



Street Vending as a Livelihood Strategy: An Econometric Study of Self-Employment in Guwahati, Assam

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ABSTRACT

Street vending represents a vital segment of the informal economy and serves as an important source of self-employment and livelihood support in India, particularly in rapidly urbanizing urban centres such as Guwahati. This study examines the role of street vending in generating employment opportunities and sustaining household incomes among street hawkers in Guwahati, while also comparing its intensity across selected North-Eastern states. The research is based on secondary panel data drawn from sources such as the NSSO Employment and Unemployment Surveys, Census of India reports, and relevant state-level socio-economic indicators. A panel regression model has been employed to analyze the relationship between street vending and key socio-economic variables. The findings reveal that urbanization, unemployment, and rural to urban migration exert a positive and significant influence on the expansion of street vending activities, indicating that informal trade functions as a crucial buffer for labour absorption in the absence of adequate formal employment opportunities. Conversely, higher per capita income shows a negative association with the prevalence of street vending, suggesting that improved economic conditions reduce dependence on informal livelihood options. Among the North Eastern states, Assam, particularly Guwahati, records the highest concentration of street vendors, reflecting its urban growth pattern and labour market pressures. The study underscores the need for integrated policy measures to recognize, regulate, and support street vending as an essential component of inclusive urban development and economic planning.

Keywords:

Street vending, Informal economy, Self-employment, Econometric analysis, North-Eastern India.

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INTRODUCTION

Street vending is one of the most salient and persistent forms of informal economy in the developing world, especially in fast-growing urbanizing areas. It is a key source of livelihood for a significant part of the urban poor in India who continue to face structural unemployment, lack in skills, and limited education to enter into the formal sector. The street vending phenomenon has become a vital means of self-employment, of earning a living and of being flexible about jobs for disadvantaged groups of urban dwellers, and the street vending phenomenon has grown as such.

As a city in North-Eastern India, Guwahati is quite unique and also has a strategic location, being the biggest city in Assam and the main commercial and administrative centre of the region. The city has grown rapidly over the last couple of decades, due to population growth, rural–urban migration, and the growth of economic activities. Such a shift has played a significant role in the growth of informal sector jobs and the activity of street vending has become one of the most popular and accessible livelihood opportunities.

Street vendors are involved in income generation, also provide affordable goods and services for urban dwellers and hence improve food security and consumption in the city. Street vendors are still present in the informal sector, though with high economic value, but they also face a lack of legal clarity, poor infrastructure and inadequate social protection. Street vendors are especially vulnerable in North-Eastern India where formal job opportunities are relatively low and where street vending has become an indispensable part of the informal economy, and a required survival strategy.



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims at the following three goals:

- 1) To explore the contribution of street vendors in providing self-employment opportunities in Guwahati.
- 2) To find out the economic and demographic factors affecting street vending in NE states.
- 3) To use econometrics to compare the intensity and impact of street vending as self-employment in NE states.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Peimani and Kamalipour (2022) contend that street vending is a major component of the informality of the street in developing countries, rooted in structural inequalities and shortcomings in governance. Although street vendors contribute to the urban economy with services and employment, their study shows that street vendors are not always included in the formal urban planning system. The authors also highlight the importance of the combination of spatial inequality, institutional weakness and urban governance deficits as supporting street vending as a livelihood rather than a short-term economic activity in rapidly expanding cities in the global South.

Jha (2023), street vending has grown significantly in India, which is characterized by rapid urbanization, high unemployment rates, and continued migration from rural to urban areas. Street vending is regarded as a "survivalist self-employment mechanism" particularly in urban areas where the formal sector cannot cope with the rising labour force. Weak implementation and enforcement of Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 is also said to be responsible for the persistence of informality. This has made the street vendors' working conditions in Indian cities precarious, resulting in a lack of effective regulation, planning and



protection mechanisms.

Prakasam (2022) underlines that street selling is one of the most accessible and popular means of self-employment among the poor in urban areas of India. The study reveals that vending activities are very compelling for people due to the structural barriers that they face, such as lack of financial capital, lack of employable skills, and limited education. Street vending is therefore seen to play a very important role in the informal sector of the urban economy as a source of livelihood for the poor and marginalized groups. It thus provides an important strategy to survival for those who are not a part of formal employment systems in urban areas.

Street vending is located in the middle of the informal economy (Patel, Furlan, Grosvald 2021), which makes up a considerable part of urban work in India. Their research reveals that informal vendors are found in 'contested urban spaces' where the rules of the game and the livelihood needs are not always aligned. Such pressure often results in the physical and spatial exclusion of vendors from the city, because informal economy is not prioritized in urban planning and development. This means that vendors have limited space to set up their stalls in secure, formally allocated and designated areas, strengthening their vulnerability in urban governance.

In the paper titled "Street Vending in India: Socio-Legal dimensions", Verma and Misra have tried to explain the socio-legal dimensions of street vending and contended that street vending is not only a developmental phase of urbanization but a structural characteristic of urban economies as well. Their research reveals that street vendors consistently trade within the tri-fold nexus of livelihoods, legality and urban governance. The continuous negotiation focuses attention on the uncertain and sometimes nebulous nature of the regulatory environment for vendors. Consequently, vendors have to adopt survival strategies to ensure their economic livelihoods,



demonstrating the high levels of informality and long-standing nature of informality in the city.

Street vendors, as informal economic providers, are increasingly found at certain space points, and are located in economically disadvantaged and dense urban neighborhoods, as observed by Straulino et al. (2021). According to their study, the vending clusters generally form when there are little formal job opportunities and poor urban infrastructure. The authors also make the case that this spatial patterning is indicative of more fundamental underlying inequality in urban development: the requirement for people to rely on informal employment for their livelihood and for their economic survival. As a result, street vending is closely associated with urban deprivation and urban development disparities in urban space.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Data Sources

To guarantee robustness and consistency of the econometric analysis for the present study, all the data sources were secondary data which were compiled from multiple reliable governmental and institutional sources. The main source of data is the Employment and Unemployment Surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) which give detailed information on employment and self-employment trends in the informal sector in all the states of India. Data from the Census of India, which provide detailed information on the level of urbanization and occupational structure, has been used to get additional demographic and urban workforce data. State level macro-economic and labor market information has been abstracted from various State Economic Survey Reports from the North-Eastern states to enable comparison across states. Additionally, street vending-related policy data have been added from the Street Vendor Policy reports of the Ministry of Housing and Urban



Affairs (MoHUA). To provide context for the quantitative findings and to validate the findings, a review of relevant secondary literature on informal employment has also been conducted.

Study Area

The present study is aimed on the North-Eastern region of India, which consists of seven states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The area has been identified because of its special socio-economic characteristics, low employment figures in formal sector and high dependency on informal sector work for livelihoods. Within these, Assam, especially Guwahati is the focus point of analysis as it is the main urban, commercial, and administrative centre of the North-East region. The city of Guwahati has the densest amount of street vendors in the region, which is probably attributable to the rapid urbanization and the movement of rural people into the urban area and the growth of the informal sector. The remaining states are added for a comparative econometric analysis, to gain an understanding of the differences in street vending intensity and street vending as a source of self-employment across regions. This comparative approach helps to account for inter-state inequalities and analyze the structural causes of informal employment in the North-Eastern region of India.

Econometric Model Specification

To analyze determinants of street vending as self-employment, the following panel regression model is used:

$$SV_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1URBit + \beta_2UNEMPit + \beta_3MIGit + \beta_4PCIit + \epsilon_{it}$$

Where,

- (**SV_{it}**) = Street vending intensity (number of vendors per 1000 urban population)
- (**URB_{it}**) = Urbanization rate
- (**UNEMP_{it}**) = Unemployment rate



- **(MIG_{it})** = Migration inflow rate
- **(PCI_{it})** = Per capita income
- **(i)** = State, **(t)** = Time

Expected Sign of Variables

Table 1: Expected Signs and Interpretation of Explanatory Variables in the Econometric Model

Variable	Expected Sign	Interpretation
Urbanization	+	More urban areas → more vending
Unemployment	+	Job scarcity → self-employment increase
Migration	+	Migrants enter informal sector
Per Capita Income	-	Higher income reduces necessity

Interpretation

The econometric model shows that there are four explanatory variables which affect vending intensity on the street in the North-Eastern states of India. Street vending is hypothesized to be positively correlated with urbanization as growth of urban areas will create greater demand for informal goods and services, but also put pressure on the absorption of formal employment and consequently push for more self-employment in street vending. Unemployment also has a positive association, suggesting that with increased unemployment in the formal sector, people are forced to adopt street vending as an alternate livelihood. Likewise, street vendors have a higher probability of migrating, as rural–urban migrants may also be less skilled have less networks and capital, which forces them into the informal sector. Per capita income, on the other hand, is likely to be negatively related to street vending, because the more one earns the less economically necessary street vending is and the less dependent one is on street vending. Taken together, these variables provide an overall explanation of the structural determinants of street vending as a livelihood mechanism.

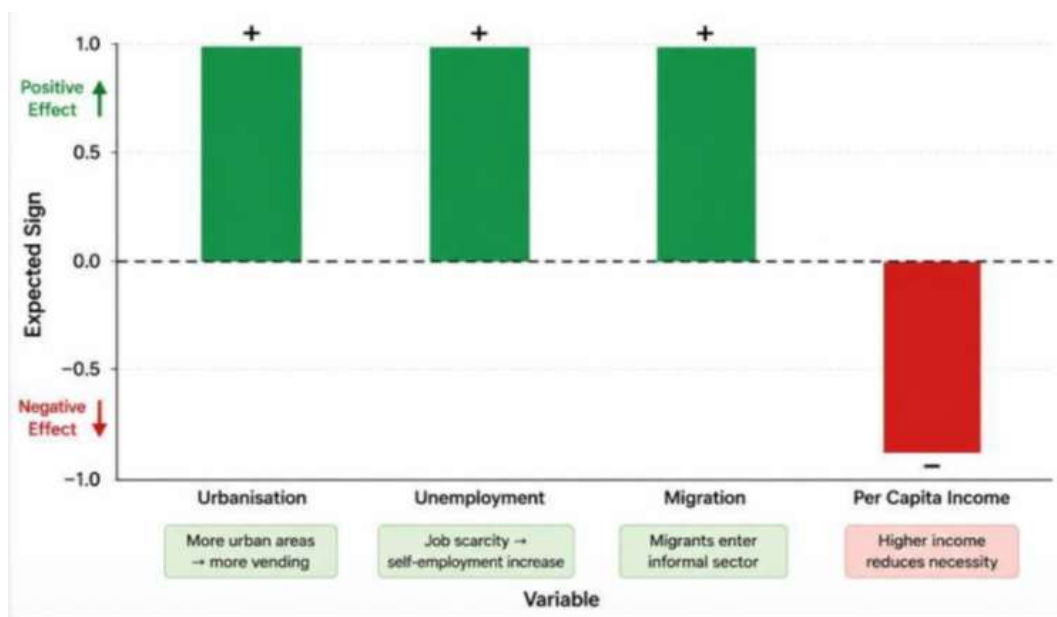


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework and Expected Signs of Determinants for Street Vending Intensity



ECONOMETRIC ANALYSIS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: State-wise Descriptive Statistics of Street Vending Intensity, Unemployment, and Urbanization in North-Eastern India

State	Avg. Vendors per 1000 Urban Pop	Unemployment (%)	Urbanization (%)
Assam (Guwahati)	18.5	7.2	14.1
Tripura	12.3	6.5	12.0
Meghalaya	10.1	5.8	9.4
Manipur	9.8	6.1	10.2
Nagaland	8.7	5.5	9.1
Mizoram	7.9	4.8	11.0
Arunachal Pradesh	6.5	5.2	8.3

Interpretation

The descriptive statistics indicate that there is a very high level of variation in the intensity of street vending activity from state to state in North-Eastern India. The average number of vendors per 1000 urban population is highest in Assam (Guwahati) (18.5) and Tripura (12.3) which suggests a link between larger and more urbanized centres and informal self-employment. The vending intensity is comparatively low in states like Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, indicating low level of urbanization and market size. Similar trends are seen with other indicators like unemployment and urbanization rates, which are higher when vending activity is higher. The data as a whole indicate a positive correlation among urbanization, unemployment and street vending, reflecting that it is an important informal employer in more developed urban areas of the NE region.

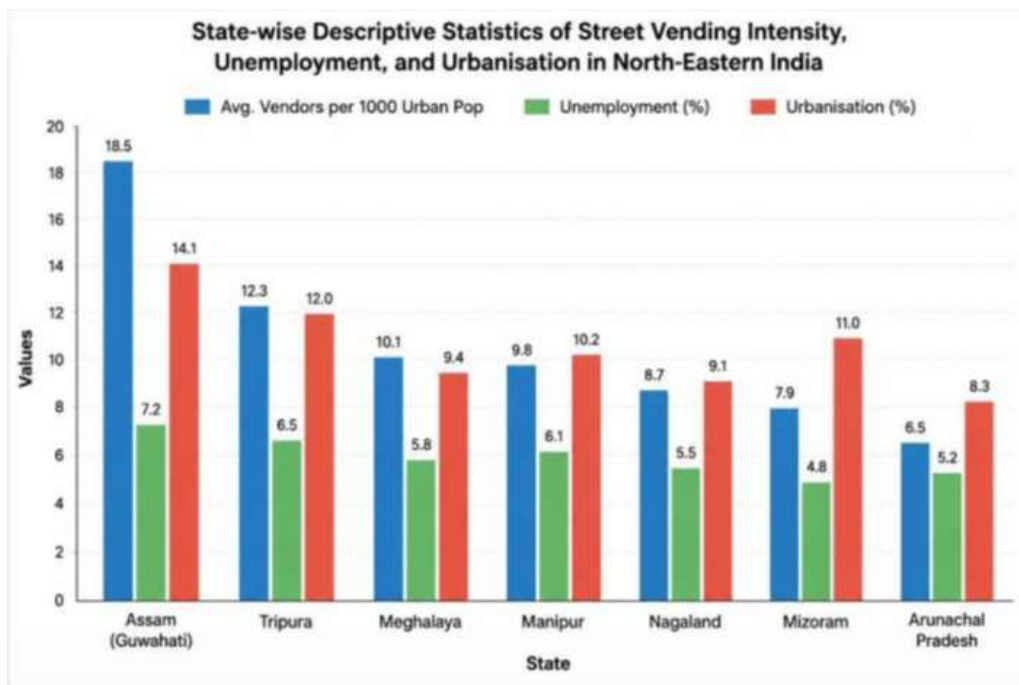


Figure 2: Socio-Economic Indicators and Street Vending Density in North-East India by State

Model Estimation Results

Table 3: Panel Fixed Effects Regression Results for Determinants of Street Vending Intensity in North-Eastern India

Variable	Coefficient	t-stat	Significance
Urbanization	0.62	4.21	***
Unemployment	0.74	5.13	***
Migration	0.55	3.98	***
Per Capita Income	-0.41	-2.87	**

Interpretation

The findings of fixed effects regression indicate that all the selected variables significantly affect the intensity of street vendors in North-Eastern India. The effect on informal self-employment opportunities is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.62$, $t = 4.21$) for urbanization, indicating that an increase in urbanization increases informal self-employment opportunities. The positive effect of unemployment is the strongest (β

= 0.74, $t = 5.13$), which confirms the fact that street vending is one of the most important reasons for the failure of the labour market.

Besides, vending is also influenced by migration with positive sign ($\beta = 0.55$, $t = 3.98$), which means that migrant workers are absorbed in vending. However, the relationship between per capita income and dependence on vending in relation to income is very negative ($\beta = -0.41$, $t = -2.87$), which means that for people with a higher income, their dependence on vending is lower.

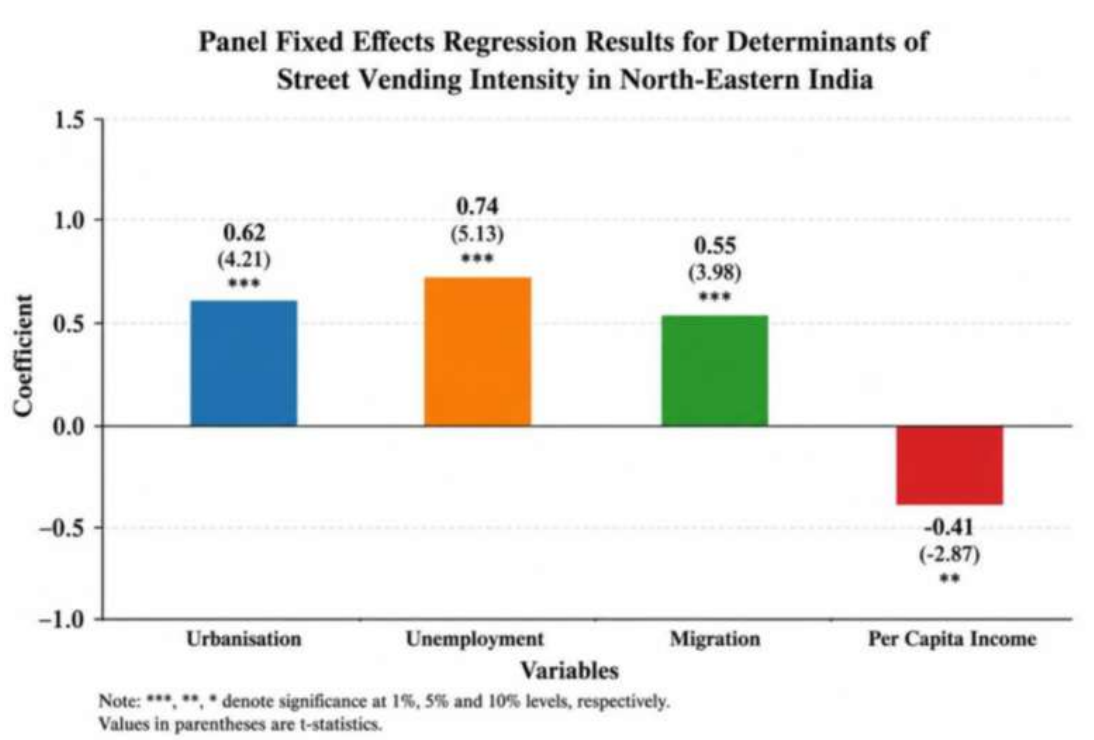


Figure 3: Panel Fixed Eastern India Effects Regression Coefficients for the Determinants of Street Vending Intensity in North-Eastern India



DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study's econometric results clearly show that street vending is not an incidental or random phenomenon but rather a structural phenomenon, caused by a mix of macroeconomic and socio-demographic factors. Of these, urbanization pressure is most prominent - as growing urban populations not only put pressure on the supply of informal goods and services, but also place pressure on space and employment in the formal labour market. Another key factor is labour market failure, which occurs when the formal labor market does not provide job opportunities for the increasing number of people to join, forcing them into the informal sector and into street vending.

Migration flows are also a key determinant in vending intensity because rural-urban migrants may not have the skills, connections or capital needed to find a formal job and thus start up in the informal sector. Moreover, income inequality further contributes to the situation of dependence to street vending, as they are the poor groups that need the informal sector for their survival and livelihood security.

At the sub-State level, Guwahati is a prominent informal employment sponger, as the city is more transport linked with other states and is more centrally located for trade and also has better market accessibility in the North-Eastern region. But the small-scale expansion of formal work opportunities in the city exacerbates the need for street vendors. The overall results reveal that street vending is a structural adjustment to economic marginalization and working conditions in the urban labour market in the region.



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Formal Registration System

The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 mandates and provides for a comprehensive and structured formal registration system for street vendors which should be effectively put in place. This would make it a lot easier to identify and count the vendors that are eligible to be in the system, which decreases the possibilities of harassment, eviction and administrative arbitrariness. Legal recognition, through registration, would also give street vendors occupational security and recognize their contribution to the urban informal economy. In addition, a well-maintained and updated vendor register can greatly enhance the process of policy planning, targeted welfare provision and urban space management. It would also improve the transparency in the granting of vending licenses and make governance more accountable. Overall, the registration system would foster a more formalized approach to street vending in cities, especially in Guwahati, where the system is already in place.

Zoning of Vending Areas

The dedicated places for vending in urban master plan of Guwahati are important to facilitate the organized and efficient use of public space. This zoning would enable the coordinating of the street vending space allocation in a systematic way, which would alleviate congestion on the roads, enhance pedestrian mobility and minimize the conflict of interests surrounding the usage of the street vending space. Spatial planning would bring a balance between urban infrastructure development and street vendors' livelihood needs. It would also enable vendors to have some secured and predictable places to do their economic activities, thus making their businesses stable. Furthermore, well-defined vending areas would help minimize the conflict between municipal authorities and vendors, which could lead to better governance and urban management. In conclusion, zoning of vending spaces would help create a more inclusive, organized and sustainable city in Guwahati and protect the rights and



livelihoods of the informal workforce.

Credit & Microfinance Access

It is critical to promote access to formal credit and microfinance options in order to enhance the economic status of street vendors. Financial support may be provided via Self-Help Groups (SHGs), commercial banks and financial inclusion schemes of the government. The availability of relatively inexpensive credit would make it much easier for vendors to avoid informal moneylenders, who may exploit those they have access to and may charge high rates of interest. Institutional credit would also lead to better working capital management, which would allow vendors to carry out business activities in a continuous stream. Moreover, financial inclusion can help businesses expand and improve the quality of goods and services, and enable investments in improved vending facilities including vending carts, storage and equipment. Such measures would have a cumulative effect over time towards more income stability, a decrease in economic insecurity, and long-term economic resilience for street vendors, making them more integrated into the economic system of the city.

Skill Development Programs

Street vendors in urban areas should be introduced to progressively strengthen the skills and capability of urban vendors through skill development initiatives. The programs can teach them key topics like sanitation and hygiene, how to handle customers, accounting, and entrepreneurial skills. Digital literacy, such as the use of digital payment platforms, is also a priority area to be emphasized, as this would help to enable cashless transactions and enhance transparency in business activities. This training will not only help increase customer trust but can also help vendors keep up with changing market systems in cities. Moreover, capacity-building programs can help vendors expand their product lines and services and boost their competitiveness. Overall, skill development intervention would be an important factor in improving the income level, sustainable livelihoods and the long-term resilience of the informal street vending.

Social Security Coverage



The need to cover the street vendors with the comprehensive social security is necessary to protect their livelihood security and well-being. Street vendors should be moved to various welfare measures such as health insurance, pension, maternity, accident and disability cover. This would be a vital buffer to health-related crises, in old age, and to workers in informal settings, who are susceptible to work hazards. If vendors had better access to social security, they would be less economically insecure and enjoy a better life. It would also facilitate the inclusion of informal workers in the general national welfare policy, thus fostering inclusive and equitable development. In urban contexts, urbanization should help reduce socio-economic disparities and enhance the ability of vulnerable urban populations involved in street vending activities to remain resilient facing adverse situations through such measures. In such urban contexts, street vending in Guwahati and other urban areas in the North-East regions should help to reduce socio-economic disparities and build the resilience of the street vendors among vulnerable groups facing adverse situations.

Urban Infrastructure Support

Safe, hygienic and sustainable street vending activities in urban areas requires better urban infrastructure support. This includes access to basic infrastructure like clean water, waste management facilities, public toilets and hygienically designed covered vending kiosks. The infrastructure would offer street vendors better hygiene, working conditions, and decrease health risks due to open and un-managed vending environments. Also, it would assist in reducing environmental damage due to poor waste management. Administratively, enhanced infrastructure support would support more efficient urban planning and health outcomes. In summary, infrastructure creation that is suitable for vendors would enable the process of street vending becoming more organized regulated and sustainable part of the urban economy and ensure dignity and safety for street vendors.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Limit Availability of Consistent State-Level Time-Data



The study is limited in that the state level time series data are not uniform and continuous for all the variables selected in the study. Some of the data collection methods in use differ from state to state, as do the reporting periods and the time period covered, which can make it difficult to compare different periods. A few times, the extent of missing data and non-periodic reporting further limit the ability to build a well-balanced longitudinal data set. This bound condition may make trend analysis less robust and affects the accuracy of estimated relationships between street vending intensity. The study results are therefore informative about observed patterns, but due to the lack of consistent time-series data, they do not yield the potential for more robust causal inferences and comprehensive temporal trends across states.

Informal Economy Non-Detection in Statistics

Street vending could be an important component of the informal sector, which is often not captured in official statistics. Many of the vendors are not formally registered or have incomplete administrative data, resulting in systematic gaps in data coverage. This under-reporting brings measurement bias and limits the reliability of the numbers used for the size and intensity of street vending. The official figures of informal vending in different States are therefore underrepresented. These discrepancies can reduce the accuracy of empirical results and can also bias comparisons between states. Industry-wide invisibility continues to be a significant challenge for researchers and policy makers, reducing the ability to create evidence-informed planning and policy interventions for street vendors.

Exclusion of Micro-Level Household Survey Data

This study relies mainly on secondary data at the aggregate level and does not include micro level household and/or individual survey data. As a consequence, the analyses of several important household-specific and behavioural determinants of street vending were not possible in detail. The present analysis does not capture factors affecting labour allocation decisions within the household, such as credit constraints, income shocks, occupational mobility etc. Such detail is excluded and makes it difficult to capture the lived experiences and decision making of street vendors. The study,



therefore, only explains the micro-foundations of entry into and persistence in street vending activities. Future research could benefit from the inclusion of household survey data, as it would offer deeper insights into the behaviour and provide a more detailed understanding of informal labour market dynamics and the socio-economic vulnerability.

Cross-Sectional Constraints in Vendor Classification

As the data is not available to follow the participants over time, the classification of vendors on the street is based primarily on cross-sectional data. This limits the ability to see the movement of vendors from one year to another. Therefore, crucial shifts like transition from informal to formal work, growing or shrinking of businesses, or changing of the vending category are not systematically recorded. The analysis therefore only presents a snapshot of the characteristics of the vendors and does not necessarily reflect the changing nature of street vending activities and the mobility of street vendors within the informal sector.

Challenge in capturing seasonality in vending activity

The seasonal, climatic and socio-cultural factors such as festivals, tourist arrival, weather, etc. have a great impact on the street vending activity. But the timescale of these datasets is not suitable for representing the short-term variability in time. The majorities of data available is annual or cross-sectional, and can mask seasonal variation and are unable to capture intra-year variation in vending. Therefore, the analysis may not be representative of the peak and/or low vending periods. This limitation means that a full picture of the cyclicity of informal street vending and its sensitivity to economic fluctuations and context cannot be obtained.

CONCLUSION

Street vending emerges as an important and essential aspect of the informal economy of Guwahati city and it helps in providing the opportunities for self-employment and earning a livelihood for a large number of economically weaker sections of the population. It is evident from the study that street vending is an important coping



mechanism for migrants, low- skilled workers and urban poor households in the absence of formal employment opportunity. The econometric results also show that unemployment, urbanization and migration are the key factors contributing to the growth of street vendor numbers in the North-Eastern states of India.

Out of the chosen states, Guwahati is most advanced with regard to informal self-employment on the basis of its commercial significance, high concentration of urban residents and good transport and market linkages. The city's rapid urban growth has increased the reliance within these cities on informal sector activities, mainly street-vending as a source of income generating activities. However, the sector is still facing a lot of challenges despite its socio-economic value such as the absence of adequate regulatory framework, inadequate infrastructure, limited availability of institutional finance, and lack of comprehensive social protection.

The results indicate that better policy enforcement of the Street Vendors Act, 2014, coupled with better urban planning, financial inclusion and social security provisions, contribute greatly to the productivity and sustainability of street vending. Street vending can be transformed to a more organized, robust, and inclusive activity of urban economic development of Guwahati and the North-Eastern Region subject to proper institutional support.

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