



Shifting Paradigm of Haat Bazaars in the context of Food Systems: A case from Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh

Markets for Inclusive Growth

This article explores the evolving nature of rural Haat Bazaars in the Chhatarpur landscape, in the context of changing aspirations of local communities. It underlines the shifts in both production and consumption patterns, and analyses how these changes are influencing local food systems.

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Context and Background

Haat markets, especially in Tribal areas, have always fascinated me for their rich diversity, deep-rooted inclusivity, and the strong sense of belonging and at times for their sheer scale and intensity. Over the last six months, as part of our work on ‘**Local Food Systems Transformation**’ in Chhatarpur with GIZ India and DMKS¹, I have had an opportunity to visit various haat bazaars² in Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh. Through these visits, observations and interactions with farmers, vendors, and community members, I have observed how these haat bazaars are responding to changing production systems, aspirations of youths and community members, consumption patterns, and market dynamics. While some of these changes are important, they also raise deeper concerns - **are these changes strengthening local food systems, or are they further deteriorating neglected, fragile and vulnerable systems?**

Haat markets have always been more than just spaces of exchange; they are deeply embedded in local production patterns, cultures, exchange and food practices. Any transformation within these markets, therefore, has far-reaching implications on the local economies and ecology. Haats brings to life the agroecological character of its hinterland.

In this article, I have attempted to bring together some of my key observations, learnings, and reflections from the landscape of Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh. These reflections are a direction in which our local food systems are headed and what

bazaars in local food systems, but rather to highlight the emerging challenges and changing patterns that demand immediate attention. These shifts call for focused engagement from practitioners and policymakers working to strengthen and transform rural food systems.

Importance of Rural Haat Bazaars for Local Food Systems

India has over 40,000 rural haats, serving nearly half of the country’s rural population. These weekly or biweekly markets facilitate an estimated ₹40,000–₹50,000 crore in annual transactions and are most dependent market systems for the local communities in many parts of the country. Chhatarpur district hosts 100+ haat bazaars. At a sub-district level with about 110 villages, there are 22 haats which host 1,500+ vendors catering to a footfall of 30,000+ weekly customers/ consumers. But their importance goes far beyond numbers. A haat is often:

- The only direct market access point for small and marginal producers in the rural areas.
- A space where women participate in economic exchange with relative autonomy
- A convergence point for on-farm, forest, livestock, non-farm, off-farm products and services
- A platform for informal information exchange, trust-building, and local networking

¹ DMKS is a Chhatarpur based NGO and our partner for implementation of the food systems project.

² Rural Haat Bazaars: These are weekly/ biweekly markets held at a given rural location on a given day or days.

These quality of interactions at haat bazaar level are informal, repeated, and relationship-based, qualities that are rarely exhibited in formal market interactions. Increasingly this is becoming clear that these qualities contribute to the resilience of both local economies & haat bazaars. There is no doubt about the critical role that haat bazaars play in local food systems; however, it is equally important to recognize the changing patterns within these markets and anticipate the evolving needs they must respond to in the future.

Observations from Haat Bazaars in Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh

I. A Gradual but Defining Shift in Product Catalogue

Growing dominance of externally sourced produce that includes vegetables, fruits, spices, pulses and other processed, semi-processed and packaged foods arriving from distant mandis and markets are becoming constants in the changing makeup of rural haat bazaars. These products, especially fruits and vegetables, are often uniform in size, colour, and appearance, making them more attractive to younger consumers than their local alternatives. While this has increased supply and variety, it has also created unintended consequences:

- Local smallholder farmers are losing their competitive edge over the commodities procured from the outside markets.
- Seasonal and naturally grown produce is being sidelined by the better-looking and cheaper alternatives.
- Increased competition for smallholder farmers and local vendors
- A gradual shift away from local agro-ecological diversity

This gradual displacement is not always visible but deeply consequential. During our visits, smallholder farmers producing a smaller quantity of vegetables end up either selling at the same price or even at lower prices, as there are hardly any buyers for their oversized or undersized, less attractive ones. These are also reserved for sale at the wee hours of the haats, where the economically weak section, together with local eateries, etc., usually purchase them at throwaway prices.



A range of aspirational foods that include macaroni, pasta, among others

II. Rising Food Safety Concerns: A Silent Crisis

Food safety concerns in haat bazaars are emerging as a serious and often under-recognised challenge. Across several such haat bazaars, instances of adulteration have become the order of the day in commonly consumed food items such as spices, flours, edible oil and pulses, products that form the backbone of daily diets. Spices are sometimes mixed with artificial colours or non-food substances to enhance appearance, flours are milled from poor-quality grains, and pulses are polished or treated to improve visual appeal at the cost of nutritional value. These practices are largely driven by cost pressures, lack of awareness, and quality oversights in haat bazaars. What makes this particularly concerning is that both vendors and consumers are often unaware of the health

implications, thereby normalising consumption of unsafe food. In the absence of basic food safety awareness and adherence to standards, haat bazaars risk becoming channels for the silent spread of food contamination, directly impacting community health and nutrition outcomes.

In one haat in Salaya village, I witnessed an elderly man purchasing a bright red powder, sold under the name of “Kashmiri Mirch.” The packet clearly stated it was a *color*, not meant for consumption. Yet, it was being used as a food ingredient.

Another growing concern in haat bazaars is the significant presence of counterfeit or “look-alike” brands. These products closely mimic well-known brands in terms of packaging, colours, logos, and overall design, making it difficult for consumers, especially in low-awareness settings to distinguish between genuine and fake.



Food Colors as spices being sold in one of the haat bazaars at very cheap prices

These counterfeits often sell inferior and sometimes unsafe products.

III. The Nutrition Transition: From Traditional to Aspirational Foods

Haat bazaars, once known for their rich diversity of traditional, locally prepared foods, are now increasingly dominated by fast, “aspirational” street foods such as noodles, momos, spring rolls, burgers, and pizzas. While this reflects changing consumer preferences, especially among younger generations, the concern is not about the introduction of new food cultures, but the manner in which these foods are being produced and consumed within the haat bazaars.

Most vendors, often first-time entrants into these food categories, operate with limited knowledge, skills, and resources. As a result, preparation methods tend to prioritise cost reduction, locally available material and speed over safety and nutrition. Deep frying has become the default cooking method; ingredients used are frequently of extremely low quality, sourced at the cheapest possible rates to maintain margins. For instance, sauces are procured at as low as Rs. 50 for a 5 kg pack, raising serious concerns about their ingredients, the process of manufacturing and safety.

Adding to this, hot and cooked food is commonly packed in thin plastic bags as takeaways for home consumption. Food that remains at high temperatures in these plastic bags for 2-3 hours releases harmful chemicals and microplastics, exposing consumers, especially children, to unsafe food.



A vendor selling snacks such as spring rolls, French fries, fried momos in one of the haat bazaars

In many cases, these practices are not deliberate but emerge from entrenched system dynamics, limited awareness among both vendors and consumers, and the near absence of monitoring or guidance. Importantly, many vendors themselves consume the same food they sell, highlighting that the issue is less about intent and more about systemic and behavioural gaps that need to be addressed. Increasing availability of such foods in the haat bazaars is also changing food options; it signals a deeper nutritional and behavioural shift, as traditional foods made from local grains, pulses, and forest produce are gradually replaced. Perhaps most concerning is the normalisation of these foods among children and youth.

IV. Infrastructure Deficit & Mismatch

Over the years, haat bazaars have increased in size and length along with an increase in the number of vendors and consumers, while continuing to operate with the age-old basic, minimal, mismatched and often inadequate infrastructure. Basic amenities such as clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, including toilets, are largely missing, creating challenges for hygiene, especially for women vendors and consumers. Equally concerning is the absence of protective infrastructure, such as sheds or covered spaces, for vendors.

Vendors are left to operate under harsh weather conditions: scorching heat, rain, or dust.

As footfall continues to rise, these gaps become even more pronounced, putting pressure on already fragile systems. The result is a paradox that cannot be ignored: Haats are expanding in scale and importance but steadily declining in quality, safety, and dignity.



Women vendors setting on the floors in one of the Haat bazaars with on infrastructure

Urgent actions Haat bazaars need

As we all know, haats are part of the informal economy and thrive on local governance, flexibility, accessibility, and low entry barriers. As part of our work on local food systems transformation in the model region of Chhatarpur, we have prioritised some actionable items as points of intervention and pilot in the Haat. We are collaborating with relevant stakeholders, vendors and community members to activate some of these interventions.

A. Strengthening Local Governance Systems to manage and operate Haat bazaars

Establishment of local governance mechanisms by forming simple

coordination committees comprising vendors, community members, Panchayat representatives, and CSOs. Such a committee can play a key role in setting basic norms for hygiene, waste management, vendor practices, and space allocation, while also addressing local challenges collaboratively. Importantly, these systems should focus on co-creation rather than enforcement, ensuring that vendors feel supported rather than regulated. In Chhatarpur, we are in the process of having a Food Systems Task Force to coordinate with local Haat markets for such kind of Governance systems and also building the capacity of relevant stakeholders.

B. Dedicated space for naturally grown and healthy foods

Supporting local producers, especially smallholders, women farmers, and forest fringe dwellers by improving aggregation and collective marketing with locally available community institutions. Creating visibility for local, seasonal, and naturally grown produce and collected produce from the forests by providing dedicated spaces within haats. In Chhatarpur, we are coordinating with local Panchayats, vendors and farmers doing natural farming to activate such dedicated spaces in some of the identified Haat markets in the region. We are also aiming to add locally produced Bio-inputs through BRCs to bring in Haat Bazaars to ensure easy access and awareness on Bio inputs.



A pilot undertaken under the project to have a separate space for naturally grown & healthy foods

C. Social behaviour change towards the consumption and production of naturally produced and healthy foods

The current practices and preferences are deeply rooted, shaped over time by affordability, accessibility, and evolving aspirations. Addressing this will require a change in behaviour and practices from all stakeholders, including but not limited to: vendors, consumers, community institutions, and market actors. Vendors need to be encouraged and enabled to source and promote healthier options, while consumers need to be made aware of the long-term benefits of choosing safe, local, and nutritious foods. At the same time, local farmers need to be encouraged to produce safe and natural products. Both supply and demand need to be augmented to create an ecosystem where naturally produced, healthy foods are not just available but actively preferred. As part of the project, we are conducting a social behaviour change study to understand the enablers and barriers to the consumption and production of healthy foods and design the activities based on the findings of the report.

D. Vendor Capacity Building

Most vendors operate with limited formal education and training in these Haat Bazaars, and are hardly aware of the existing food safety practices and regulations. Concise, practical, and context-specific training sessions aligned with FSSAI guidelines can significantly improve hygiene, food handling, storage practices, and ingredient quality. Simple nudges, such as using safe packaging or avoiding harmful additives, can go a long way in improving food safety outcomes.

E. Consumer Awareness of naturally grown and healthy foods

Consumer demand plays a critical role in shaping markets. Awareness campaigns—through community events, local influencers, schools, and on-ground demonstrations—can help shift preferences towards safe, seasonal, and locally sourced foods. Special focus is needed on engaging youth (in colleges) and children (in schools), who are key drivers of changing food habits. In Chhatrapur, we have identified some healthy alternatives such as millet-based foods, Sattu (a drink made out of chick-pea) and some other traditional foods and beverages to create consumer awareness and revive traditional foods and crops.

F. Infrastructure-related investments

Investments in clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, sheds and raised platforms, waste management systems, electricity, and storage facilities for perishable commodities can significantly improve both vendor conditions and consumer experience. Bringing this investment requires coordination and collaboration with the local panchayat, administration and development partners, including the CSRs in the region.

Way forward and Expected Outcome

Strengthening haat bazaars as platforms for both generating awareness and market access can play a key role in transforming local food systems in the region. Improved availability of markets, along with advisory support, is expected to encourage farmers to adopt agroecological practices, leading to better soil health, enhanced biodiversity, and overall ecological sustainability. Over

time, this can also reduce input costs for farmers and improve the resilience of farming systems.

At the same time, increased availability and visibility of safe, diverse, and nutritious foods in haats can promote healthier food choices among communities, resulting in improved nutrition and health outcomes. Awareness efforts can further influence behaviour change among both consumers and vendors, creating a stronger demand for healthy and naturally produced foods.

In addition, these interventions are expected to create new livelihood and enterprise opportunities for women and youth in areas such as food vending, processing, and local value addition.

However, achieving these outcomes will require significant patience, effort, and resources and is beyond the capacity of any one agency or organisation. It will require close and long-term (3–5 years) convergence, coordination, and sustained commitment from all stakeholders. This includes active participation from communities and vendors, who are at the centre of haat ecosystems, as well as continuous support from local civil society organisations for mobilisation, awareness, and capacity building. At the same time, government departments need to play a critical role in enabling policies, infrastructure development, and institutional convergence across various departments, e.g. agriculture, nutrition, and rural development. The private sector is expected to contribute through market linkages, innovation, and investments, while philanthropic organisations can support catalytic funding, piloting of models, and scaling of successful interventions.

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