

‘Little Pockets of Joy and Happiness’: Momo Informal Entrepreneurial Economy, Urban Foodways, and Nepali Migrants in Delhi, India

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Abstract

Nepali migrants have played a key role in popularising momos as a street food and are central to their informal production, circulation, and sale in Delhi. Drawing on field and desktop research, the paper analyzes how this migrant food became an urban staple and how Nepali migrant foodways generated the urban momo economy by converting culinary knowledge and food-work experience into livelihoods. It identifies core aspects of this entrepreneurial momo economy, including how and where it is organized through migrant labour and their networks. Finally, the paper highlights how Delhi residents have embraced this migrant food without fully accepting Nepali migrants.

Keywords

migrant entrepreneurship, informal food sector, migrant foodways, urban food environment, Nepali migrants

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Cover Image

Momo vendor in an urban village in Delhi. Photo credit: Sujata Ramachandran

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Long ago in a land unknown, someone came up with a genius gastronomical idea of getting delicious pockets of happiness to India. When that happened, momos quickly became the unofficial street food of the nation. Any Indian could swear by momos. We could have momos 24x7, all days of the year because in the simplest words, they now are an inseparable part of our cuisine (Times Food, 2018).

You cannot travel an arm's length in Delhi without bumping into momo stalls. From paneer momo, chicken momo, and veg [vegetarian] momo, to tandoori momo and Kurkure momo – the dumpling and its varieties are as omni[present] as the city's potholes (Singh, 2023).

Introduction

Often described as “little pockets of joy” and “happiness”, momos have become a highly popular food across many parts of India, including its capital city (Roopa, 2024). Momos are steamed or fried dumplings that originated in Tibet and Nepal. Each dumpling has a thin, small dough wrapper made from flour, filled with minced meat, vegetables, or other fillings, and is typically served with one or more dipping sauces. Zomato, India's top online and app-based food-ordering and delivery company, reported over 10 million momo transactions in 2021, outstripping demand for several traditional Indian dishes (Saha, 2021). Momos have also replaced familiar street fare such as *samosas* and *chaat* in Indian cities, including Delhi (Vaid Dixit, 2013). *Chaat* (*chāt*) is a savoury Indian snack that combines sweet, spicy and tangy flavours. Labelled by some as the “king of street foods” (Times News Network, 2019), the “new samosa” (Trivedi, 2018) and “the [Indian] capital's most favourite snack” (Behal, 2024), momos and the formal and informal businesses that sell them have become ubiquitous features of India's contemporary urban foodscape (Singh, 2023). In 2018, Delhi Tourism (the city government's tourism department) described momos as “Delhi's favourite food, loved and savoured by everyone” (Palat Narayanan, 2022, p. 85). As cultural historian Rana Safvi notes, “over time, the humble momo, a migrant food, has become a reigning monarch in Delhi's culinary landscape” (Behal, 2024).

However, Delhi's massive demand for momos tells only part of the story. Behind the expanding urban momo foodscape lies an organised informal economy largely shaped by Nepali migrant labour, kinship- and nationality-based networks, and migrant entrepreneurial practices. Visible in some ways, yet invisible in others, this Nepali-migrant-led informal momo economy has played a central role in reshaping food preferences in India's capital. In this paper, we examine how this shift occurred and identify the key aspects of informal business activities that forged this transformation. We show that the emergence and expansion of Delhi's migrant momo economy reflect the interplay among cross-border labour migration, urbanisation, economic growth, dynamic foodways, and informal entrepreneurship. Nepali migrants have not simply introduced a food item to Delhi; they have created and organised a translocal and transnational food

economy that links migration, labour, small-scale entrepreneurship, supply chains, and cosmopolitan consumption across this Indian city.

Using the concept of the momo entrepreneurial economy, we highlight the interconnected relations of labour, production, circulation, knowledge, business practices, and consumption through which this migrant food became embedded in Delhi. We show that while Nepali migrants shape urban momo foodways, they do so under largely unequal conditions. We highlight the contrast between the successful incorporation of momos into Delhi's food culture and the more limited social integration of the Nepali migrants whose labour, knowledge, and entrepreneurship made that possible. We situate our study within the migration and development framework and offer nuanced insights into how international migrant communities adapt to and shape the food environments and food cultures of receiving areas while sustaining their livelihoods. In doing so, the study contributes to the limited research on the role of international or cross-border migrants in the dynamism of urban foodways in the Global South (Arcadu et al., 2025; Crush & Ramachandran, 2023).

The paper is divided into several sections. After situating our research within the literature on food, foodways and migration, we outline the study methodology. In the next section, we analyze how momos and momo informal enterprises have been incorporated into the urban foodways of India's capital city. We identify the circumstances that facilitated the rise of momos as an urban street food and connect them to migration flows from this neighbouring country and the presence of Nepali migrants in urban areas. The paper then discusses key aspects of the city's informal momo entrepreneurial economy and how Nepali migrants organise it.

Food, Foodways, and Migration

Food is an important lens for observing, engaging with, and critically examining challenges in food systems, as well as the societal, economic, and behavioural practices associated with them (Arcadu et al., 2025; Nestle, 2026; Sumner & Classens, 2026). The food-migration nexus thus intersects with broader development issues. For migrant and diaspora communities, food carries multiple layers of physical, material, emotional, and symbolic meaning (Parasecoli, 2019; Protassova & Yelenevskaya, 2025; Ramachandran et al., 2026). Memories, rituals, taste, tradition, and, above all, survival are intimately connected to food (Bailey, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2018). As part of paid food work, participation in food-related activities, including selling food products, can sustain migrant livelihoods (Crush & Ramachandran, 2023). Migrants' food-focused economic activities not only provide financial resources for themselves and their households in the receiving country but also help support relatives in their countries of origin through remittances (Sithole & Wegerif, 2025). Studies show that food remittances are key elements of transnational circuits linking migrants with their sending communities (Owusu & Crush, 2025). With cooking, serving, and other key food-preparation tasks often seen as women's responsibilities, migrants' gendered participation is an

important part of their paid and unpaid food work in the public and private spheres of the receiving setting.

Beyond providing physical sustenance, food offers a tangible link to migrant culture and local communities (Fodde, 2026; Weller & Turkon, 2015). Migrant foodways are the sociocultural, political, and economic practices, beliefs, and institutions that encompass the production, distribution, and consumption of food associated with the arrival and settlement of migrant and refugee communities (Vivanco, 2018). They highlight the “intertwined mobilities” of migrant communities, including their travelling foods and food-related practices (Zanoni, 2016, 2018). The interconnected mobilities of migration and food shape both migrant foodways and the broader food environments, foodways, and food cultures of migrant-receiving areas. Thus, migrant cuisines cannot be understood narrowly through nation-centred perspectives (Zanoni, 2018).

Migrant food practices arrive, travel through, inhabit, unsettle, and reshape urban areas in distinctive ways (Edwards et al., 2021). In their scoping review, Low and Ho (2018) note that “the mobility of different communities and their accompanying culinary habits also impacts upon how eating cultures in host societies are localized and reorganized.” In some settings, migrant foodways are exemplified by “migrant marketplaces”, transnational urban centres organised and shaped by the actual and imagined connections among mobile communities, their foods, and the culinary experiences that travel with them (Zanoni, 2018). Migrant marketplaces are also central to ‘migrant food economies.’ Building on the concept of ‘refugee entrepreneurial economies’ (Crush et al., 2017; Ramachandran et al., 2024), migrant urban food economies can be conceived as micro- and small-scale entrepreneurial activities by migrants and refugees in the urban informal sector, organised around the sale of food items and food-focused work (food work).

Like other cultural objects, expressions, and activities, food is tied to social and economic relationships between migrant communities and host societies, as well as to the power dynamics between them (Brighton, 2015). As Arcadu et al. (2025, p. 1) observe, “food is often mobilized by migrants as a way to represent themselves, as individuals and members of specific ethnic or cultural groups, and to negotiate their place within host society.” Food and food-related activities enable migrants to navigate and reassert their position in destination areas (Brighton, 2015). Food can be a site of cultural and socioeconomic tensions, adaptation, and resilience for migrant communities (Scagliusi et al., 2018). A study of African student migrants highlights how they used food and dining to negotiate daily life and social hierarchies in Chinese cities (Ho, 2018). Similarly, another study of Peruvian female culinary entrepreneurs in Southern California shows how they mobilise food as a material and symbolic resource to navigate inclusion through distinction (Corrales-Øverlid, 2023). These food businesses served as crucial spaces where these processes unfolded, drawing on food discourses to forge counternarratives to stereotypical portrayals of Latinx immigrants. Migrant entrepreneurs thus function as more than mere economic actors, and their

entrepreneurial practices are situated within social processes of acceptance and belonging (Corrales-Øverlid, 2023). This paper draws on and builds on these ideas.

Research Materials and Methods

The study began with a desktop review to identify online newspaper and magazine articles, features, blog posts, and other web-based sources, including Reddit threads, that discussed momos, migration, and informal momo vendors in urban India. This review informed our analysis of the emergence and growth of migrant momo foodways in India’s urban environment, particularly in Delhi. We also used these sources to identify popular informal momo vendors and their locations across the city. We followed the desktop review with fieldwork in Delhi, using in-depth interviews and participant observation. We used purposive and snowball sampling to identify locations in Delhi where momo vendors operate and to recruit participants. In some areas, bystanders, residents, and others helped us locate new momo vendors’ sales sites in the neighbourhood. We conducted fieldwork in July and December 2024 at 11 separate locations in South, Central, North, and East Delhi. Certain locations were visited multiple times at various points during fieldwork. Some study sites were “urban villages” in South Delhi where migrants reside and where momos are informally prepared for distribution and sale. We conducted 44 in-depth interviews with participants active in the informal supply chain, including momo production, supply, and sales, comprising 35 Nepali migrant entrepreneurs and workers and 9 Indian small- and micro-vendors. These interviews averaged half an hour. The study received approval from Wilfrid Laurier University’s Research Ethics Board (REB #8855).

Momo Transnational Foodways and Nepali Migration to India

Momo foodways are transnational, spanning many parts of Asia, including Central, South, and East Asia. Momo is a truly migrant and diasporic food, and its preparation and consumption have evolved with the settings in which it is served. While the origin of stuffed dumplings has been traced to China (Sijapati, 2016), they are an important part of multiple Asian cuisines, known by different names: *mantoo* (Afghanistan), *hönté* (Bhutan), *jiaozi*, *shaomai* or *shuimai* (China), *momo* (Nepal), *gyoza* (Japan), *mandu* (Korea), *buuz* (Mongolia), *momo* (Tibet), and *manti* (Uzbekistan). In Nepal, momo is an important culinary staple, described as “the nation’s favourite dish due to its affordability and versatility” (Baral, 2024, p. 97) and “a veritable cultural fixture among Nepal’s” (Sijapati, 2016). Some studies depict momo as a cultural symbol of Nepal, embodying its cultural heritage and national identity (Baral, 2024; KC et al., 2026). It is believed that the historic mobilities along the Silk Route of the Newari trading communities first introduced momos to Nepal as far back as the 14th century, while others attribute their introduction to the later arrival and settlement of Tibetan migrants and refugees (Baral, 2024; Bastola, 2026; Mulmi, 2017; Pathak, 2007). Nepal later adapted momo recipes by adding local spices such as turmeric and sumac,

and developed new dishes centred on momos, such as *jhol momo* (Agrawal, 2026).

Recent migration flows, particularly those of Tibetan refugees and Nepali migrants, brought momos for informal sale in India. Our desktop research confirms that these two groups sold momos informally in Delhi well before the 1990s. However, this activity occurred on a much smaller scale and was confined to certain locations, such as the Tibetan refugee settlement of *Majnu-ka-tilla* near the University of Delhi's north campus (Banerjee, 2017; Compton, 2017; Deepak, 2021). Their popularity was also limited to certain cohorts, such as youth (Deepak, 2021). Even today, momos remain among the top foods sold informally near educational institutions where students congregate, such as colleges, university campuses, and coaching centres (private institutions offering test preparation for competitive exams) (DU Beat, 2019; Hindustan Times, 2026; Rajvardhan, 2016). Some respondents underscored that Indian urban youth were vital to the contemporary popularity of momos.

India's economic liberalisation, beginning in the early 1990s, created fertile conditions for the growth of urban momo foodways by broadening their appeal across classes and social groups. These shifts facilitated the gradual emergence of an informal momo entrepreneurial economy, in which Nepali migrants began to participate in larger numbers as both workers and entrepreneurs, and led to the geographical expansion of these small-scale enterprises across various urban neighbourhoods. Economic growth fuelled consumption of food outside the home, especially among the middle class, while rapid urbanisation increased demand for portable, inexpensive, and convenient foods across various social cohorts (Nandy, 2004). Furthermore, it fostered a flourishing restaurant culture in Delhi in the new millennium and laid the foundation for a cosmopolitan urban food culture (Siegel, 2010) in which the informal momo foodways became entrenched. The few available studies suggest that restaurants became sites of cosmopolitanism and of urbanites' engagement with unfamiliar foods (Siegel, 2010). Indian cities, including Delhi, further witnessed culinary globalisation through the entry of global franchises and restaurants serving a variety of non-Indian cuisines (Lorenzana, 2023). These developments transformed urban tastes and food preferences and forged new economic spaces for migrant workers to engage in paid food work during a period of violent turmoil in Nepal (Bohra-Mishra & Massey, 2011).

Be that as it may, little attention has been paid to how these broad changes aligned with the expansion of street-food cultures and their engagement with global culinary influences, and to how the migrant-led momos' informal entrepreneurial economy intersected with these key transformations. Street-food culture did not remain isolated from these culinary shifts; instead, it responded by expanding the range of dishes prepared and sold in smaller eateries and makeshift food stalls. Nepali migrants, already active as food workers in a variety of informal and formal establishments (Donini et al., 2013), sometimes preparing Indianised Chinese (Indo-Chinese) or 'Chindian' food, joined Tibetan refugees in preparing and selling momos informally, albeit

across more dispersed locations in the city. As highlighted by one of our Indian participants, who had operated a restaurant for a lengthy period, the general opinion of Nepali migrants as 'good workers' fostered their increased involvement in paid food work and, in turn, provided them with the requisite experience to set up small enterprises:

Nepalis are good workers. They learn different tasks quickly, and they do good work. Nepali workers are very common in Delhi's food industry. You will see them helping to make Chinese food like fried noodles and even frying puris [deep-fried Indian bread] in restaurants. Food businesses like to hire Nepali workers (Interview with Participant 18, Location 6, 9 July 2024).

We were also informed that Nepali migrants, especially the seasonal or circular cohort, were highly active as food workers at large events during the wedding season, which runs from late October to February. This niche food-related work also provided Nepali migrants with valuable experience in commercial-scale food preparation and service, which later proved useful in momo entrepreneurship.

The visible success and strong earnings of a few early-generation informal momo entrepreneurs encouraged others to start microbusinesses, leading to the proliferation of migrant vendors preparing and selling momos across Delhi (Deepak, 2021; Modi, 2025). One of our Nepali participants managed a larger, established operation in a South Delhi urban village, employed several migrant workers, sold momos at three locations, and additionally supplied a couple of local restaurants and several micro vendors. He recounted a similar experience:

I worked with computers in an office, earning only ₹10-12,000 a month, even after spending long hours. Then, I noticed a Nepali vendor near my office. He was making money hand over fist selling only momos for a few hours each day. I would see him counting all this cash he made every day. So, I decided to quit my job and start this business. It has been good. I tell people that I have been able to send my daughter to study in London with the money I earned from this business (Interview with Participant 15, Location 2, 7 July 2024).

Nevertheless, our research confirms that acceptance of momos developed gradually. One participant recounted that in the early years of his business, local residents treated momos with suspicion and derision. He ran a food shop in a lower-middle-class neighbourhood in South Delhi, where momos are informally produced for distribution to local small-scale restaurants and micro-vendors.

Nowadays, if you go anywhere in the city, people know momos, and many have eaten them. But when I first began cooking and selling momos in my shop here, people were unfamiliar with them. They complained about the smell and how they looked. Why are they so white? Is it uncooked food? I would

be asked (Interview with Participant 6, Location 2, 3 July 2024).

Another reason for their heightened appeal is that momos have been implicated in aspirational food discourses and practices in the city, particularly as consumable products perceived as trendy and healthy. Food has been identified as an important dimension of popular lifestyles and aspirational cosmopolitanism (Cappeliez & Johnston, 2013). Eating momos is part of this aspirational consumption, tied to diverse urban residents' longings for a good life. They signal desires across classes, including the middle and lower classes, for global and cosmopolitan experiences through the consumption of global cuisines and foodways (Bhatia, 2022). Food choices, including street foods that are generally not seen as quintessentially "Indian," such as momos, embody desirable image and status by reflecting sought-after values such as sophistication and a nourishing, healthful lifestyle. The following quotes from our participants connect momo foodways to shifting urban food preferences, the desirability of certain trendy foods, and their associated traits, particularly perceived nutritional qualities:



Image 1: Momos for sale at a restaurant in South Delhi. Photo credit: Sujata Ramachandran (Identifying information was removed with ChatGPT)

See, people eat their main meals at home and then come to the market. They want to eat something light and healthy at the market. So, food like momos works well for them (Interview with Participant 26, Location 10, 23 December 2024).

Nowadays, people don't want to eat samosas, tikkis, or choley bhaturey. They only want to eat food like momos. Only foods like momos sell, so everyone wants to make and sell them. What shall we do? We don't have much choice in what we want to sell (Interview with Participant 34, Location 8, 29 December 2024).

Samosa, tikki, and choley bhaturey are familiar street foods in North India. Momos were also perceived as a "healthy" food by multiple customers during fieldwork and in several comments on Reddit, as noted by a user in a Reddit thread:

It's one of the few snacks I can get in street-side places that isn't fried, is cheap and not too heavy. I'm at that age where I have to be mindful of what junk food I eat...because my digestion is no longer what it used to be (r/India, 2024).

Interestingly, despite the common perception of momos as 'light and healthy' food, the typical preparation—using refined flour for the outer shell or dough wrap, deep-frying, and sauces such as commercially prepared mayonnaise—provides limited nutritional value.

Momos, Street Food Culture, and Urban Foodscapes

Informal food vendors contribute to urban liveliness (Allison et al., 2021) and urban dynamism (Palat Narayanan & Veron, 2018). They transform public spaces by amplifying community engagement and cultural vibrancy, shaping culinary heritage, and embedding familiar and unfamiliar gastronomic cultures within urban networks. Through their involvement in these processes, they help reshape these cities. Migrant momo vendors in Delhi are no exception to these dynamics. As Palat Narayanan and Veron (2018) highlight in their analysis of a momo-making neighbourhood in Delhi, informal momo-making practices interact with formal institutions and structures to co-produce urban space and, consequently, the city.

Over the past nearly two decades, the Nepali and Tibetan 'momo' has evolved into 'momos' in Delhi. Many urban residents and informal food establishments, along with a large share of formal restaurants frequented by middle-class residents, refer to all forms of Chinese dumplings they serve as 'momos' (Image 1). As Palat Narayanan (2022, p. 82) notes, "momos have become a cultural phenomenon of Delhi." Using the notion of foodification, he links rising momo consumption to "discourses, materialities, and practices [as] coproduced by food" (p. 84). The increased popularity and consumption of momos in Delhi have been accompanied by greater public discussion, reflected on social media.

Palat Narayanan (2022) identified some 6500 posts on Twitter feeds on 'Delhi + momos' between 2010 and 2020. Moreover, various organisations have used this trendiness strategically to market themselves (Palat Narayanan, 2022, 2023). For example, private organisers launched Delhi's first momo festival in 2015 (Palat Narayanan, 2022).

Our desktop review uncovered numerous newspaper and magazine articles, blog posts, and Reddit threads underscoring the individual and collective appeal of momos at the urban and national scales. Below are a few examples.

A plate of momos, hot and steaming, is comfort and reward rolled into one. And inevitably, it ends in a very happy food coma (Varghese, 2026).

Momos, a little pocket of happiness, is a gastronomic delight for every other person. Just a visual of a plate of momos with the spicy red chutney makes a street food lover's tongue tickle. One can well relate momos [to] the culinary map of India; be it Delhi, Mumbai, or Bengaluru, momos have successfully won the hearts of people from all over India (My India, 2018).

Momos are in the heart of every Delhiwala [Delhiite or Delhi resident]. They are always a topic of conversation, and their stalls dot every street of the city (Delhipedia, 2021).

Delhi and momos are a match made in foodie heaven...Whether you are craving budget-friendly momos or Himalayan-style authentic dumplings, Delhi has a momo spot for every mood (Sawhney, 2026).

...If Delhiites chose a hill to die on, it would be the supremacy of their favourite momo place in the city over all others. Momos aren't just a food here; they're a way of life; they're memories – of the first movie one saw at a theatre, of 'group dates' in high school, of letting off steam (pun intended) after exams at the cart near college (Sood & Gupta, 2022).

The widespread acceptance of this food item is further evident in the many Reddit threads devoted to it, some of which are listed below. Most of these threads discuss favourite places to buy momos in Delhi and their overall appeal. Some of the places identified are operated by Nepali migrants:

- *Delhi momos ruined me. Now I can't enjoy anything else* (albatross127, 2025).
- *Let's end this debate...best momos in Delhi* (Eso-tericOP, 2025).
- *Best momos I've [had] in my life (Delhi momos – Indian dumplings)* (whyeff89, 2026).
- *Best momo places in Delhi* (r/delhi, 2026);
- *What's your favourite place to have momos in Delhi?* (Prudent_Sir_9927, 2024).

• *Best veg[etarian] momo in Delhi? Drop your go-to place and exact order* (mastikhor_chirkut, 2026).

• *I am looking for the best momos in Delhi for after Navratni* (sparsh_goyal, 2024).

• *What's your go-to place for momos in Delhi NCR [National Capital Region]?* (Oxjaswi, 2025).

• *When and how momo became such a huge part of Dilli [Delhi]'s cultural identity?* (Acceptable-Creme-648, 2025).

Rather than being seen as unknown foods, momos have become part of mainstream urban Indian restaurant and street-food culture, readily available in a wide range of formal and informal establishments across the city. In one area of East Delhi with high foot traffic from a large mall and a subway station near its entrance, we counted street-food vendors and informal food stalls and compiled an inventory of the food and drinks they sold. We found that momos were the only item sold at about one-third of these businesses, confirming their strong appeal. The remaining businesses offered more familiar 'Indian' street foods and drinks, including dishes such as *lithi chokha*, associated with Bihari migrants.

Momos are sold in a wide variety of retail outlets that serve a diverse clientele with varying levels of material resources. During fieldwork, we often saw various momo varieties advertised on menus alongside more 'Indian' fare, even in small, informal food stalls in large and small markets. Informal momo enterprises include mobile street vendors and momo-sellers operating temporary or permanent stalls inside and outside markets, alongside numerous small and large formal restaurants that feature momos as their sole menu item or a key element. Informal vendors displaying the distinctive large, stacked aluminum containers used for steaming momos are a common sight on the city's streets, in neighbourhoods and markets, especially in the late afternoon and evening (Image 2). In many micro-businesses, a small, gas-cylinder-powered stove on a tiny platform made up the stall, while a few others had acquired metal food stands.

Our study shows how this migrant food became a popular urban staple in Delhi, albeit in reinvented forms, with new versions, flavours, preparation methods, and accompanying sauces. New versions include *kurkure momos* (deep-fried for a crunchy texture), Afghani momos smothered in a creamy sauce, and *tandoori momos*, marinated in a tandoori sauce after steaming and then grilled in a *tandoor* (oven). These were generally available at larger informal stalls and established restaurants because they require additional equipment, such as a *tandoor*. Momo recipes have also adapted to Indian palates, with common "veg" (vegetarian) or plant-based fillings and familiar ingredients such as *paneer* (Indian cottage cheese), along with new spicy accompanying sauces (Image 3). Likewise, red onions and tomatoes, common cooking ingredients in several regions of India, are used to prepare the chutneys or dipping sauces



Image 2: Stacked metal containers used to steam momos at an informal vendor's stall in a community market in Delhi. Photo credit: Sujata Ramachandran



Image 3: An informal food cart in a Delhi market offers a variety of momos for sale. Photo credit: Sujata Ramachandran (Identifying information was removed using ChatGPT)

typically served with the momos. In micro momo enterprises, vendors often sprinkle momos with *chaat masala*, a dry spice mix widely used in North India to add a tangy, savoury flavour, before serving. Strikingly, these newly developed urbanised and Indianised versions depart from how migrants and their households prepare and consume momos. “We don’t eat momo like this in Nepal. We don’t prepare it like this at home. We prepare it differently,” our migrant interlocutors often told us during fieldwork.

Food practices and items, including momos, carry cultural meanings and are tied to sociocultural traditions and distinct group identities. As Palat Narayanan (2023, p. 242) observes, “momos are understood as a foreign food which has become quintessentially of Delhi.” While momos have become an integral part of New Delhi’s urban foodscape, they are also perceived as non-local and remain associated with certain internal and international migrant communities, such as Nepali migrants and the diaspora (Gurkha community), Tibetan refugees, and migrants from Northeast India (Compton, 2017). As a result, these groups’ preparation and sale of this food lend it legitimacy and authenticity. For this reason, urban residents prefer to eat at small street stalls run by migrant communities, especially those specialising in momos and other foods. Similarly, larger food stalls and restaurants also prefer to hire Nepali migrant workers to prepare ‘foreign’ food, including momos and ‘Chindian’ food (Khatry, 2013). This preference has also contributed to the concentration of Nepali migrants in this niche food-focused activity. However, Trivedi (2018) contends that crude racial stereotypes conflating Chinese and Nepali communities have partly driven demand for Nepali workers in Delhi’s food industry, especially to prepare momos and ‘Chindian’ food.

Multiple Indian participants in our study who operated small-scale momo stands freely admitted that they or their workers had learned momo-making and entrepreneurial skills from Nepali migrants they had worked for or employed. During participant observation, several operators of small food stalls said they purchased momos from nearby Nepali micro-vendors when they ran out of the daily supply prepared by their own workers or when their workers were unavailable. In at least two cases, Indian migrants had partnered with Nepalis to create such businesses. Indian respondents generally agreed that Nepali migrants were the “experts” on momo enterprises. “Only the Nepali migrants know how to run a momo business and make momos properly,” we were repeatedly informed during fieldwork.

The transformation of the Nepali momo into Delhi ‘momos’ shows that what has emerged is neither a Nepali food transplanted to Indian cities nor an Indian food that has lost its migrant origins; rather, it is a co-produced urban foodway. The case of migrant momo foodways illustrates that these are not simply transferred intact from origin to destination. Instead, they are continually remade through interactions among migrant culinary knowledge, local tastes, dietary preferences, entrepreneurial experimentation, competition, and consumer demand. Nepali migrants have been vital in many of these processes.

Migration and Food Security

Earlier sections highlighted how migration flows from Nepal, migrant foodways, and economic participation intersected to make momos a popular food in Delhi. Given the MiFOOD Project’s central thematic focus, we now briefly evaluate how food security influenced the migration decisions of our study’s Nepali participants. Recent studies show that rising rural immiseration amid intensifying, interconnected economic, environmental, social, and political challenges has deepened out-migration to neighbouring countries such as India (Barshila et al., 2025; Chapagain & Gentle, 2015; KC et al., 2026). We asked our study participants whether food insecurity affected their decision to migrate to India, and the results aligned with the two broad categories in which they were situated.

Except for three participants from urban areas, including Kathmandu and Pokhara, the others migrated from rural areas across multiple districts of Nepal. We can categorise the latter group into two sets: those whose families owned land and continued to farm in Nepal, and those whose families lacked such assets, especially arable land. The asset-less cohort was clearly more disadvantaged, with a more pronounced background of precarity in Nepal. These respondents had been exposed to all forms of deprivation, including material deprivation, from early childhood in some cases. Food insecurity was a key dimension of these hardships. Personal shocks, such as medical crises and family financial hardships, profoundly circumscribed these migrants’ socioeconomic security and well-being, as well as their household members’. They were also more likely to have lower educational attainment than the other group, with several participants having received no schooling. Below we provide some accounts from our interviews:

My father did not work. My older brother had some health problems and could not work. He was bedridden all the time. We had no money, and we struggled to have enough to eat. So, I had to work from a very young age (Interview with Participant 24, Location 10, 22 December 2024).

My parents died when I was 16. They had many health problems. Our family sold all the land for their treatment and whatever else we had. But they did not survive. I was left with my didi [older sister]. We were left with nothing. As the only male member of my household, it was my responsibility to see that she was married and settled. Someone from my village worked in Delhi, so I came with him to find work here (Interview with Participant 16, Location 6, 8 July 2024).

Other participants whose families continued to farm their own land were less likely to report food insecurity in Nepal. We were told that these households consumed the crops they sowed and used barter to obtain other foods. In other words, this cohort reported that they were not forced to skip meals, although food quality varied. That said, smallholder farming households in Nepal face unsustainable livelihoods

and agricultural precarity due to low yields and weak economic returns, with increased reliance on migration and remittances to fill these pronounced material gaps:

We can obtain food, but we still need money for other things (Interview with Participant 11, Location 5, 5 July 2024).

My village is in a hilly area. We have a home, but it is very small and kuccha [a temporary or semi-permanent structure made of natural materials such as thatch and mud]. We have some land, but it is very hard to cultivate in the hilly area. We get very few returns from it (Interview with Participant 29, Location 1, 27 December 2024).

Other participants noted that few employment opportunities were available to support sustainable livelihoods in their villages, prompting migration to India. “There is little work in our village” and “We get paid very little, and it is insufficient to meet our family’s expenses,” several participants said. Thus, food insecurity and precarious livelihoods form the socioeconomic context in Nepal from which many migrant food and momo workers and entrepreneurs emerge. The *2024 Nepal Labour Migration Report* notes that India is a popular destination for impoverished households because of low migration costs, geographical proximity, an open border, and existing social networks (MoLESS, 2025).

However, we did not examine food insecurity in depth because it was not the study’s primary focus. Future research can examine the nuanced ways in which various forms of food insecurity shape Nepali migration to Indian cities.

Momo Entrepreneurial Economy and Nepali Migrants

Many studies show that urban informal food vendors, including migrant entrepreneurs, face difficult operating conditions and must navigate multiple hurdles to keep their businesses viable (Crush & Tawodzera, 2024; Gastrow, 2022; Ramachandran et al., 2024). As Haque and Saxena (2026) highlight, based on ethnographic research in Karachi and Mumbai, vendors’ daily material negotiations are marked by inventive improvisations of infrastructure and space in interstitial sites, along with fluid socio-material practices through which they respond to harsh urban realities in which erasure, displacement, and even violence are constant risks. We highlight some of these practices and, in doing so, identify key aspects of the momo entrepreneurial economy, organised informally by Nepali migrants in Delhi, albeit at varying scales. We also discuss the multiple forms of entrepreneurial insecurity encountered by the migrant participants and their efforts to address them.

Momos’ Perishability and Production

While momos are a prominent feature of contemporary urban street food culture, they are less well known as a highly perishable and labour-intensive food commodity. In Delhi, where it remains warm for much of the year except

during the short winter period, momos have a brief shelf life, limited to a few hours, especially when refrigeration and other cooling facilities are unavailable at micro- and small-scale vendors’ sales sites. In the small and micro enterprises we studied, particularly those selling from temporary, makeshift stalls, vendors prepared momos fresh daily in the early hours, partially cooked them, and set them out for sale only in the late afternoon and evening, without any cooling facilities. In the summer months, vendors set out momos even later to let the high daytime temperatures dissipate closer to sunset, and sales continued until 10 pm and, in some cases, even later. This production and sales routine kept small-scale entrepreneurs engaged in this trade from morning until late at night.

For micro and small vendors who regularly set up makeshift stalls away from momo preparation sites and lack cooling facilities, perishability limits not only how long they can sell momos but also where they can sell them. Most vendors we interviewed operated close to their momo preparation sites to minimise transportation costs and maintain freshness. Vendors brought limited quantities of precooked momos to sales locations, based on an assessment of typical sales on certain weekdays or during specific periods. Because momo preparation is labour-intensive, even very small businesses need regular assistance to produce them. Most businesses prepare several hundred momos daily, and in some cases, more than 1,000.

When these businesses employ relatives, social duties of care and commitment shape these work relationships. This enables momo vendors to fulfil their moral obligation to support relatives, even distant ones, while also securing access to the labour their business requires. In a few instances, friends pooled their resources to work together. Others employed unrelated migrants to help with momo preparation, although in such cases the business operator generally sold them, with the help of an assistant. Thus, informality is not simply the context in which the momo economy operates; it is integral to how the economy is organised. Perishability, limited infrastructure, proximity between production and sale, and reliance on kin and migrant labour reinforce one another and shape the spatial and social organisation of these enterprises.

Many of our participants highlighted the recurring challenges posed by this food’s limited shelf life, its arduous preparation process, and the time-consuming nature of these activities.

It is not easy work. It needs a lot of effort and hard work. Momos spoil easily. We must throw away unsold leftovers because we cannot sell them the next day. They start smelling bad...Even if it is very hot, we cannot use a fan while preparing momos because it dries out the dough. It is very hard work (Interview with Participant 1, Location 1, 3 July 2024).

We throw away the leftovers. We cannot give bad food to our customers. Our market will go down. That is why we need to provide good products, so

that our customers keep coming back to buy momos from us (Interview with Participant 8, Location 3, 4 July 2024).

Some of the vendors we interviewed indicated that they took special care to respect their customers' preferences and wallets, as captured in this account:

We try our best to cater to our customers. We offer a special deal on a half plate of momos for ₹30 for those who cannot afford the full plate. During the festival season, when people are fasting, we offer special vrat waley [fasting-sensitive] momos. We prepare them without onions, garlic and ginger, using different flour and sendha namak [rock salt]. We want our customers to be happy with us (Interview with Participant 11, Location 5, 5 July 2024).

As momos' trendiness and popularity as a purchased and street food grow, small-scale informal vendors appeal largely for their convenience, fast service, and accessible pricing. Yet they face clear limits on what they can charge. Momos' prices generally vary by neighbourhood, with vendors charging more in upscale locations and at established businesses with regular clientele. Even with their special efforts and customer-focused concessions, small-scale informal vendors cannot expect to charge restaurant prices, as one of our respondents pointed out:

We sell the same food as the big restaurants. We use the same ingredients in the momos you eat in a restaurant. You will have to pay a lot more to eat it in a restaurant – several hundred rupees. But we cannot charge more than ₹50 or ₹60, even though we sell the same food and it takes the same amount of effort to prepare (Interview with Participant 2, Location 1, 1 July 2024).

Informal food enterprises are generally perceived as inferior to restaurants and lack the physical environment restaurants offer, including seating, décor, ambiance, and additional comforts such as fans and air conditioning.

Masculinised Entrepreneurial Economy

The momo entrepreneurial urban economy is largely masculinised, although food preparation and cooking are generally considered women's responsibilities in the private domain within households in South Asia, including India and Nepal. Male migrants make up the largest segment of actors as owners, enterprise operators, and workers. This key feature of Nepali-led momo informal entrepreneurship can be partly explained by the fact that young males constitute a significant share of transnational flows from Nepal, especially its circular and seasonal patterns (IOM, 2024; Koirala & Bashyal, 2025). Most micro and small businesses we studied were organised by older male migrants, often with young male workers in their early 20s assisting them. In several cases, extended family members living in shared and separate households, such as uncles and nephews, operated one or more small or micro businesses together; in others, they were unrelated, yet all were male. Our participants explained

this male-oriented dynamic by emphasising the gendered division of labour in their households:

Women don't do this type of work. They need to do the housework and look after the children. This is why they cannot help to make and sell momos (Interview with Participant 11, Location 5, 5 July 2024).

Making momos requires much stamina and strength. Women cannot do this type of strenuous work (Interview with Participant 29, Location 2, 26 December 2024).

Most of our male migrant participants also acknowledged that they had not done any cooking or food preparation before taking on paid food work in India.

A different reason for this gendered participation is the geographical organisation of momo production, especially when enterprises involve unrelated workers who share living and workspaces provided by the momo enterprise operator. Several migrant workers shared one or two rooms that served as sleeping spaces at night and as workspaces for preparing momos during the day. Such spaces are suitable for gender-selective arrangements, which also contributes to a preference for hiring young male migrant workers. The momo entrepreneur absorbed the rental costs of these spaces, which tend to cluster in lower-income neighbourhoods in the city, such as unauthorised (non-regularised) settlements or urban villages where rental costs are relatively lower, and rules are less stringent for operating cottage industries and informal, small-scale production enterprises (Deccan Herald, 2014; Mahajan, 2012; Palat Narayanan & Veron, 2018).

While women migrants are not absent from the informal momo entrepreneurial economy, they remain far less visible in public spaces where momos are sold, particularly large markets. In some households where male members ran one or more informal momo businesses, female members helped prepare momos, especially when extra assistance was needed (Mahajan, 2012). Women migrants entered sales only when male household members could not participate because of health-related or other challenges. They also tended to set up makeshift stalls in mixed residential-commercial neighbourhoods closer to home for safety and social reasons. Of all our study participants, only two were women. Thus, the momo economy reorganises the gendered divisions of food work, masculinising its most visible and remunerated forms while women's contributions remain more closely tied to household-based preparation and safer neighbourhood spaces.

Geographies of Momo Production and Consumption

The apparent ubiquity of momos availability across Delhi depends on a much less visible geography of migrant labour and production concentrated in specific urban spaces. In his analysis of momos as street food in Delhi, Palat Narayanan (2023) notes that momo production and sale highlight

different constructions of urbanity and the circumscribed ways residents can use urban spaces. While momos are now widely available across a wide variety of neighbourhoods, including upscale areas, their informal production remains contested and confined to certain locations. Production occurs disproportionately in lower-income neighbourhoods, urban villages (former rural areas incorporated through urban expansion and exempt from standard municipal regulations), unauthorised settlements, and shared residential-work spaces, while consumption and sales extend into markets and more affluent areas (Mahajan, 2012). Vendors depend heavily on access to particular streets and customer flows for their sales.

Moreover, for their micro and small-scale businesses to work and be profitable, migrant vendors must also identify “good” sales locations that attract a steady stream of customers and allow them to operate regularly. Finding such a space is clearly challenging. Several vendors reported unsuccessful attempts to sell momos at several sites before finding suitable locations. One participant sold momos daily near a government-run alcohol shop in a residential neighbourhood market in South Delhi. Although the market was small, with only a few shops, the alcohol store and a nearby college ensured he had many customers and steady earnings.

I tried selling in two or three places, but I couldn't attract many customers. Then I came here, and it has been very good until recently. This was the only liquor shop in the larger area until three years ago. Lots of people would come to the store to buy alcohol, and many would stop to buy and eat momos from me after buying their alcohol. But now several liquor stores have opened in this area, so fewer people come here to buy alcohol. My business has been affected (Interview with Participant 7, Location 3, 4 July 2024).

Another key aspect of the informal momo economy is the reciprocal relationship between individual informal momo vendors and a nearby shop proprietor through the informal ‘leasing’ of sales spaces. These unwritten arrangements allow vendors to use a designated space to operate regularly and store their platforms and other gear. They do not have to carry these items back and forth each day between the spaces where momos are made and where they are sold. These arrangements also offer some protection from harassment by police and municipal authorities. Local authorities, such as municipal officials and police, may perceive these momo businesses as connected to formal shops run by middle-class proprietors and subject them to less scrutiny. These proprietors could also mediate with these officials on behalf of momo vendors. In return, the shop proprietors benefitted financially from this relationship.

For vendors operating within or near markets or in commercial areas, securing a good sales site often meant accepting such an informal arrangement with nearby formal stores. These arrangements had significant economic implications for momo vendors, even though they provided

several benefits. Momo vendors were expected to pay a regular commission or fee to the store operator to access the site, ranging from a fixed amount to a share of the day's earnings. In most cases, vendors sold on the street outside the formal store or near it, and in some instances in the covered corridor outside it. This financial arrangement applied even though many of these ‘sales spaces’ for momo vendors were situated beyond the commercial space of the store from which they had informally ‘leased’ the site and constituted public spaces. For example, two micro entrepreneurs operated for several hours each day in the covered corridor just outside the entrances of formal shops within market plazas. In other cases, momo vendors had forged similar arrangements with informal and formal food stalls with more permanent structures, selling their momos within these establishments. In this latter arrangement, they were expected to yield close to half of their daily earnings to “the house.”

One participant, who worked for an established informal momo business, told us he had previously attempted to operate his own micro-enterprise. However, the unreasonable fee demanded by the shopkeeper near whose formal premises he tried to sell momos led to the abrupt demise of his short-lived business.

At first, he said that I would have to pay him ₹300 for each day I sold momos outside his shop. Then, after two days, he said I would have to pay him ₹1,000 a day to sell. How could I pay so much? I also had to make some money. I couldn't keep operating my business from that location, and I couldn't find another good one. I tried other places, but I couldn't sell much there. I had to give up and go back to working here (Interview with Participant 32, Location 9, 29 December 2024).

These informal ‘leasing’ arrangements and linkages with formal businesses underscore the interdependence of informal and formal urban economies, which mutually constitute each other. However, this reciprocity is unequal: the shopkeeper controls access to this space and, through rental extraction, profits from it, even though many migrants operate in public spaces.

Competition, Diffusion, and Conflict

As noted previously, the enormous popularity of momos has led to a rapid proliferation of small- and micro-scale vendors selling this food across the city. This expansion has made momos more accessible to urban consumers in most neighbourhoods. In one location widely known for informal momo production for distribution and sales, momos were even available at some small corner shops that generally do not offer cooked food. However, this trendiness has contributed to sharp increases in the number of international and internal migrants entering the informal urban entrepreneurial space focused on this food item. Rural migrants from other Indian states have also established informal micro- and small-scale enterprises selling momos. In a busy commercial area in East Delhi, we found that, except for two vendors, other makeshift momo stands and stalls were

managed by internal migrants from the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. In other markets, we encountered migrants from Bihar operating momo micro-businesses. As a result, competition for adequate sales and prime sales locations has intensified sharply.

Several momo vendors in a South Delhi neighbourhood, popular as a 'budget-friendly food hub' specialising in Nepali and Northeastern cuisine, lamented this change. Participants in other locations also complained that too many momo vendors nearby inevitably led to fewer customers and lower earnings.

Earlier, we sold a lot of momos. We were the only ones selling them in this neighbourhood, and we were the first to do so. So, it was very good business for us. But now so many people are selling momos here. You can see someone selling momos in every lane here. So, how can sales be good? We are selling more fried noodles in our shop now than momos (Interview with Participant 3, Location 1, 1 July 2024).

See, it is like this: there are fewer momo eaters and too many momo sellers...On the surface, it seems like I am earning good money in this business. But as you can see, I have no customers right now. I can only sell a small number of momos daily. But I still manage to survive somehow (Interview with Participant 34, Location 8, 30 December 2024).

Increased competition has also led some newer entrepreneurs to resort to unscrupulous practices to undermine older vendors and threaten their businesses, including poaching their customers and other pernicious tactics. "Our *bhai* [brother] has betrayed us" was a bitter grievance expressed by two Nepalis who had operated a micro-business for several years in a busy market. Another migrant, employed at a large momo shop in the area, had recently set up his momo stand just a few feet from their business. He not only ate into their customer base but also, they believed, stole equipment from their business, forcing them to spend money to replace their metal stand. By *bhai*, they meant a Nepali migrant. Their protest suggests that, because of their shared identity as Nepalis, they expected mutual empathy, cooperation, and support from their adversary, not cut-throat competition and insidious sabotage.

The growing number of momo vendors also affected these small-scale enterprises in other ways, particularly for those who could not rely on relatives for the required labour. The general perception that the informal momo enterprise, even at the micro-scale, could generate significant revenue has created a 'revolving door' of migrant workers for some businesses. After gaining some experience in this trade, workers quit to launch their own micro-enterprises selling momos, leaving their employers without support and forcing them to seek new workers.

We work very hard to train our workers. We spend so much time showing them how to prepare good

momos, operate the business properly, and deal well with customers. Then they leave us to start their own momo business, and we have to repeat the process with another worker (Interview with Participant 14, Location 5, 5 July 2024).

It is very difficult to find good workers nowadays. They don't stay for long, don't do good work and ask for a lot of money. Until a few years ago, we could hire workers for ₹8,000 and ₹10,000 [monthly salary], but now even at ₹15,000, we can't find good workers (Interview with Participant 15, Location 2, 7 July 2024).

Momo migrant entrepreneurship has produced new entrepreneurs, some of whom were previously workers in other momo businesses, suggesting an informal transfer of skills and tacit knowledge about momo production and sales. The entry of Indian migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh also confirms the success of the Nepali migrant-created urban momo market (Vegini, 2025). That said, this success has eroded the original entrepreneurs' advantage through knowledge diffusion and market reproduction. Moreover, small-scale entrepreneurs, especially those supplying vendors and smaller food businesses, increasingly face formidable competition from organised, large-scale momo production units. These newly emerging units serve quick-serve restaurants (QSRs) and offer momos in bulk to small eateries at significantly lower prices (Bera, 2025).

In street-food cultures where taste and novelty are key drivers of customer appeal, standardising momos, including their preparation and accompanying sauces or chutneys, risks customer fatigue and a slump in demand. Some momo vendors sought innovative ways to overcome these disadvantages (Borah, 2016; Vegini, 2025). In an upscale South Delhi market, a vendor sold 'popcorn momos', smaller versions resembling popcorn and generously sprinkled with chopped coriander, which appeared to be a major draw. We observed customers gathering in substantial numbers well before he set up his makeshift stall. Another vendor, operating from a bicycle in a crowded South Delhi market, claimed he was the only one in the city doing so. Other vendors offered familiar, popular foods in new ways, such as peri-peri-flavoured fries and spring rolls alongside momos.

Some of our migrant entrepreneurs, especially those running established micro-businesses, reported that their earnings were several times higher than what they could receive in other types of work, particularly waged work. Yet none of our respondents wanted their children to engage in informal 'momo-work,' as exemplified in these accounts:

We want our children to study and find another occupation, not sell momos (Interview with Participant 17, Location 5, 8 July 2024).

Our children cannot handle the problems we constantly face while running this business. We start early in the day by buying supplies to make momos, then spend several hours preparing them, and sales

continue until late in the evening. Most evenings, by the time we wrap up and return home, it is close to midnight. Our children are not used to such hardships (Interview with Participant 11, Location 5, 5 July 2024).

The fact that entrepreneurs may earn considerably more than in wage work, yet do not want their children to remain in momo work, suggests an important distinction between immediate socioeconomic mobility, longer-term security, and occupational desirability. Indeed, several momo vendors expressed keen interest in relocating outside South Asia to seek more secure, better-paid forms of waged food work (Dubai and Japan were two locations mentioned) and hoped to use their momo work in Delhi to fund related costs.

While informality offers an easier entry point for Nepali migrant momo vendors, it also limits growth and the transition to formal entrepreneurship. Many momo businesses were clearly survivalist in orientation, and their longevity is limited for various reasons. Multiple migrant workers reported previously working at other momo businesses that ceased operations for various, sometimes overlapping, reasons: municipal authorities demolished the stall; curfews, lockdowns, and other containment measures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic; or insufficient earnings, among others. We could not find some vendors identified in Reddit threads at the cited location. Likewise, some of the momo vendors we studied or observed in Delhi disappeared from those locations a few months later. These patterns confirm that informal momo work and the momo entrepreneurial economy are precarious and risk-laden, despite the potential monetary rewards, and that such businesses are largely unviable for a significant cohort.

Control and Discrimination

Foods associated with migrant and refugee groups, and their participation in food-related work and foodscapes, can trigger conflict and tension in receiving settings (Crush & Ramachandran, 2023). Migrant engagement in informal food vending can be treated as unfair competition for disadvantaged locals. In South Africa, Somali and Ethiopian refugees' entry into the *spaza* trade, selling groceries in tuck shops (*spazas*) in townships and other low-income areas, has sparked persistent controversy and prompted repeated formal and informal efforts to curb their growth (Gastrow, 2022; Ramachandran et al., 2024). More recently, state authorities in Tanzania and Kenya imposed legal restrictions on migrant traders, including those active in informal food vending (Kasanga, 2025; Kimani, 2026).

Anti-immigrant tendencies, discourses and practices, or xenophobia, are also closely linked to food neophobia, a strong aversion to foods perceived as 'unfamiliar' or 'foreign' (Guidetti et al., 2022). Food has become a source of violent conflict in India, with food preferences and practices used to delineate social boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. This is evident in increasingly vociferous opposition to the availability of certain foods, particularly beef, and in related attempts to control the sale and consumption of other

meats perceived as conflicting with majoritarian cultural-religious norms (Adcock, 2022; Baviskar, 2021). Across all our study locations, the only meat filling available was chicken, and by all accounts, chicken momos are the most popular type across Delhi. At one study site, a vendor we interviewed reported stringent social controls on momo preparation in their neighbourhood. A migrant from Northeast India, he ran a small momo stand on the street alongside his Nepali business partner in the commercial section of a residential neighbourhood.

We cannot use whatever fillings we want. Only chicken is allowed. On Mondays and during festivals, the Residents' Welfare Association does not permit us to sell non-veg [non-vegetarian] momos. Of course, using pork is out of the question in this area (Interview with Participant 31, Location 8, 30 December 2024).

Recent efforts have sought to curb the informal sale of momos. In mid-2017, Ramesh Arora, a legislator from the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), launched a public initiative to ban momos and 'Chinese' street food in the northern city of Jammu (Sharma, 2017). His campaign highlighted what he believed were the harmful effects of momo consumption, as illustrated in the following quotes:

Momo is a killer, and we cannot allow a killer to grow in a civilised society...Our teenagers are getting addicted to dumplings like drugs. It is spoiling their health. We have to stop it (Ray Chaudhuri, 2017).

Momos have been found to be the root cause of several life-threatening diseases, including cancer of the intestine...Besides memory loss, regular consumption for two to three years causes cancer of the stomach. They are found to be more harmful than alcohol and psychotropic drugs (Rose, 2017).

He claimed his campaign contributed to a 35% decline in informal momo sales in the city (Rose, 2017). Although it did not target Nepali migrants, his opposition stemmed from a crude, homogenising view of momos as 'Chinese food' and from problematic concerns about adverse health consequences associated with their consumption. Such xenophobic efforts have not yet been undertaken in Delhi. Nevertheless, several news reports around this time expressed similar pejorative opinions of momos as street food. For example, online articles in a leading newspaper described "momos as the worst street food ever," claiming they were prepared with "stale or poor-quality ingredients," using meat from "dead" and diseased animals that could be purchased very cheaply, and even suggesting that some were prepared using "dog meat" and contained "fecal matter" (Times Food, 2020; TNN, 2019). Another photo feature highlighted a Delhi youth's "ruined health" after regular consumption of street momos (TNN, 2017).

Previous sections have shown that the momo migrant foodway has constituted an important, albeit under-documented, route to the economic integration of Nepali migrants in

urban India. Moreover, their longstanding participation in food work has fostered social acceptance of their presence in Delhi. However, this integration has marked limits. We asked our Nepali participants whether they faced discrimination and hostility in Delhi, especially while conducting their momo-related economic activities. Many respondents reported challenges common to all small-scale informal food vendors, such as customers leaving without paying and failing to honour informal credit extended to them. Harassment by municipal authorities, including confiscation of their equipment and *challans* (fines), was another cited challenge. Some migrants who supplied to other food establishments and vendors reported unreliable payment. A couple of our participants acknowledged being subjected to racialised verbal slurs and other forms of discrimination because they were Nepali migrants.

One female Nepali participant told us that local children in her neighbourhood taunted her, calling her *momo-wali ladki* (momo-selling girl). Her mother and older sister prepared momos daily, selling some below their apartment and the rest in a nearby large market. In his analysis of tweets about Delhi's momos, Palat Narayanan (2022) shows that selling momos, particularly informally, is linked to lower social and economic status and negatively associated with certain racialised groups. In some interactions, local residents expressed views that reflected broader prejudices towards these migrants. In a large market where most restaurants had a longstanding tradition of hiring Nepali migrant workers, an Indian worker grumbled about their substantial numbers:

The entire market is flooded with Nepali workers. First, one Nepali boy came to work in the market; then he brought another Nepali to work; then another came. Soon, the whole market was filled only with Nepalis (Participant Observation, Location 6, 8 July 2024).

In a similar vein, an Indian resident in a neighbourhood known for small-scale momo production staunchly opposed the migrants' presence.

They dirty the whole neighbourhood. We don't know what they do in their rooms, but the [sewage] pipes keep getting blocked. We have told people here many times to stop renting to these Nepalis, but who listens? People only care about getting the [rent] money (Participant Observation, Location 2, 9 July 2024).

The study shows that Nepali migrants face insecurities associated with informal street vending more broadly, as well as those arising specifically from their status as Nepali migrants. These forms of insecurity overlap but are not identical. Regulatory and economic insecurities may affect informal vendors broadly, whereas racialised stereotyping and attempted exclusion appear specifically tied to migrant identity.

Conclusion

Ray's (2017) assessment of the sociology of food argues that transnational and rural-to-urban migrants play significant roles in food businesses in many global cities, but they remain largely unaccounted for in the sociology of taste. This gap is especially pronounced in Global South cities. While some studies examine the activities of internal migrants in the informal food trade across Indian cities (Baviskar, 2021; Bhattacharjee et al., 2025; Kundu & Dutta, 2020; Sreerupa & Dasgupta, 2024), the involvement of international migrants in transnational and urban foodways, combined with food-focused activities, has been largely overlooked. Using momo migrant foodways and informal momo-focused entrepreneurial activities, and linking these themes to Nepali migration to Delhi, this study served as a corrective. Using this specific food item as an example, the paper highlights migrants' influence on local foodscapes and food environments and, more broadly, draws attention to how they are implicated in the key processes of urban change in the Global South.

We argue that the transformation of 'momo' into 'momos' and its geographical and socioeconomic expansion as a ubiquitous street food cannot be narrowly understood as a shift in consumer tastes driven by cultural globalisation in urban India. Our case study highlights the manifold ways a largely hidden migrant momo economy was forged, encompassing production, labour, entrepreneurship, knowledge, social networks, and informal distribution. While conditions in the new millennium suited the growth of the informal momo economy, Nepali migrants were not simply inserted into an existing urban informal economy. Through informal momo entrepreneurship, they have actively produced and shaped parts of the city's food economy and food culture. Drawing on the migration-development approach, we show how Nepali migrant labour and economic organisation underpin dynamic urban foodways. Nepali migrants are key urban economic and cultural actors who have forged new markets and shaped tastes, socioeconomic spaces, skills, and consumption practices through producing and selling momos.

Our study of Delhi's informal momo economy demonstrates how Nepali migrants contribute to both culinary globalisation and urban development from below. They do so not only by supplying labour but also by creating culinary knowledge, building informal enterprises, reshaping consumption, and transforming urban food cultures. Yet this contribution occurs through unequal, insecure informal work, creating a paradox: migrant food is culturally incorporated alongside the limited social incorporation of Nepali migrants who informally produce momos. We also show that momo entrepreneurship can provide socioeconomic mobility without necessarily providing economic security, especially long-term security. Some established entrepreneurs can earn substantially more than waged labour, but most businesses are precarious, physically demanding, vulnerable to competition and regulation, and often short-lived. The most striking finding here is that migrants do not want their children to remain in momo-work.

We also highlight the linkages between culinary adaptation and migrant authenticity in the paper. Even as momos become less Nepali in form in Delhi, Nepali identity remains economically valuable in its production. Our analysis showed that even as momos have become increasingly Indianised and detached from how migrants themselves prepare them, Nepali identity continues to confer authenticity and expertise on momo commercial food-work and trading. Yet there is a murkier dimension to this striking pattern, as crude racialised beliefs simultaneously contribute to 'authenticity' and to occupational stereotyping.

Another important finding is that informality is productive for the momo entrepreneurial economy, even as it creates various forms of insecurity for participating Nepali migrants. The study showed that Nepali micro- and small-scale momo vendors organise this informal economy by improvising production spaces in their homes and shared rooms, establishing arrangements with shopkeepers, negotiating public space, relying on kin and migrant labour, mitigating food perishability by choosing locations, minimising transportation costs, and operating through informal commercial relationships. Informality enables migrant participation in momo entrepreneurship whilst also generating spatial, economic, regulatory, gendered and social insecurity. While momo foodways have provided a route to economic integration and social acceptance for Nepali migrants, they are unevenly incorporated. While Nepali migrants are economically valued as workers, culturally valued as momo experts, and commercially valued as entrepreneurs, they are socially racialised as outsiders and institutionally vulnerable as workers. The pervasive geography of urban momo consumption also obscures the more circumscribed geography of momo production in less affluent neighbourhoods.

Finally, by highlighting Nepali migrants' role in this niche, food-focused urban economic activity and its organisation through migrant labour, the study moves beyond generalised accounts of migration from Nepal to India and challenges prevailing stereotypes of Nepali migrants as security guards and domestic workers (Bashyal, 2020; Sharma, 2013).

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