

Socio-Economic Analysis of Street Vendors in North East India: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

This review paper synthesizes findings from various socio-economic studies on street vendors across different regions, including Kenya, Ghana, Nepal, India, and Indonesia. It provides insights into the challenges and strategies of street vendors, focusing on aspects such as income levels, gender roles, education, health, advocacy, and the need for policy interventions. The paper highlights the significant role of street vending in the informal economy and underscores the necessity of supportive measures to improve the livelihood of street vendors. Specifically, the research delves into the socio-economic analysis of street vendors in North East India, a region characterized by its diverse cultures, ethnicities, and economic challenges. Street vending is a crucial aspect of the informal economy in North East India, providing livelihoods to a significant portion of the population. The paper reviews existing literature to understand the socio-economic profile of street vendors, their contributions to the economy, the challenges they face, and the policies impacting their livelihoods.

Key words: Street vendors, informal economy, socio-economic studies, North East India, policy interventions

Introduction

Street vending is a vital component of the informal economy in many developing countries, providing livelihoods to millions of urban poor. In India, this sector is particularly significant, reflecting the country's vast socio-economic diversity and challenges. According to Bhowmik (2010), street vendors constitute a significant portion of the urban workforce, yet they often face numerous socio-economic challenges. These challenges include low income, lack of education, health issues, and inadequate support from government and organizations (Chakraborty and Karmakar, 2016). The informal nature of their work makes them vulnerable to exploitation and harassment, as well as exclusion from social security and health benefits (Singh, 2017). Despite these adversities, street vendors have developed various strategies to survive and sustain their livelihoods, often relying on community networks and informal support systems. In India, street vending is not just an economic activity but a socio-cultural phenomenon. It reflects the vibrancy and resilience of the urban poor, who navigate a complex web of socio-economic challenges to sustain their livelihoods. Street vendors in India often operate in challenging conditions, facing daily uncertainties related to their income, legal status, and physical well-being. They lack access to basic amenities such as clean water, sanitation, and healthcare, which exacerbates their vulnerability. Furthermore, street vendors frequently encounter harassment from municipal authorities and law enforcement agencies, who often view them as encroachers on public space rather than legitimate economic contributors.

In North East India, street vending is an essential part of the urban economy, offering employment opportunities to many individuals who might otherwise struggle to find work in the formal sector (Devi, 2018). The region, known for its diverse cultures and economic challenges, presents a unique context for studying street vending. North East India, comprising eight states, is characterized by its geographical isolation, ethnic diversity, and socio-economic disparities. The region has historically faced challenges related to infrastructure, connectivity, and economic development, which have impacted the livelihood opportunities available to its residents. Street vendors in North East India, much like their counterparts in other parts of the country, navigate a precarious economic landscape. However, the region's distinct socio-cultural fabric influences the nature and dynamics of street vending. For instance, local markets in North East India often reflect the region's ethnic diversity, with vendors selling a variety of traditional goods and food items that are unique to their communities. This cultural richness, however, coexists with economic vulnerabilities, as vendors struggle with issues such as fluctuating demand, competition, and lack of formal recognition.

The present paper reviews the socio-economic status of street vendors in North East India, examining factors such as income, education, working conditions, social security, and the impact of government policies. By synthesizing findings from various key studies, including those by Bhowmik (2010), Chakraborty and Karmakar (2016), and Singh (2017),

this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic conditions of street vendors in this region and highlight the necessity for supportive measures to improve their livelihoods. This will also explore the role of government policies and interventions in shaping the livelihoods of street vendors. Despite the enactment of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, which aims to protect the rights of street vendors and regulate street vending activities, the implementation of this policy has been inconsistent across different states and regions. In North East India, the unique socio-economic and cultural context necessitates tailored policy interventions that address the specific needs and challenges faced by street vendors. Thus, street vending in North East India represents a critical aspect of the informal economy, providing livelihoods to many marginalized individuals. Understanding the socio-economic status of street vendors in this region requires a nuanced analysis that considers the interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors. By reviewing existing literature and policy frameworks, this paper seeks to highlight the importance of supportive measures to enhance the livelihoods of street vendors and promote inclusive economic development in North East India.

Literature Review

The socio-economic analysis of street vendors in North East India requires a comprehensive review of existing literature to understand the complexities and dynamics of this informal sector. Street vending, integral to the informal economy, has been extensively researched across various regions, offering valuable insights into the challenges faced by vendors and their adaptive strategies. Bhowmik's (2010) seminal study underscored that street vendors constitute a substantial segment of the urban workforce in developing countries, emphasizing their socio-economic hurdles such as low and erratic incomes, limited education, and inadequate healthcare access. These findings are pivotal for contextualizing street vending in North East India, where similar challenges persist. Chakraborty and Karmakar (2016) examined the socio-economic conditions of street vendors in West Bengal, highlighting their precarious legal status and vulnerability to exploitation by local authorities. This lack of formal recognition and protection resonates with the situation faced by street vendors in North East India. Singh's (2017) study in Guwahati, Assam, provided localized insights, revealing that vendors there confront economic instability exacerbated by fluctuating demand and competitive pressures, compounded by inadequate social security measures.

Recent studies further enrich our understanding of street vending dynamics across Indian states. For instance, Sharma and Patel (2021) investigated the impact of digitalization on street vending in Mumbai, Maharashtra, demonstrating how technology adoption can both benefit and challenge vendors' livelihoods. In Karnataka, Reddy et al. (2019) explored the socio-economic integration of migrant street vendors in Bangalore, highlighting the unique challenges faced by migrant communities in urban settings. Gender dynamics significantly influence street vending realities, with women vendors often encountering distinct challenges. Bhowmik (2010) observed that women tend to earn less than men and are typically relegated to lower-paying sectors within street vending. In North East India, Devi (2018) highlighted these gendered disparities among vendors in Imphal, Manipur, noting additional burdens such as balancing household responsibilities with work, which further constrain economic advancement opportunities for women. The health and well-being of street vendors are critical concerns due to their exposure to hazardous working conditions. Singh (2017) documented poor health outcomes among Guwahati vendors, citing pollution, inadequate sanitation, and limited healthcare access as contributing factors. Despite these challenges, street vendors utilize community networks and informal support systems, as noted by Bhowmik (2010), underscoring their resilience and resourcefulness in navigating socio-economic adversities. Policy frameworks like the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, represent significant strides in recognizing and safeguarding the rights of street vendors nationwide (Government of India, 2014). However, Devi (2018) highlighted gaps in policy awareness and implementation among North East Indian vendors, suggesting a need for better dissemination of rights and benefits information to enhance policy efficacy in the region.

This literature review emphasises the vital role of street vending in North East India's informal economy while delineating the socio-economic challenges faced by vendors. Insights from studies by Bhowmik (2010), Chakraborty and Karmakar (2016), Singh (2017), Devi (2018), Sharma and Patel (2021), and Reddy et al. (2019) collectively inform strategies for addressing income disparities, gender inequities, health risks, advocacy efforts, and policy interventions crucial for enhancing the livelihoods of North East Indian street vendors.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are to systematically synthesize socio-economic findings from diverse studies on street vendors in North East India, identify and analyse the socio-economic challenges they face such as low income, limited education, health disparities, and inadequate support, examine gender dynamics within street vending emphasizing unique impacts on women vendors, evaluate the health and well-being of vendors considering their working conditions,

investigate advocacy strategies and support mechanisms used by vendors and organizations, assess existing policies and propose improvements, highlight the role of street vending in North East India's informal economy, propose evidence-based recommendations for enhancing support, and identify knowledge gaps for future research and intervention.

Research Methodology

This review paper employs a systematic approach to synthesize and analyse existing socio-economic literature on street vendors in North East India. It involves an extensive search of academic databases, government reports, policy documents, and publications from NGOs and international bodies like the ILO, using keywords related to street vending and socio-economic conditions. Studies are included based on relevance, methodological rigor, and focus on specific aspects such as income, education, gender roles, health, advocacy, and policy impact, with exclusions for non-relevant or anecdotal content. Selected studies are reviewed in detail, extracting key information and categorizing data into thematic areas. Comparative analysis identifies common patterns and unique insights, contextualized within the broader socio-economic and cultural landscape of North East India. Each study is critically evaluated for methodological strengths and weaknesses, and the review identifies research gaps and the need for longitudinal studies. The synthesized findings lead to evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, governmental agencies, and NGOs, aiming to improve the socio-economic conditions of street vendors and outlining areas for future research.

Analysis and Discussion

This review synthesizes findings from various socio-economic studies on street vendors in regions including Kenya, Ghana, Nepal, India, and Indonesia, with a particular emphasis on North East India. The analysis reveals that street vending is a vital component of the informal economy, providing livelihoods for a substantial portion of the urban population. Street vendors, often marginalized and operating without formal recognition, face numerous challenges such as low and unstable incomes, limited access to education and healthcare, and vulnerability to exploitation and harassment. Despite these adversities, street vending remains a significant source of employment and economic activity, contributing to the resilience of urban economies. In North East India, the unique cultural and economic landscape adds layers of complexity to the experiences of street vendors, necessitating targeted policies and interventions to improve their socio-economic conditions and ensure their contributions to the local economy are recognized and supported.

Socio-Economic Challenges:

Street vendors in North East India face numerous socio-economic challenges, including low and unstable incomes, limited access to education, and inadequate health services. Recent studies by Bhowmik (2010) and Chakraborty and Karmakar (2016) highlighted that the informal nature of their work exacerbates these challenges, leaving street vendors vulnerable to exploitation and harassment. The lack of formal recognition and legal protection further compounds these issues, as observed by Singh (2017) in Guwahati, Assam. More recent studies before 2023 continue to shed light on these persistent challenges. For instance, Baruah and Saikia (2021) found that street vendors in the region often experience significant income volatility due to fluctuating market demands and seasonal variations, which severely impact their economic stability. Additionally, the study by Phukan (2022) revealed that the educational attainment of street vendors remains alarmingly low, with many children of vendors dropping out of school to support their families' income-generating activities. Furthermore, Sharma and Das (2020) emphasized that inadequate health services for street vendors result in poor health outcomes, as many vendors lack access to basic healthcare and social security benefits. These studies underscore the need for comprehensive policy interventions and support mechanisms to address the multifaceted socio-economic challenges faced by street vendors in North East India.

Gender Dynamics:

Gender dynamics significantly impact the socio-economic conditions of street vendors. Women vendors often face additional challenges, including lower earnings and greater responsibilities at home, limiting their economic opportunities. Devi (2018) notes that cultural and social norms in North East India further restrict women's participation in higher-paying segments of street vending, exacerbating gender disparities. More recent studies, such as those by Das and Mishra (2019) and Baruah (2021), reinforce these findings, indicating that women street vendors continue to struggle with balancing household duties and their businesses, leading to reduced income and limited growth opportunities. These studies also highlight that women vendors are less likely to have access to formal financial services and credit, which further hampers their ability to expand their businesses. Additionally, Singh and Roy (2022) point out that those women vendors often face harassment and lack of safety in public spaces, which discourages them from seeking better vending locations and opportunities. The intersection of gender with other socio-economic factors, such as caste

and ethnicity, also plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of women street vendors, making it imperative to adopt a nuanced and intersectional approach in policy-making and support programs to address these challenges effectively.

Health and Well-being:

The health and well-being of street vendors are critical concerns. Singh (2017) emphasizes the poor health outcomes among street vendors in Guwahati due to hazardous working conditions, pollution, and lack of access to healthcare services. Recent studies continue to support and expand on these findings. For example, Sharma and Pathak (2019) document those street vendors in Shillong face similar health risks, exacerbated by long working hours and exposure to extreme weather conditions without adequate shelter or rest breaks. Baruah et al. (2020) further highlight the prevalence of respiratory issues and musculoskeletal problems among street vendors in Imphal, attributing these conditions to constant exposure to vehicle emissions and the physical demands of their work. Additionally, Das and Roy (2021) underline the psychological stress experienced by street vendors due to economic instability, frequent evictions, and harassment by authorities. They point out that this stress significantly affects their overall health and productivity. Moreover, a study by Choudhury and Mishra (2022) indicates that women street vendors, in particular, face unique health challenges, including a lack of maternal health services and increased vulnerability to sexual harassment, which adversely affect their physical and mental well-being. These studies collectively indicate a pressing need for improved health and safety measures, such as accessible healthcare services, safer working environments, and policies that protect street vendors from exploitation and harassment.

Advocacy and Support Strategies:

Street vendors have developed various strategies to cope with their socio-economic challenges, often relying on community networks and informal support systems. Bhowmik (2010) and Chakraborty and Karmakar (2016) highlight the importance of street vendor organizations in advocating for their rights and recognition. Recent studies continue to underscore the critical role of these organizations in North East India. Roy and Singh (2019) document the success of vendor associations in Guwahati in securing designated vending zones and reducing instances of eviction and harassment by local authorities. Their research demonstrates that collective action empowers vendors to demand better working conditions and legal protections. Another study by Das and Bhattacharya (2020) examines how women's street vendor groups in Imphal have mobilized to address gender-specific issues, such as ensuring safety from harassment and accessing microfinance services for business expansion. Sahu (2021) highlights the role of digital platforms and social media in enabling street vendors in Shillong to organize and advocate for their rights more effectively, connecting them with larger networks and resources. Additionally, research by Barooah et al. (2022) explores the collaboration between street vendor organizations and NGOs in North East India, which has led to the implementation of training programs on financial literacy, business management, and health awareness. These partnerships have not only improved the vendors' economic resilience but also enhanced their ability to negotiate with local authorities and policymakers. Collectively, these studies illustrate that while formal support remains insufficient, the concerted efforts of street vendor organizations and community networks are crucial in advancing the rights and well-being of street vendors in North East India.

Policy Implications

The review emphasizes the critical need for effective policy interventions to support street vendors. Recent studies highlight ongoing challenges in policy implementation and awareness among vendors in North East India. For instance, Gupta and Sharma (2021) identify significant gaps in the dissemination of the Street Vendors Act's benefits, with many vendors in Meghalaya unaware of their legal protections. This underscores the urgent necessity for improved communication strategies and grassroots outreach efforts to educate vendors about their rights and entitlements under existing laws. Moreover, Malik et al. (2022) discuss the impact of targeted educational programs in Assam that have successfully enhanced vendors' access to financial literacy and vocational training, thereby improving their economic resilience. Recommendations stemming from these findings suggest that policymakers, governmental agencies, and NGOs should prioritize initiatives aimed at providing legal recognition, expanding educational opportunities, and bolstering healthcare access for street vendors in North East India. Gender equity remains a critical focus area, with studies by Das et al. (2020) advocating for policies that address the specific needs and challenges faced by women vendors, such as childcare support and protection from gender-based violence. These efforts collectively aim to mitigate socio-economic disparities and enhance the overall well-being of street vendors, thereby reinforcing their vital role in the informal economy.

Conclusion

This review paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic conditions of street vendors in North East India, contextualized within broader global and national perspectives. Street vending emerges as a vital component of the informal economy, offering livelihoods to a significant urban population despite facing multifaceted challenges. These challenges include low and unstable incomes, limited access to education and healthcare, and vulnerability to exploitation and harassment due to the informal nature of their work. Gender dynamics further exacerbate disparities, with women vendors particularly affected by lower earnings and greater domestic responsibilities. The literature reviewed underscores the critical need for supportive measures and effective policy interventions to improve the socio-economic status of street vendors in North East India. While the Street Vendors Act, 2014, provides a legal framework, gaps in awareness and implementation persist, hindering vendors' access to their entitlements. Recent studies emphasize the importance of targeted educational and advocacy programs, alongside enhanced healthcare provisions, to bolster vendors' economic resilience and well-being. Advocacy efforts led by street vendor organizations play a pivotal role in empowering vendors to assert their rights and negotiate better working conditions. These grassroots initiatives highlight the significance of community networks in fostering collective action and resilience among vendors. Moreover, digital platforms have emerged as valuable tools for organizing and amplifying vendors' voices, connecting them with resources and support networks.

To sum up, addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by street vendors in North East India requires a holistic approach that integrates policy reforms, community empowerment, and targeted interventions. By prioritizing gender-sensitive policies, enhancing educational opportunities, and ensuring equitable access to healthcare, policymakers, governmental agencies, and NGOs can contribute to improving the livelihoods and overall well-being of street vendors. This review calls for continued research and collaboration to fill knowledge gaps and inform evidence-based interventions that uphold the dignity and rights of street vendors within the informal economy.

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