

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## People and Places

### Food on the Street Provides Food for their Homes

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defined street food as "ready-to-eat foods and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors and hawkers, especially in the streets and other similar public places," FAO recognised that the street foods are an important economic activity in the context of the modern urban life.

FAO expert R. J. Dawson termed the street foods as "a problem, a challenge and an opportunity for development."

by Chapal Bashar

millions of consumers. "Street foods are a socio-economic impetus for the less educated and relatively poor urbanites. Street food vending is one of the terminals of food marketing and distribution systems. It can be easily regarded as a huge but scattered

"They are not quite clean and are responsible for causing frequent cases of food poisoning", the FAO report pointed out.

Vending of street foods is now a common scene in the urban areas of developing countries. Varieties of foods

fer, so do the quality standard and serving method from one city to another, from one country to another. But, inspite of these differences, one factor

FAO has been monitoring the growth and development of the street foods and constantly reviewing the situation through workshops and expert

Findings of the FAO studies and workshops highlighted various problems associated with this large scale but, in most instances, non-recognised industry and identified fields for further development and activities.

The report of a FAO expert

provides employment and income opportunities, especially to women, city migrants and those who have relatively low educational background. However, improvement of food handling practices, particularly those related to sanitation and hygiene of street foods and

Most of these push-carts are covered with glass panes and snacks are prepared inside. These snack vendors do their business mainly around parks, museum, schools, colleges, cinema halls and other places where people gather in large number.

Other vendors sell tea, sugarcane juice, fruits, sweets and many kinds of snacks on the busy thoroughfares of the metropolis. Some cook and sale *pthas* on the city streets.

"Are the street foods of Dhaka safe for health?" On this question, people seldom differ. Everybody would agree that our street foods are not adequately hygienic. Moreover, authorities have little control over ensuring the safety. There is also lack of awareness among the vendors and consumers as well.

Among the Asian cities, street foods are widely practiced in Thai capital Bangkok. The situation in Bangkok is such that the street foods are popular among the consumers for many reasons. The street foods there are cheap and some are cheaper than the same if cooked at home. Bangkok is a big city and it is expanding rapidly further such that for many to go to work and back can take one to two hours. The population has therefore to depend for their meals on the street foods as they do not have sufficient time to prepare meals at home for themselves. It is said that 90 per cent of the people in Bangkok do not cook food at home 90 per cent of the time! So, they buy street foods for breakfast, lunch and dinner and also at snack times.

Statistics of 1986 shows that the number of street food vendors in Bangkok was about 13 thousands. The number is likely to be doubled by now since the practice is growing fast, believe the experts.

In Singapore, the street food business is now well organised. Since 1971, Singapore embarked on a national programme to build food centres to resettle licensed street food hawkers. With the completion of the programme, the hawkers are no longer allowed to sell food on the streets. Necessities have been provided to the food centres located on the street side. About 24 thousand street food vendors were licensed in Singapore till 1988.

The number of street food vendors in Kuala Lumpur was estimated at over 25 thousand in 1988. Most of the vendors in the city are licensed. Besides owning food centres and stalls, vendors use push-carts to sell foods and beverages in some areas of the Malaysian capital.

The Malaysian Ministry of Health and respective local authorities are directly responsible for maintaining and enforcing codes of practice of food hygiene and the by-laws of the country. There are efforts from Malaysian authorities to ensure food safety and hygienic condition of the street foods.

Realising its economic significance, the sale of street foods is being encouraged through licensing, provision of basic facilities, regular inspections, assistance in the form of subsidies and loans where appropriate, and proper siting and relocation. It is hoped that efforts can be continuously made to improve the sale of street foods in Malaysia so that it is conveniently available for Malaysians as well as tourists and visitors.

In Nepal, street food items which were not so popular in the past are becoming more and more nowadays in the urbanized cities. These are being integrated from other countries like India, China, Tibet and European countries. Street foods are generally of a low quality, which are mostly consumed by young school children, local workers, and low class traders. Problems of food hygiene and sanitation in the street foods sector are common. There is also a lack of safe water for drinking and cleaning purposes. Tourists tend to get diarrhoea and other gastrointestinal problems. There are no regulations on the health and hygiene of vendors or sellers.

The demand for street foods exists in all the cities, particularly of developing countries. It is increasing with the growth of urbanization which however, entails myriad problems, but opportunities as well.

Street foods at present, in Dhaka though lack in adequate standard and may very well create health hazard nevertheless, it has come to grow. And, therefore, proper measures have to be taken to raise it to a healthy standard. And this will convert the problems into opportunities.



A good sale at Kamalapur Railway Station



Smiling couple sell street food in Bangkok.



There's always a demand for "Fuchkas" on Dhaka streets.

food industry," said the report which also noted that street foods and food vending are considered a 'eyesore and a nuisance' creating traffic men-

and beverages can be seen in the streets of Dhaka, Calcutta, Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Manila and such other cities in Asia. The street food items dif-

remains common which is, more and more people are drawn into this quick business and the urban people's dependence on street foods is also marking a significant growth.

consultations. In addition, studies were carried out with FAO assistance in reviewing various aspects of street foods as they pertain to their composition, availability and safety.

consultation on street foods held in Indonesia in December 1988 said, "street foods are an important source of economical and nutritious food, particularly for the urban poor. Street food vendors are a necessary part of urban modern-day life, especially in the developing countries although are frequently looked upon with disdain by some government officials because they regard street food vendors as causing a traffic menace, a nuisance regarding the cleanliness of the city and possible sources of food poisoning outbreaks. FAO's interest in street foods extends to quality and safety concerns as well as consideration of their valuable food and nutrition aspects. Since street foods are the end product of marketing and distribution chains for agriculture, animal husbandry and fisheries products, they are also directly linked to these sectors of the economy and thus have additional impacts."

creating awareness to satisfy the nutritional needs of the population are imperative in the upgrading of street foods. The strengthening of the food quality and standards regulations, as adopted by the government, need to be undertaken to ensure food safety for the protection of the health of consumers.

The case study, however, did not elaborate the street food situation in Dhaka or elsewhere in Bangladesh.

How many street food vendors are there in Dhaka city? None can answer this question since, so far it is known, there was no survey on it by any agency.

According to the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) rules and regulations, vending of foods on the street is not legal. A DCC official frankly admitted their ignorance about the number of street food vendors or hawkers.

"Undoubtedly, there are thousands of street food vendors in the city," he said adding, "Our manpower is not enough to control street food vending or for ensuring hygienic standard."

One can come across differ-

## London Times on Perks for MPs; A Few New Ideas for Sangsad Members; and What Would Have Bhashani Said about the Remuneration Act?

WE are rather fortunate that *The Times* of London does not have much of a circulation among our members of the Jatiya Sangsad. We can, therefore, assume that most of them missed a recent report in the UK daily detailing the perks enjoyed by British MPs. There too, among members of the House of Commons, rumblings are heard that they may not be getting as much fringe benefits as their counterparts in some west European countries or in the US Congress. One wonders if most MPs are about the same, when it comes to their own financial benefits, in many democracies.

free car, every MP should be provided with a motorbike, an ideal mode of transport for travel in the interior of the country.

However, if any last remaining idealistic member of the Sangsad suggests that the motorbike should be a substitute for the duty-free car, not in addition to the four-wheeler, we will give him (or her) all

hard-working representatives of our people - and a few marginal advantages, such as the research study, for the country.

LIKE myself, many of my contemporaries were perhaps filled with memories of the late Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani when we read the stirring

wrath of the masses. There, standing against the setting sun, with his white beard shaking in the wind, he would have warned the mighty and powerful, like a Biblical figure stepping out of mythology, that people do not forgive you for your blunders.

Yes, we may miss Bhashani. What we miss more is someone who can serve as the "conscience of the nation," one who can exercise his undoubted moral authority, instead of power based on decrees and ordinances, the kind of authority that, like charisma, is difficult to define but hard to ignore.

But, then, people say that in the world of changing realities of power politics, moral authority *per se* has no place, a world in which even Mahatma Gandhi would be a misfit, like "a monk walking in the rain with a leaking umbrella", as Mao Tse Tung once told Edgar Snow.

Journalists who covered the Moulana's activities, month after month and year after year, for over four decades, from the forties to the seventies, would remember many different - and often somewhat conflicting - sides of the man and the politician. We would remember him as an uncompromising relentless fighter for the downtrodden and poor, as a crusader against corruption and bureaucracy, as a devout Muslim who believed in socialism and, finally, as a hopeless, unpredictable ally of governments which he himself had helped to bring into power, like the United Front provincial administration in the then East Pakistan in the mid-fifties - and the Government of Independent Bangladesh in 1971.

Today, we remember the Moulana for a specific, special reason, with a somewhat direct question in mind. "How would he have reacted to all that is happening around us and what would he have told the nation?"

To be more specific, what would Moulana Sahib have said about member of the Jatiya Sangsad acting with a rare show of unanimity in raising their own remuneration at a time like this?

We know what he would have done. He would have marched down to the Bangabandhu Avenue, at the head of a procession, climbed into a dias and spoken out, just in the way he had done hundreds of times before, reminding the people in power of the

paper you could finish reading in ten minutes.

While I would not single out any of these veterans - we should certainly put together a "Who's Who" in our next anniversary issue - I cannot help bringing one name to your attention. It is Erskine Childers whose most thought-provoking piece, "Whose Democracy - For Whom?" appeared on the edit page of this paper earlier this month.

A political analyst who had always been critical of the way the so-called western democracy works, he now talks about growing caution in Eastern Europe and the Third World which see the "need for self-reliant construction of culturally appropriate democracy."

According to Childers, "Social democracy is now in a danger of being crushed between bankrupt statist command economies and unprincipled capitalism which many western leaders preach like a new religion, a sure path to the kind of fundamentalism that can tear democracy apart - whether Christian authoritarianism, a new white-racist fascism, or an ultra-conservative Islam."

Those who have known Erskine Childers, for two decades as the Director of Information of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and then as an adviser to the UN Secretary General, would not be surprised at these outspoken views. Now that he has retired from the active UN service, he should be able to express them more forcefully than ever. Ideas which have matured over decades.

Son of an Irish revolutionary with the same name who was hanged by pro-British paramilitary force during the country's war of independence, Childers first made his name as a broadcaster on the Middle East affairs and then in the sixties, he moved to Bangkok to set up the first project, with UN assistance, on Development Support Communication. Even before taking over as the Chief of UNDP, he had joined the growing rank of experts who see international communication as something much more than just free enterprise.

Now a guest columnist for the Inter Press Service, Childers should be writing for *The Daily Star*, hopefully, on a regular basis. As an old friend, I must make sure that he does, notwithstanding his Irish temperament.

## MY WORLD

S.M. Ali

our support even if he (or she) is hounded out of the session or declared unfit to be a member of the Sangsad on ground of momentary insanity.

At another level, we may offer a couple of innovative ideas.

One proposal is that every MP should receive an allowance of, say, Taka 1,000 a year to pay for a research study on any development-oriented subject of his (or her) choice in the hope that when the member speaks at a public rally, the findings from the research would replace hollow rhetoric, some facts and figures would take the place of meaningless promises and, finally, a clear policy direction would be substitute for clarion exhortations.

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So, on balance, a further scrutiny of what has been so unfairly (?) described as a controversial, unpopular Act may well produce additional benefits for the hard-pressed,

For instance, in a gesture of generosity, we may suggest that in addition to the duty-



MP on motorbike



Bhashani

May be the answer does not lie in looking for a Bhashani as the "conscience of the nation." In the world we live in, conscience has acquired a more collective dimension than the charisma of an individual. This makes our task of changing the realities that much more difficult.



Street food - Bangkok scene

Photo by the author

Dawson identified the problem as the control of the quality and safety of foods offered for sale. The opportunity is the strengthening of traditional and local food habits, the development of small industries and cooperative marketing structure. The challenge is to provide government and municipal authorities with the means to assure the safety and quality of street foods at the same time encouraging the formal development of this sector.

The street food situation in Asian cities was reviewed in another expert consultation on nutrition and urbanization organized by FAO in Bangkok in May 1989.

A case study on Bangladesh presented at that meeting referred to the growing street food vending in the country. The study termed street food as an 'age old phenomenon' and said that its socio-economic and health factors play an important part in their growing importance.

The Bangladesh case study said, "The street food industry