



## **AN ANALYSIS OF HOW STREET FOOD IN INDIA CAN BE MADE SAFE FOOD**

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### **Abstract**

One of the ways to create memorable experiences for foreign tourists visiting India is through culinary trails. These trails essentially highlight the culinary traditions of a tourist destination, making cuisine one of the attractions of the region. There is a bewildering variety of street food that is on offer in India. They offer a dining option that combines taste with variety and economy. Other countries – such as Thailand – have dedicated foot streets where the local cuisine forms an important tourist attraction. However, because of the unsanitary ways in which the food is cooked and the unhygienic surroundings in which such food is retailed, the potential of Indian street food as a tourist attraction is largely untapped. This research examines the problem of street food safety and hygiene from the point of view of the street food vendors. A qualitative methodology was followed to collect primary data. The researcher interviewed 50 street vendors in Chennai. It was found that they were ignorant of the importance of hygiene in the preparation of food and of creating a perception of cleanliness to attract foreigners. The many training and entrepreneurship programs instituted by the Government of India / Tourism Ministry have not benefited the street vendors at all. They were not even aware of the existence of such programs. In addition, the complete lack of facilities – such as clean drinking water, garbage disposal facilities, toilets etc – effectively pre-empts them from maintaining appropriate hygiene

whilst preparing and selling food. Government apathy and indifference to their plight and harassment from government officials, prevents them from making those investments required to upgrade their facilities and businesses. There is no monitoring of conditions related to health and hygiene or for the implementations of WHO (2006) guidelines related to the hygienic preparation of street food. In light of these findings, appropriate recommendations have been made that it is hoped, will make Indian street food, safe to eat by foreign tourists.

**Key Words:** Street Food, Food Safety, Hygiene, Hawkers, Vendors

### **1. Introduction**

Street food has been defined as ready to eat food items that are prepared and / or sold by street vendors (Muleta and Ashenafi, 2001). Eating street food is one of the joys of travelling in India. Street foods represent varieties of local cuisine, not found anywhere else in the world and linked to the culture and cuisine in the area where they are sold (Rheinlander, 2006). They offer a dining option that combines taste with variety and economy. It may be inferred that street food in India can be a potentially important tourist offering. The street food sector in India is valued at a daily turnover of Rs. 3000 crs (Skill India, 2015). There are one crore food hawkers in India, selling food in streets, trains and buses (Roy, 2015). In India, street food vending is a major source of employment, domestic revenue and food security.

However, the street food business in India is highly disorganized. Hygiene and food safety measures are ignored. Hygiene standards amongst street hawkers themselves are highly variable in India. For these reasons, street food in India is perceived to be unhealthy, disease causing, overly oily and spicy, unpalatable and unhygienic amongst foreign tourists (Lonely Planet, 2016). What this essentially means is that the potential of a unique and highly differentiated tourist offering is largely untapped in India. There are multiple initiatives launched by the Indian government to promote safety of street food. These include Swacch Bharat Swacch Pakwan, Surakshit Khadya Abhiyan, Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending, and Project Clean Street Food. Why street food vendors are not able to leverage these schemes to prepare and sell street food hygienically needs to be examined. This research examines the problem of street food safety and hygiene from the point of view of the street food vendors.

**Research Question**—What are the challenges faced by Indian Street Food vendors in preparing and selling hygienic street food?

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature on street food indicates that there are several reasons why street food is unhygienic and pose a public health risk. According to Janie and Marie (2013), food vendors are poor, illiterate with little knowledge of how to handle food safely, maintain clean environment,

sanitation and hygiene or lack knowledge on aspects such as food display modes, service, hand wash, procurement and potable water. Chakravarthy (2013) states that food is a biological product and supports many micro-organisms such as aerobic bacteria, E.coli bacteria and pathogens responsible for diseases such as diarrhoea. Chemical additives such as colourants and preservatives also routinely contaminate food (Nurudeen et al., 2014). Brown et al., (2010) point out that poor hygiene of food vendors, faulty holding and inappropriate processing methods are also responsible for street food contamination. The foods are prepared and sold in environmentally unhygienic conditions. Foods may not be protected from flies and dust and sold in unsanitary locations with the vending carts located on footpaths, near drains or sewerage (Khairuzzaman et al., 2014). It may be therefore concluded that microbiological, chemical and lack of personal and environmental hygiene are the main causes of street food contamination.

To reduce the incidence of food borne diseases, the World Health Organization in 2006 established 5 points for food hygiene. These include (i) keeping food clean, (ii) separation of raw and cooked foods, (iii) thorough cooking, (iv) maintaining safe temperatures and (v) using water and raw food material that is safe (WHO, 2006). These basic five principles must be practiced to prevent food related diseases. It may be inferred that these five principles extend to street food as well.

Based on these findings, the conceptual model indicated in figure 1 was formulated.

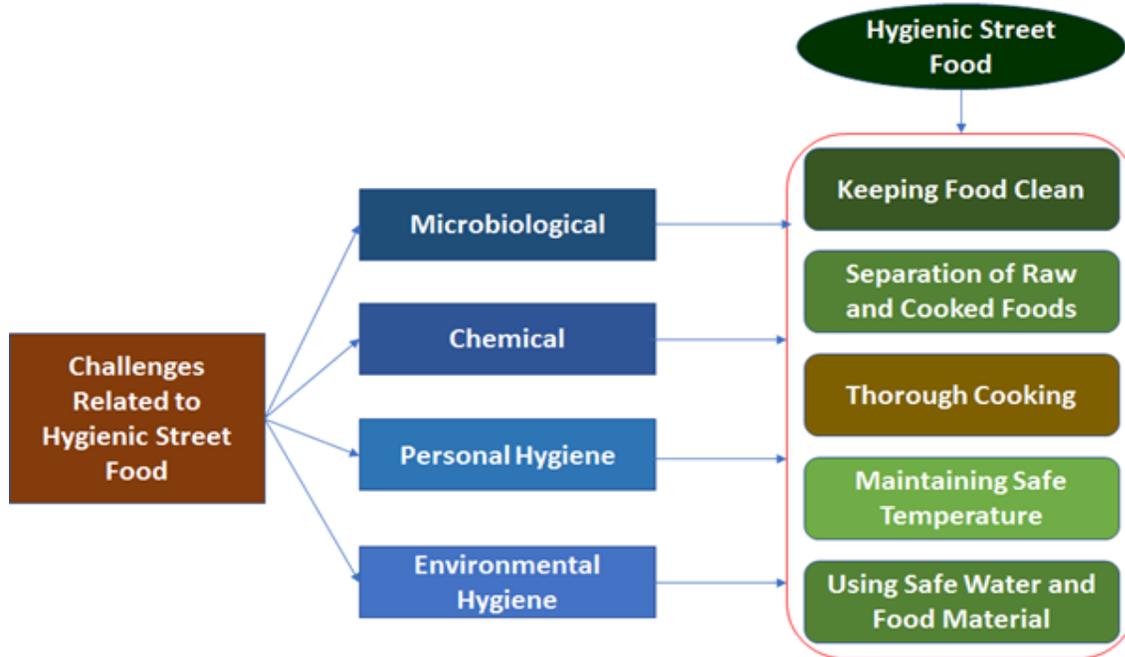


Figure 1. Conceptual Model : Hygiene of Street Food

Figure 1 indicates the four main challenges related to keeping food safe. The literature deals with the problems related to hygiene and sanitation pertaining to street food. In addition, the literature also indicates what standards of hygiene need to be maintained for the safe preparation and retailing of food. However, there is no literature on the challenges being experienced by the vendors of street food in India as they try to overcome problems of hygiene and sanitation and sell food that is safe and hygienic. It is this gap in the literature which this research will bridge.

### 3. Method

A qualitative methodology was used in this research using secondary and primary data. The

secondary data was used to formulate a conceptual model indicated in figure 2.1 on dimensions related to hygienic street food. This model was then be applied to the street food sector in India. The researcher interviewed 50 street food hawkers in Chennai city. The focus of the interview was to understand what hygiene standards the street hawkers were following, whether they were aware of the importance of food safety and hygiene in attracting tourists, what were the challenges in following food safety and hygiene standards in India and most importantly – what help and assistance they are looking for from the tourism sector to help them implement food safety and hygiene standards.

#### 4. Analysis & Discussion

The respondents were first asked as to whether foreign tourists came to their stalls. Figure 2 indicates their responses.

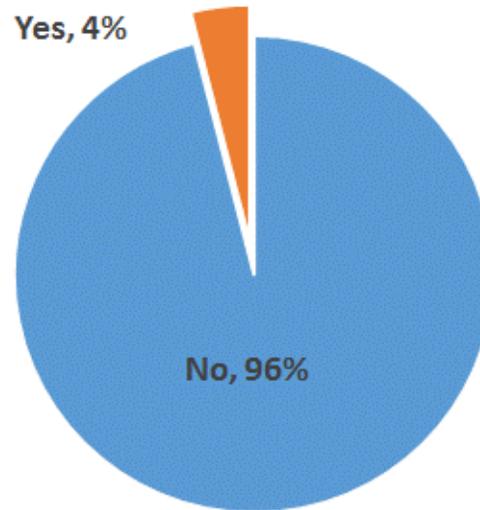


Figure 2. Foreign Visits to Street Food Vendors

It is observed that 96% of the respondents indicated that foreigners do not visit their carts. Respondents stated that '*most foreigners fear falling sick eating this food*'. Respondent 2 said that '*foreigners prefer fast food sold in shops to street food sold by us*'. This corroborates the findings from Lonely Planet (2016) which pointed out that street food in India is perceived

to be unhygienic and therefore unpalatable by foreigners. Foreigners prefer to eat fast food sold in shops such as Pizza Hut or McDonalds because of higher standards of hygiene observed in these shops. The respondents were then queried as to what were their perceptions of cleanliness and hygiene and their responses summarized in figure 3.

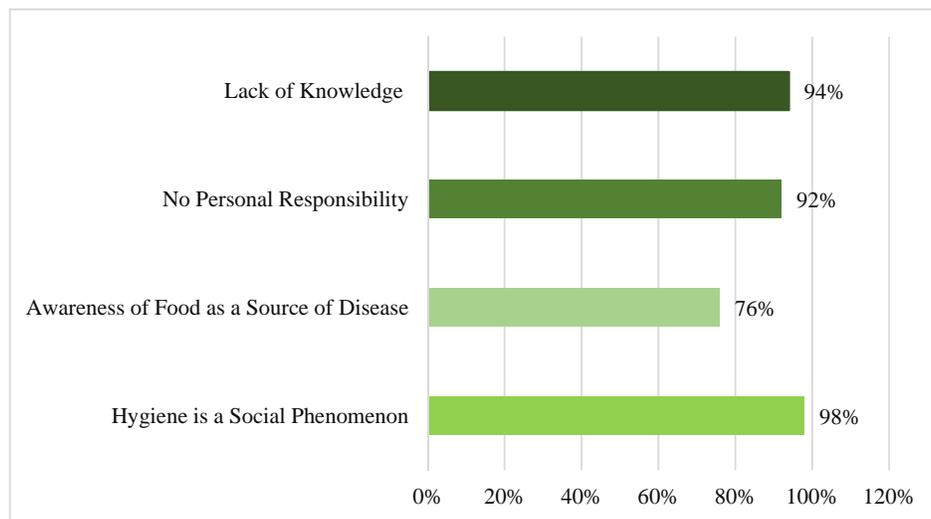


Figure 3. Awareness of Hygiene

**Lack of Knowledge** - Respondents indicated that they are aware that contaminated food can be a source of diseases such as a running/upset stomach and stomach pains. However, they did not believe that food prepared in their vending carts was unhygienic. Respondents 18 and 32 stated that if *'we do not fall sick eating this food, why would the foreigners fall sick'*. Many respondents stated that *'foreigners fall sick because they have weak stomachs, not because of eating our food'*. The respondents found nothing wrong with practices such as keeping food on the ground, lack of garbage bins for disposal, using the same water for two or three vessel rinses etc as *'they did the same back home'*. The respondents indicated that it was more important to *'decorate their carts and improve their attractiveness'* to attract customers.

The researcher found that concepts related to hygienic preparation of food are largely unknown to the respondents. For example, the respondents did not see the relationship between animals running loose, poor sanitation and drainage systems or use of improvised furniture and contaminated food. They did not find it necessary to segregate raw and cooked foods, nor did they find it necessary to handle foods with washed hands only. Vegetables were cleaned only in the case of those that had to be peeled. It was not found necessary to cover foods or to reheat items that were prepared in the early morning. All of these measures, conform to the WHO (2006) stipulations on the safe and hygienic preparation of food. A lack of awareness of these stipulations again indicates a high degree of ignorance prevailing amongst street food vendors in India.

These views indicate a lack of knowledge and awareness of standards of hygiene related to food. The respondents do not take personal responsibility for ensuring cleanliness of their stalls. Their views echo that of Douglas (2002) who pointed out that perceptions of hygiene is related to the fundamental values of society. Therefore, since the vendors have lived all their lives in unhygienic conditions, they see nothing wrong in the way they prepare and sell food in their carts. Therefore, a lack of awareness and knowledge of sanitation is a key challenge. This inference is supported by the finding that none of the respondents knew about schemes launched

by SurakshitKhadyaAbhyian or Street Food Vendor Protection rules or about Project Clean Street Food launched by the government to ensure safety and hygiene of street food.

**Lack of Water**—The lack of water in the vicinity of vending carts was the most important reason for unhygienic food preparation. Respondents indicated that they *'use well or tap water in their preparations'* as *'bottled water is very expensive'*. Others indicated that *'because water supply is erratic, they store the water for many days and use it sparingly'*. Many were not aware that drinking water needed to be purified. The lack of water also affected how plates got cleaned. Most respondents stated that they *'did not have facilities to store large quantities of fresh water required to clean all the plates'* nor did *'they have access to taps'*. Most did not *'use detergents as then more water is required to clean plates'*. The lack of availability of clean, fresh water is a key challenge in maintaining the hygiene of street foods.

**Unhygienic Practices**—It was found that the vendors practiced a number of unhygienic practices. None of them found it necessary to wash hands before or after cooking food, while serving food or after handling cash. Respondent 2 pointed out that *'washing hands after every operation takes lots of time, customers do not like to wait. I will lose business'*. Others indicated that *'there are no facilities for hand wash'*. Food is served on papers / polybags as *'disposable plates will increase costs'*. Scraps and leftovers are *'disposed of on the street itself or in drains as there are no garbage bins around'*. Most respondents did not believe in covering food as then *'customers would get suspicious if they cannot see the food and not purchase from them'*. It would appear therefore that along with a lack of knowledge of cleanliness, the exigencies of their business, force the vendors to adopt practices that are inherently unhygienic for the sake of not losing out on sales.

**Apathetic Officials**—Figure 4 indicates challenges related to the civic / government authorities in ensuring cleanliness of street food. All the respondents stated that *'local authorities*

do not provide us any facilities such as water taps or garbage disposal'. The government authorities are perceived to be the bane of the street vendors. All the respondents indicated that they 'had to pay bribe to police officials, to the

local goons as well as to local government representatives for plying their trade in a particular location'. Respondent 3 stated that 'as long as the police get their money, they do not care how clean my cart is'.

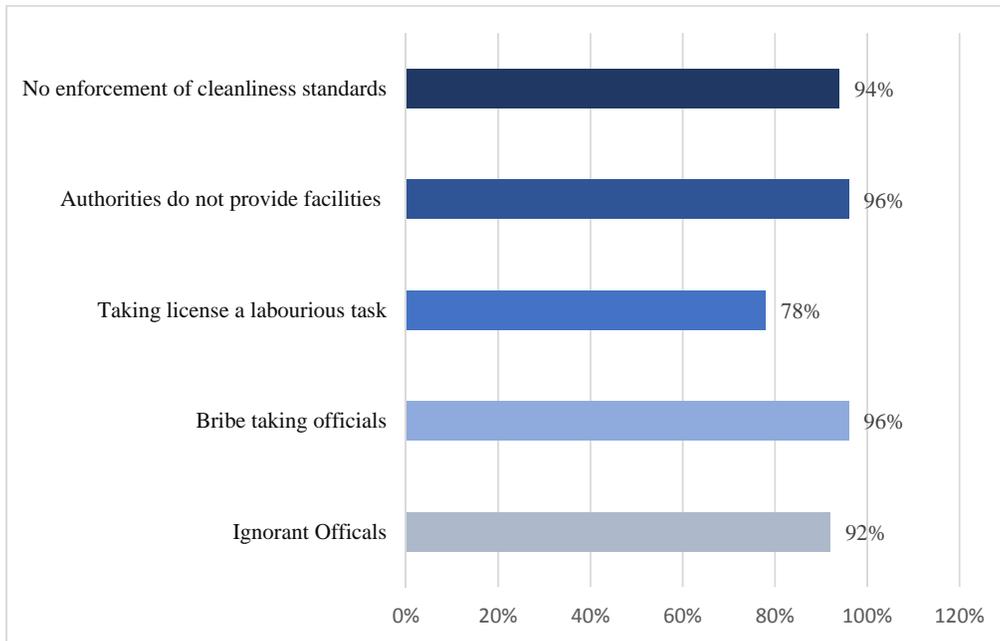


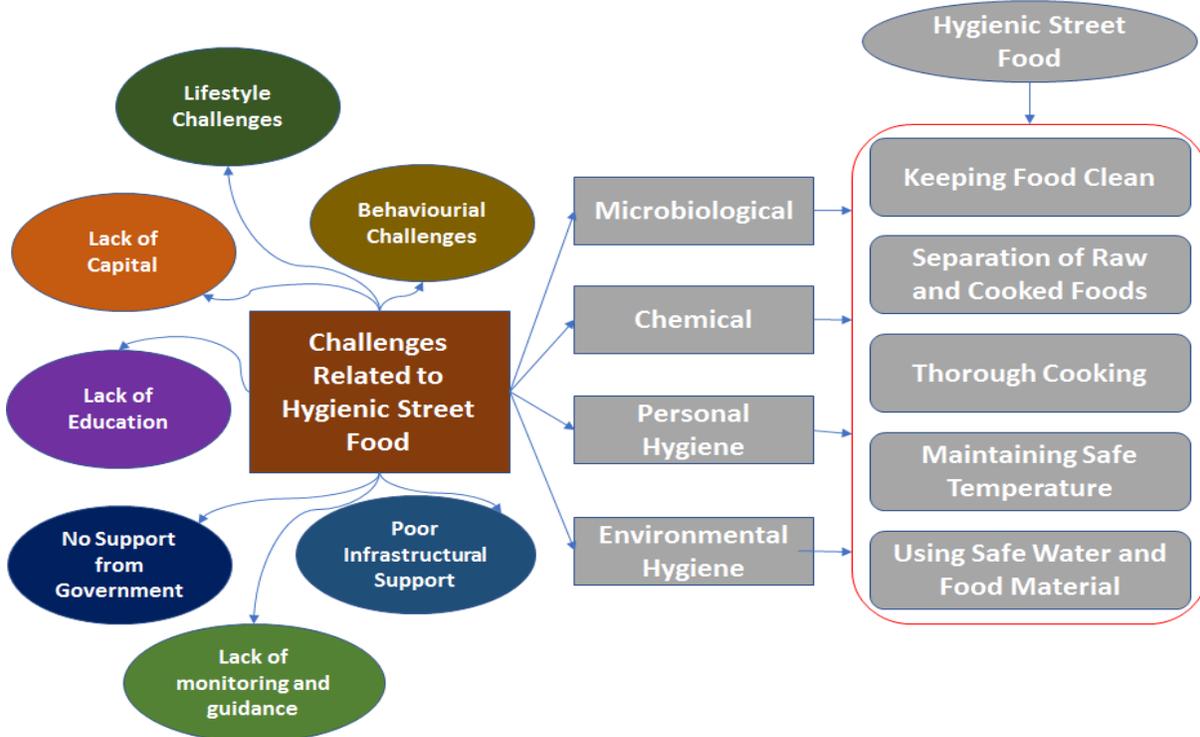
Figure 4. Apathy of Government Officials

Respondents 10, 32 and 46 indicated that taking licenses is not necessary for their small businesses. Getting a license 'involved a lot of bribery and took very long periods of time'. In addition, respondents stated that local authorities ignored their petitions for better facilities to run their business. Respondent 18 indicated how she 'has been asking the local MP for a women's toilet for the last 3 years, to no avail'. Respondent 50 indicated that 'requests for a water tap to get fresh water have fallen on deaf ears'. From their responses, it is evident that the

apathy of the local government officials is itself a big challenge in ensuring safety and hygiene of street food.

On the basis of the aforementioned findings, the conceptual diagram in figure 1 was modified to indicate the key challenges being faced by street vendors in India. The modified diagram is indicated in figure 5.

Figure 5. Key Challenges – Street Vendors of India



## 5. Conclusion & Recommendations

From the conceptual model, it is observed that there are seven main challenges that prevent the clean and hygienic preparation and retailing of street food in India. These include (i) Challenges related to behaviour and habits of street vendors (ii) Challenges related to their domestic lifestyles (iii) Lack of funds and capital (iv) Lack of Education and knowledge (v) Poor Infrastructural support (vi) No Support from the Government and (vii) Lack of Monitoring and Guidance. To overcome these challenges the following recommendations may be made:

- It is apparent that the lack of education, training and experience is one of the main reasons for the lack of awareness of the importance of hygiene and of the potential business benefits in terms of hygienic surroundings attracting foreign tourists. Without changing the attitude and perception of street vendors towards cleanliness, it is not possible to bring about a change in behaviour. For this to happen, appropriate training and awareness programs have to be conducted
- The Tourism Department and the Government has several schemes already in place to train street vendors. However, this research has shown that very few, if any, street vendors have been contacted / enrolled in these programs. What is recommended therefore is a sustained movement by the private sector in the hospitality industry to partner with the government and with other corporates to mobilise training and development programs for street vendors to increase their awareness of the importance of hygiene.
- It is also recommended to train street vendors on how to approach foreigners, how to behave and speak with them and convince them to buy that food that is being sold. Tips on how to create a perception of cleanliness must be informed. For example, keeping water on the boil on the stove creates a perception that the water being used is safe.
- It is not practical to suggest that street vendors be provided with all facilities such as water, garbage disposal etc. The reality of India is that such services

cannot be provided at all places. Instead there must be specially designated places created specifically for street vendors in cities / tourist locations and these locations can become potential tourist attractions in themselves. It would be far easier to provide facilities such as water taps, washing areas, garbage disposal, toilet facilities etc in these specific places. Here again, private sector interest and investment is necessary to bring the project to fruition.

- A recurring complaint of street vendors is that of government apathy and of harassment by officials. In order to counter this, it is recommended that the private sector take the lead to organize street vendors to press for better facilities, an end to bribes and harassment and speedier sanction of licenses.
- It is recommended that the government on its part develop guidelines for street vendors which can be easily followed to maintain hygiene and sanitary food vending conditions. Whether these guidelines are being properly implemented must be monitored. A friendly way of doing this is to perhaps institute rewards for those street vendors who are particularly compliant with these stipulations.
- The tourism ministry must actively market and promote street food to foreigners to create awareness of this inexpensive, healthy and taste food option that is available across India.

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