 3) Bhowmik, S.K. "Street Vendors in Asia: A Review." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, no. 22-23, 2005, pp. 2256-2264.
- 4) Chakravarthy, I and C. Canet. "Street Food in Calcutta." *Food and Agricultural Organisation*, 1996
- 5) Das Gupta, Minakshie, Gupta, Bunny, & Chaliha, Jaya (Eds.). (1995). *The Calcutta Cookbook: A Treasury of Recipes from Pavement to Palace*. Penguin Books.
- 6) Engineer, Rayomand. "This City Just Won the Title of India`s Best Street Food Hub. Here`s why!" *Times of India*, 23 July 2018, 6:14 pm, [www.betterindia.com/152048/kolkata-india-best-street-food-news/](http://www.betterindia.com/152048/kolkata-india-best-street-food-news/)
- 7) McDonald, M. R. (2009). *Food culture in Central America*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press.
- 8) Sen, Colleen Taylor (2015). *Feasts and Fasts A History of Food in India*. Speaking Tiger.
- 9) Tinker, I. (1997). *Street foods: urban food and employment in developing countries*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- 10) Urry, J., (2002). *The tourist gaze: leisure and travel in contemporary societies*. Sage, London.