

Evaluation of Food Safety Standards among Street Food Vendors in Select States

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Introduction

Food safety has long been the subject of research, and street food is a weak link in food safety supervision. Street food not only provides convenience for many people, but is also the livelihood for millions of low income people, making a great contribution to the economy of many developing countries. Street food safety is essential, and yet it has been rarely studied in countries world over. The street foods play an important socio-economic role in meeting food and nutritional requirements of city consumers at affordable prices to the lower and middle income people. The number of food poisoning notifications rose steadily worldwide since the inception of *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak in the 1980s to date. This may be partly attributed to improved surveillance, increased global trade and travel, changes in modern food production, the impact of modern lifestyles, changes in food consumption, and the emergence of new pathogens. Consumer's knowledge and attitude may influence food safety behavior and practice. For the sake of public health, it is important to understand the epidemiology of food borne illnesses that help in prevention and control efforts, appropriately allocating resources to control food borne illness, monitoring and evaluation of food safety measures, development of new food safety standards, and assessment of the cost-effectiveness of interventions.

This study was sponsored by Department of Consumer Affairs, GoI. It was undertaken by Prof Suresh Misra and Dr Mamta Pathania, CCS, IIPA to examine the attitude, taste, preferences and awareness about food safety and hygiene issues and also to assess the level of food safety and hygiene practices among the street food vendors in India. The study also assessed the level of awareness among street food vendors towards food safety laws and regulations. In order to collect information various stakeholders (consumer, street vendors and concerned authorities) were approached to understand the health and hygiene of food and its impact on the consumers eating behavior. To assess the practice of hygiene and food safety guidelines by street vendors and level of awareness of the consumers the primary data was collected through questionnaires which were administered to street vendors and consumers. Keeping in view seven states with different characteristics, having different food culture were selected to collect consumers' opinion about street food safety standards. Seven cities recognized as prominent tourist place in the country were selected for the survey of Street Food Vendors. These cities were Delhi, Kolkotta, Mysore, Ujjain, Varanasi, Puri and Guwhati. As regards consumers, the survey was conducted in seven states namely Bihar, J&K, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal and in the following cities Muzaffarpur, Jammu, Mysore, Ujjain, Ahmedabad, Varanasi and Nadia.

Need of the Study

The quality and safety of street foods is determined by numerous factors such as the business organization, regulatory aspects, technical aspects related to the preparation, preservation and display of food sold in the streets, the consumer perspective, and educational programs. In order to improve the conditions of street food vendors and to make sure that the food sold does not jeopardize public health, the first and foremost necessity is to build awareness that food vendor should maintain certain quality standard. In many areas, street foods are sold and food safety issues are not taken into consideration neither on the producer nor on the consumer side. Consumers tend to look mostly at the price and might be already accustomed to the taste of unhealthy meals. Vendors, on the other hand, have a very small margin of profit and are incentivized to keep expenses low by utilizing low quality ingredients and disregarding costly hygienic practices.

In general, interventions and programmes can only be successful if they do not focus on one aspect alone. Tackling only food quality, for instance, cannot ensure that street food vendors play the most positive role in realizing food security of the urban population. It is important not to forget that the street foods constitute a very heterogeneous sector and the interventions need to be carefully planned by keeping different aspects such as gender, secondary audience, and local customs into consideration. It is also necessary to differentiate between vendors selling freshly prepared food on the spot or hawking dishes prepared earlier at home, with the second practice being much more risky in terms of food borne pathogen and spores. Needless to say, general education levels also play an important role in ensuring safe streetfoods. The more both vendors and patrons will be educated and the more they will know about issues such as nutrition and food safety, the more they will be interested in having the business as clean and the products as healthy as possible. Keeping this in mind the present study was undertaken to develop an understanding of the assessment of food vendors following food safety standards and hygiene practices.

Objectives of the Study

Therefore the focus of the present research work was:

1. To ascertain the level of awareness about food safety and hygiene practices among consumers.
2. To analyse the factors that influence consumer behaviour toward street food.
3. To assess the knowledge and attitudes of food vendors towards food safety and hygiene practices.
4. To evaluate the level of awareness among street food vendors towards food safety laws and regulations.
5. To draw conclusions from the study and suggest measures for better protection of consumers and adherence of food safety guidelines by street vendors.

The present study was an empirical research based on both primary and secondary data. It is a blend of both descriptive and analytical methods of study. For the purpose of the study primary data was collected through questionnaires and by way of discussions with various stakeholders (consumer, street vendors and concerned authorities). The approach was to seek information from various stakeholders involved in the health and hygiene of food and its impact on the consumers eating behaviour. The secondary data was collected from the FSSAI and other sources. To assess the practice of hygiene and food safety guidelines by street vendors and level of awareness of the consumers the primary data was collected through questionnaires which were administered to street vendors and consumers. The two set of questionnaire were prepared. One set of questionnaire was for consumer and other for Street vendors.

Sample Plan

The survey methodology for this study was stratified random sampling. Since India is a very heterogeneous country and having diverse geographic, socio – cultural and economic characteristic, a stratified random sampling could reflect the characteristics of the population as a whole. Keeping in view seven states with different

characteristics, having different food culture were selected to collect consumers' opinion about street food safety standards. Seven cities recognised as prominent tourist place in the country were selected for the survey of Street Food Vendors. These cities were Delhi, Kolkotta, Mysore, Ujjain, Varanasi, Puri and Guwhati

Sample Size

As regards consumers, the survey was conducted in seven states namely Bihar, J&K, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal and in the following cities Muzaffarpur, Jammu, Mysore, Ujjain, Ahmedabad, Varanasi and Nadia. The data regarding the Street Food Vendors was to be collected from seven cities of tourist importance, where large number of tourists visit each year; namely, Delhi, Kolkotta, Mysore, Ujjain, Varanasi, Puri and Guwahati. However due to lock down, data could not be collected from Puri and Guwahati. In each state, 205 consumers were randomly surveyed from different parts of the states representing diverse sections of the society and 45 street vendors from different locality of the city were selected randomly for interview. Thus the total sample size of consumers was 1470 and street vendors 225.

The major findings of the study were: 94.3 percent of the respondents eat street food and as to the reasons for eating street food, 33.9 percent said it is tasty, 31.1 percent found it convenient, 17.3 percent of the respondents wanted a change from home food; as far as factors influencing consumer's choice of street food is concerned, for 56.3 percent taste is the preference, 51.1 percent prefer due to the variety offered. 45.3 percent find it to be fresh; 59.3 percent of the respondents agree that street food should be regulated; 53.8 percent of the respondents are not aware that street food vendors must be registered with FSSAI while 73.9 percent are unaware about FSSAI; only 29.2 percent of the respondents prefer street food vendors who follow hygiene practices

FSSAI has started 'Project Clean Street Food' to ensure that it is safe and healthy. 74.6 percent of the respondents are not aware about this project and its objectives. Not many consumers are interested in checking the quality of the items that are being used by the street food vendor; 85.8 percent of the respondents agree that FSSAI should rate the hygiene practices of the street food vendors and this rating should be displayed by the vendor.

35.1 percent of the surveyed vendors have been working as Street Food Vendors for last 5 years, 31.2 percent have been working for the last 6-10 years and 28.7 percent have a work experience of more than 10 years; 87.6 percent of the street food vendors are not aware about Food Safety Standards. 46.2 percent are not at all aware about Food Safety Laws and Regulation; 73.2 percent are not aware about Registration and Licensing of Food Vendors under FSSAI; 83.2 percent of the vendors do not have Food Safety License; 95.5 percent of the vendors have no formal training in food safety and hygiene practices; 91.6 percent of the food vendors are not aware about Project Clean Street Food initiated by FSSAI. As regards the place where food items are prepared, 44.6 percent of the vendors prepare it at the vending site, 33 percent prepare the food at home.

As far as personal hygiene practices are concerned, 93.1 percent do not wear apron while working, 95 percent do not cover their head or use gloves. Only 21.3 percent avoid chewing/talking while serving. 60.4 percent do not cover their food properly; 46.4 percent reuse oil for cooking. 59.2 percent of them do not give spoon and fork to eat. 57.9 percent serve food with hands and only 15.2 percent wash hands before serving. 30.4 percent of the waste water is thrown on the street while 95 percent is thrown it into the rain water drain. 58.4 percent of the vendors use plastic utensils made of recycled plastic to serve food. Only 19.3 percent use

disposable utensils for serving food; only 34.4 percent wash their hands with soap after using the toilet, while 46.3 percent wash their hands after preparation of the food; 22.3 percent of the vendors store the leftover food for next day use. Majority 95.1 percent of the vendors have no formal training in food safety and hygiene practices. The overall assessment of knowledge and hygiene practices followed by food vendors is of average quality and puts the consumers at risk.

Keeping in mind the major findings, the following suggestions and recommendations were given -All stakeholders in street food trade including the street vendors, consumers and governments must be involved in ensuring the safety of the street food sold and consumed. Strengthening of food safety policies and stringent enforcement of food safety laws would significantly prevent, eliminate, or reduce the street foods hazards to acceptable safer levels. This is important because even though food safety policies do exist but they are poorly enforced. In order to improve the conditions of street food vendors and to make sure that the food sold does not jeopardize public health, the first and foremost necessity is to build awareness that food vendor should maintain certain quality standards. A comprehensive training programme should be drawn up and implemented. Training of street food vendors to educate and make them aware should be prioritized to improve the safety of the street food. FSSAI alone cannot do this as there are more than 20 lakh street food vendors.

Major food businesses like Nestle, Patanjali, Dabur etc should be roped in to educate the food vendors under CSR. Educational Institutions particularly schools and colleges can be roped in to educate and create awareness about food safety and hygiene practices among consumers and street food vendors. Posters/painting completions may be organized for school children to create awareness about safe food. Registration and licensing of street food vendors is imperative to ensure consumers get safe food. This should be made mandatory and enforced with strictness.

An online portal of street food vendors with all details should be set up by FSSAI under a scheme. FSSAI needs to integrate and connect all Registered Street Food vendors on a common technology driven platform at the earliest for better management. Through this FSSAI will be able to access real time data which will help in better management of the scheme and also help improve foods safety standard and hygiene practices of the vendors by keeping a track of them. This will help in monitoring and also data retrieval for better management of the food safety system. Health/Medical Records of all street food vendors need to be pitched in as a mandatory condition for granting licenses to them and the registration certificate should be displayed along with health.