

Where is my Chai?

The Indian Street Vendor: Ultimate survivor, innovator, scapegoat and economic catalyst

By: Sanjeev Shankar, FoAM



Spicy wild fruit vendor, Chandni Chowk girls school, Delhi. Re 1/- per pack

Steaming *Idlis* with hot *sambar* and spicy coconut chutney laid out on fresh banana leaves. South Indian filter coffee, popularly known as *kappi* placed in traditional stainless steel tumblers. Early morning office goers, attired in traditional whites awaiting their turn at a popular roadside cafe in Kerala. Seven hundred miles away, Bombayites, similarly have a wonderful range of delicacies to choose from as they return tired from work place. The riot of traditional recipes, which have no culinary parallel complete the spirited theatrical display of the Indian street vendor.

This article is a description of both Indian street food and the encounters with those magicians on the street – the vendors. At the same time, what began as a simple account has led me to reflect on the changing values and economic dichotomies found in Indian cities today: conceptions of public space and ownership; definitions of "beauty" and "success"; the urge for growth, cleanliness and efficiency. Investigating Indian street

vendors and the food they sell came to highlight for me a paradigm shift in the pace of urban life; one that encompasses the clash of rich and poor, of rural and urban, of literate and semi-literate, and ultimately, stories of stark survival on the streets. It became a rediscovery of the numerous layers that make up urban India, of the relationship between its cities and the countryside, and above all the food and culture of its people. It became an appreciation of the total sensory overload that is India, its musical honks, radiant smiles, screaming attires, labyrinthine streets and overzealous strangers. This is a personal insight into a great nation and its brewing paradoxical realities.

The Magicians on the Street

Vir Singh is 62 years old and has been selling dry fruits from the same spot in Fountain, Bombay for the last 42 years. He hails from Jaipur, Rajsthan. His day begins at seven in the morning at Kalyan and he reaches Victoria Terminus using the local train by nine. His wife joins him at four in the afternoon and they return home together at nine in the evening. He personifies the image of a larger than life figure: the wrinkled, weathered look; timeless, regionalized features and mature expression. He has been following the same routine for all these years along with his wife and eight kids who are also in the same profession. He is content but misses home.



Vir Singh, Fountain, Bombay

Photograph by John Vijay Abraham

Who are street vendors?

Street vendors are essentially self-employed people who earn their living by selling products and services on the streets. Their service is characterized by the absence of “fixed prices” and “brands”. Here nothing is "standardized". Often hailing from rural India, they remain firmly rooted in their tradition and culture and help create a theater for the senses on the city roads. These vendors may be constantly on the move or they can be stationary, selling from a fixed place in a market or on the road side. The social and economic dynamism, which this informal sector creates within the wider system, is indispensable. A highly flexible, informal and evolved group, they generate a melting pot on the streets.



Spicy home made snack vendor, Girls school, south Delhi. Rs 2/- per packet

A typical street vendor could be a traditionally dressed lady selling vegetables on the street or a girl selling flowers in a local train. He could be giving a shave under a tree or offering juicy melons at a busy traffic junction. From a potter selling his wares on the highway to a small boy polishing shoes at a busy railway station platform, he could be an entrepreneur with innovative solutions for repairing old electronic items or a palmist inspiring your business decisions. A street vendor could be any of these.



Spicy sprouted pulses vendor, Chandni Chowk, Delhi. Rs 5/- for one bowl

What makes them special?

Street vendors constitute a motivated and sophisticated group with an informal and natural approach to their work, demonstrating a high degree of innovation and professionalism with a wonderful personal touch. As such they encourage an atmosphere of easy human bonding through their spontaneity and genuineness.

Street vendors create their own employment and reduce poverty. They trigger economic growth, reflect the culture and tradition of rural India and through this create a differentiated urban identity. Seen as representatives of social interaction as a whole in urban India, they symbolize an active link between the modern and traditional, the formal and informal, the public and private, and the trade and production realms. These interactions manifest in different ways: often fertile and meaningful, they occasionally turn confrontational. Street vendors are constantly used as scapegoats by city forces as sources of chaos, filth and pollution. Subjected to eviction threats, their legal status and very existence is being questioned by almost all the pressure groups within the city- the police, municipality, politician, real estate agent, private shop owners, vehicle owners and modern shopping mall developers.



Flavoured Juice Vendor, Powai market, Bombay. Rs 5/- for medium glass

Photograph by John Vijay Abraham

Can anyone imagine an Indian city without its vendors? From the sounds and smells to the colour, texture and vibrancy of animated expressions: they critically contribute to the heady experience of India. Unconditioned by formal perceptions of order and aesthetics, they bring their unique sensory package into a city. By sustaining the common man and providing exceptional service at the doorstep, they are truly a city's lifeline.

The Magic on the Streets

- *Boil 3 cups water*
- *Add 2 tsp tea leaves and 4 tsp sugar*
- *Add 2 crushed cardamom's and 2 cloves*
- *Add ½ inch slice of crushed fresh ginger*
- *Bring to a boil and add 1 cup milk*
- *Boil few times till we get the right fragrance and colour*
- *Strain and serve in earthen cups for four people*

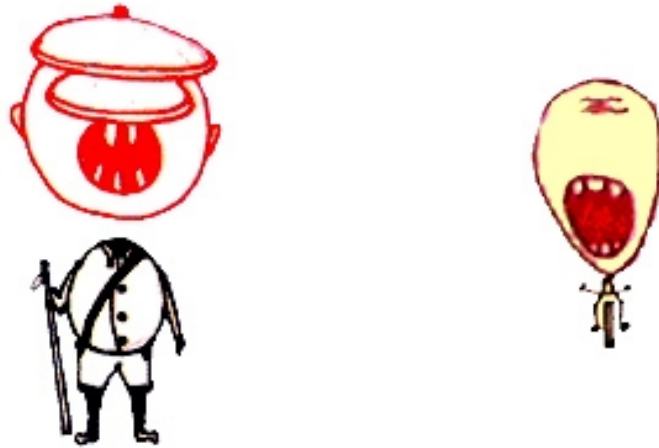
This would be an ingredient based lexical definition of *masala chai*. However, conveying the experience of enjoying a cup of hot *masala chai* in a cold Delhi winter with a group of strangers sitting crouched on the mud floor discussing politics, would bring back memories of the entire north Indian belt and the vibrant energy on its streets. How could those dark leaves of a diminutive shrub conjure up such imagination, fun, conversation, relief and magic in people's minds? This has been an important question for Sanjeev. The idea of *Chai* is greater than the image or sound of *Chai*. It is synonymous with "goodness". It builds relationships and erases subtle biases beyond even colour, caste or creed. To witness a popular *Chai* joint is to see a democratic milieu of people from different sections of the society coming together to enjoy an informal and often open ended discussion. Further, with the price of a cup of *Chai* pegged at Rs 2/- or Rs 3/-, the service and product is affordable to anyone. Often, the extent of camaraderie is so infectious that the vendor willingly logs the tea in his "account book" or offers it "on the house", the latter happening during festivals. I am often tempted to equate the dynamics of democracy in a nation to the number of *Chai* joints on the streets.

If it is *chai*, samosas and kachoris in north India, it is the irresistible vada pao, bhel puri and gol gappas in the western belt and the delightful idlis, vadas, dosas and uttapams in the south India. We have always been delighted by the fertility of the minds that envisioned a samosa or pioneered a gol gappa! Indeed, street food is a great medium which helps every Indian reconnect with their past, and with their childhood in a deeply holistic way. The very mention of "idli", conjures up images of something small, soft, humorous and delicate. Idli in fact finds mention in scriptures dating back to AD 920. Such is the wonderful connect between the food of a place and its language that we can never imagine a samosa being called anything else or a dhokla being renamed. Translations are usually inadequate. The deep connect between food and its language has further resulted in a string of qualitative terms which bring in much needed dynamism and flexibility. Words like, "garam" and "kadak" are often directly associated with *chai*, and "Chat patta" or "khatta meetha" with gol gappas and bhel puri. Indeed, the streets in India are constantly giving birth to new ligual terminologies in an effortless and often open ended manner.



Raj Kachori, Chandni Chowk, Delhi. Rs 10/- for one plate

The Clash



Standing on the streets of New Delhi, Sanjeev is surrounded by desolation all around. Where is the splash of colour, the mix of attires and tinkle of myriad sounds? He, no longer sees' people idyllically playing marbles by the bus stop or discussing politics next to the *paan* vendor. There are no "chilled out" cows, overzealous monkeys or curious dogs on the streets. Where is the balloon vendor outside the school? Where is the fresh lime juice vendor outside the bus stop? Where is his beloved *Chaiwalla*? They have all gone, in a single stroke: purged for creating discomfort and being detrimental to the pace of "growth" which we eagerly want and are getting accustomed to.

Today he witnessed a municipality truck with five officials in South Delhi, picking up vendor carts at random. They took away the utensils and the stock. Other officials decided to use their sticks to beat up vendors and break their eggs. There was milk all around. They finally drove away with apparent glee. Sanjeev had been acquainted for several weeks with one of the vendors they attacked. Many say that Delhi is only going to be for the rich from now on. His barber shares, how, everyone wants to rid Delhi of its "ills" and make it like Europe. Others say this with a sense of pride: this is "progress", they say: "we will soon be like the West". They all say this_ politicians, transport authorities, municipal bodies and the police.

This is not a nightmare. If all goes as planned by the authorities, Indian cities will soon be as sterile and desolate as they are in the West, and our obsession with cleansing; our persistence to rid the system of its variables- will be at the core of this. Since when did India become so intolerant? Since when did we learn to become so efficient, that we began wiping out the very essence which makes us unique? Since when did India so acutely want to run at a pace which is detrimental to its own diversity and sustenance? Can't we be more accommodating? Is purging our only solution? Are the convictions of the educated middle and upper middle class, right? Shouldn't a diverse nation like ours look for more holistic solutions? Surely, Delhi is by no means representative of India, but it certainly drives national opinion along with other major cities like Bombay, Calcutta, Chennai, and recently Bangalore, Poona, Hyderabad and Chandigarh.

In view of this, the more time Sanjeev spends with street vendors, the more he begins to feel a sense of empathy towards them. In the last three years, his excitement for street food in Delhi, Bombay and Goa has given way to much introspection, a growing discomfort and shock at the highhandedness of authorities in India. Much like mute witnesses, the vendors carry on. They keep coming back. The day this stops happening, our cities will indeed become comparable to any other city in the world. They will share the same sense of boredom and clinical efficiency which one associates with modern cities. They would be divorced from the flavors which really mean "India". They would become reservoirs for the chosen few who would take pride in its linearity and predictability. By showing our explicit love for the fast food industry where everything- from pizza delivery time to the- 'height of the pizza after baking'- is standardized, we are creating a platform for a monoculture. While the West seems to fail in its quest for diversity and fertility within its cities, our authorities are convinced that, the western model is our only answer for the future !

Salute

Meanwhile, our vendor is back the next morning. Sanjeev is impressed and inquires how

many times this has happened, and he replies with defiance, "three times in the last two months". Sanjeev asks again, "Don't you pay money to the cops and the authorities?". He answers, "of course, we even pay in kind, but there is still no guarantee". The cart is from his friend, a fresh juice vendor. The fresh juice business is not very popular in winters. We are informed that the municipality truck picked up 12 carts yesterday. There are no eggs today since all were broken in the clash. However, the vendor remarks, "eggs will arrive soon." Meanwhile he lights a fire with the waste paper lying around to warm up the place. This attracts students, construction workers, security guards, house maids and soon the greetings give way to informal exchanges. People start enjoying their early morning *masala chai*. Meanwhile, a brilliantly dressed doctor comes from the hospital behind and orders the vendor to bring 10 cups of hot tea and three omelets into the conference room. The vendor starts working on it immediately and later gives Sanjeev the honor of making an omelet.

Indeed, there is a wonderful method on these streets, a system in place and a deep sense of balance. Street Vendors live in the present and thrive amidst contradictions and complexities. We, the people, love them and value them. They are an integral part of India and personify its spirit and values. Sanjeev silently thanks every street vendor along this journey and looks forward to another glorious, colorful and fragrant day.



Fresh Mix juice, South Delhi. Rs 10/- for medium sized glass