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## INDIA: 'City of Joy' Turns Model for Street Food Hygiene

**By Keya Acharya****KOLKATA, May 20 (IPS) - Ranjini Gupta who works with the urban development department located in the heart of this bustling city snacks occasionally at the street food stalls nearby unmindful of food safety concerns.**

"One can't really attribute any serious health issue from eating at these stalls," says Gupta, a doctoral student on solid waste management at Kolkata's prestigious Jadavpur University. "There are other eating places in this city where food hygiene is of far lower standards than that of the street food vendors," she avers.

Gupta, like many other people who live and work in Kolkata, are beneficiaries of a successful project to turn this eastern metropolis' cheap, mouth-watering variety of ready-to-eat street foods into a safe and hygienic experience.

It all started with a scientific study, conducted by the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (AIHPH), and later translated into a plan of action. The initiative has claimed an award from the Rome-based Food and Agricultural Organisation and a categorisation as a 'centre-of-excellence' for the AIHPH in writer Dominique Lapierre's 'City of Joy'.

Indira Chakravarty, project coordinator and additional director-general of the 76-year-old institute, looked at 120,000 vendors feeding nearly 7.8 million people daily from all walks of life around various parts of this teeming city with a population that was almost 16 million in 2001.

Unofficial estimates put the number of street-vending stalls in the city at 130,000 with a rough turnover of 60 million US dollars annually.

An entire small-scale industry serving street foods has now grown up in Kolkata -- and the rest of India -- built on economies of scale. High sale volumes coupled with almost no overhead costs allow the vendors to make a livelihood from this industry where the basic food is either prepared by small home-businesses or made by the vendor at the stall.

Nearly 200 varieties of foods, mostly traditional, served fresh and speedily and with a minimum of space requirements make this industry popular with customers in a hurry.

Office-goers, low-income manual workers and clerical staff get a piping hot meal of rice, lentil, vegetable and sometimes fish for a fraction of the time and cost involved in cooking the same at home.

Stalls set up around industrial areas were found to be the only source of daily sustenance for manual workers. But others, including higher-income urban middle-class populations, see street-foods as a tasty and cheap alternative to more elaborate dining.

"This is a cottage-industry which is surprisingly nutritious, providing nearly 1,000 calories for as little as five rupees (12 US cents)," Chakravarty told IPS.

Kolkata's street foods are based on Indian indigenous cooking, different from western fast foods, and in some cases, typical of the region.

Spicy, fried, meat-filled 'samosas', or fried, spicy lentil mixed with onions, called 'pakoras' are literally hot favourites all over country, and a popular snack in many international countries with Indian populations such as Britain.

The model, which was presented to an international audience at a meeting organised by the international NGO WaterAid in New Delhi recently, looked at types of food served, clientele, timings, profitability, as well as environmental factors such as water-quality, garbage disposal and kiosk standards.

Also looked at were the attitudes of vendors, their relationship with authorities like the police and officials of the municipal corporation and with consumers.

"Unfortunately, while the calorific value of street foods was high and a ready source of attractive-looking, tasty nutrition for millions of low socioeconomic people, we found the handling of food and water to be very poor," commented Chakravarty, adding that knowledge of hygiene and health safety amongst the vendors was "very low".

A microbiological assessment of the water used showed 86.6 percent coliform, 56.6 percent E.coli -- an indicator of faecal contamination -- and 23.33 percent of salmonella, all deadly water-borne bacteria.

Scientific assessments, according to HACCP (hazard analysis critical control point) standards of both food served and water used showed that contamination was not at source, but during the handling and transportation of these foods, made at vendors' homes.

Chakravarty gave, as an example, the making and selling of 'sandesh', a very popular sweetmeat in Kolkata, made from curdled and strained milk or a form of cottage cheese, wherein the bacteria was found to begin from the cloth used to strain the curdled milk.

Or the contamination of 'ghugni', another popular dish made with horse gram, onions, potatoes and spices, that contracted microbes only during storage in the stalls or kiosks.

Poor environmental conditions, lack of storage space and access to sanitary facilities and proper garbage disposal posed one set of problems for street vendors. There were also problems with civic authorities, this being an 'illegal' industry without regulatory monitoring.

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The model, says Chakravarty, then devised a strategy of awareness and capacity-building amongst vendors and authorities.

"We told the vendors that the bacteria in their food came not from source but from handling and even something as seemingly small as washing vessels and leaving them upturned at night," says Chakravarty.

Government authorities were roped in to monitor water quality sources, create proper garbage disposal, sanitation facilities and a process of control on street food sales on mutually acceptable terms.

Special hawking zones have now been created in central areas of Calcutta and 120,000 vendors have their names listed with the police.

Training of police, hawkers and municipal officials has been undertaken by the AIHHPH.

The AIHHPH has in recent years been helping draw up similar management plans for countries like South Africa and is a consultant to the World Health Organisation in the South-east Asia region.

(END/2008)

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