

Rebecca Hofmann, Christoph Dittrich

**The Social Construction of Food Risks
of Lower Middle Class in the Emerging
Mega City of Hyderabad/India**

Rebecca Hofmann, Christoph Dittrich

**The Social Construction of Food Risks of Lower Middle Class in the
Emerging Mega City of Hyderabad/India**

Europäischer Hochschulverlag GmbH & Co. KG

EHV)

The Social Construction of Food Risks of Lower Middle Class in the Emerging Mega City of Hyderabad/India

Rebecca Hofmann^{*}, Christoph Dittrich^{*†}

July 2010

Abstract

This paper shows how risks and threats are perceived and valued by the socio-economic group of Hyderabad's lower class women. For this purpose, a basic introduction is given on current scientific approaches in risk theory, followed by a description of the women's socio-economic environment, as well as an overview of food and nourishment related discourses in the print media. Ensuing on this, the women speak about risks and threats from their perspective. Throughout the report, it becomes clear that perceptions and valuations are embedded in cultural and social contexts, which is why this report serves to understand risks from the emic view of the respondents.

Key words: *food risk, urban middle class, Hyderabad, India*

^{*} Institute of Geography, Dept. of Human Geography, University of Goettingen, Goldschmidtstrasse 5, 37077 Goettingen

[†] Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 551 398 021. Email: christoph.dittrich@geo.uni-goettingen.de

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

2 Theoretical approach

2.1 Vulnerability

2.2 Risk research

2.2.1 Definition of risk

2.2.2 The perception and valuation of risk

2.2.3 Risk mitigation

2.3 Applicability of existing theories

3 The social environment of the respondents

3.1 Urban setting

3.2 Lower middle classes

3.3 Study areas: Tilak Nagar and Saroor Nagar

3.3.1 Tilak Nagar

3.3.2 Saroor Nagar

4 Societal discourses on food related risks as represented in the print media

4.1 Rising prices

4.2 Food safety

4.3 Changing lifestyles and new eating habits

4.4 Concepts of beauty and health

4.5 Concluding reflection

5 Risks - exposure and handling as reported by lower middle class women

5.1 Awareness and perception of Indian middle class women

5.2 The importance of children and their schooling

5.3 Threats to the socio-cultural self

5.4 The trust and responsibility of things to come

5.5 The time factor

5.6 Exposure to risks of food and nutrition

[5.6.1 Eating habits](#)

[5.6.2 Food adulteration](#)

[5.6.3 Urban and rural agriculture](#)

[5.7 Health at risk](#)

[5.8 Shopping behaviour](#)

[5.9 Increase in food prices](#)

[5.10 The risk of being vulnerable](#)

[5.11 Influences on perceptions](#)

[5.12 Adaptive capacities and mitigation behaviour](#)

[6 Conclusion and further recommendations](#)

[References](#)

1 Introduction

In 1986, the sociologist Ulrich Beck called the modern society a 'risk society' (Risikogesellschaft). It soon became a famous slogan and released a new era of scientific risk research. Hazards, for the environment or health, always have existed, but never before have they been so intensively debated by the scientific as well as the public world. Natural disasters—often severed by human maladjustment—are hereby no longer the biggest challenges, the modern society rather faces a whole array of new risky technology, applying to various fields of human life, such as nutrition and health or mobility and communication. In the last two decades, food related risks have caused several uproars in the media and public of our western society and hereby created a new awareness of these issues. BSE and bird flu resulted in the elimination of millions of livestock and in a total boycott of beef and chicken. Radioactive contaminated food ensuing from the incident at the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl or the uncertainty about genetically modified crops and dairy products shake the consumers' perceived safety as they are not directly perceptible, but represent rather latent risks of such an everyday necessity as alimentation.

Yet, to be concerned about food safety presumes an adequate and secured level of nourishment. Needless to say that people with no access to sufficient food have a different definition of food related risks. In the emerging Indian megacity of Hyderabad with its fast changing society, the people's definition of food related risk depends heavily on their economic and social position. In the words of Isabelle Milbert (2009: 234): "Risk and vulnerability structure and organize the fragmentation of Indian cities." The urban setting bears a huge diversity of risk factors, and when

people rely on external input and food purchases, the nourishment of households faces manifold threats where access to good quality food cannot always be taken for granted. This exposure to risks is especially pronounced when food is not only seen as a basic condition of life, but moreover as an integral part of personal and group identity. This report, therefore, is based on newer discourses on hunger and food security which integrate a holistic perspective and hence address the issue rather as a question of *food sovereignty* where quantity and quality, but also cultural acceptance as well as religious and social expectations, are taken into consideration (see IPC Food Sovereignty 2010). Moreover, *objective* risks are perceived by individual social beings and it therefore has to be assumed that consumer uncertainties are multi-causal and based on complex decision-making processes. What is more, Ortwin Renn, a leading risk research scientist and his colleagues point out that threats do not have any effects until they are communicated in the social world (Renn et al. 2007: 20).

Objective of the study

One of the keywords of current development research and foreign aid is 'building resilience' (see Bohle 2008: 435). As such, a long term goal of the megacity project is to identify ways how to enhance the resilience of a society in terms of food and nutrition. Resilience means the ability to buffer risk, to recover from stress and a general handling of change and uncertainties (see Blaikie & Brookfield 1987; Adger 2000; Bohle 2008). It is thus seen as a strategy to mitigate future risks (Manyena 2006: 439).

To live with risk means foremost to learn how to active handle social change and socio-economic transformations in order to be prepared for the insecurities, disturbances and surprises in the risk worlds of tomorrow (Bohle 2008: 435; own translation).¹

Hence, to strengthen a society's resilience can only be achieved with a prior understanding of local risk perception, based on an in-depth understanding of the perceivers' attitudes and responses to hazards and threats which people face in their everyday life, because these attitudes, the knowledge and the overall perception also determine the terms of conduct in risk situations. However, in the intent of a holistic and emic access to the research topic, it soon became obvious that Ortwin Renn's notice on social risk communication bears more truth than anticipated, simply by the interviewees' reaction to the question of risks in their daily life, which they answered with blank faces. Thus, a different approach which distances itself from our western categories had to be applied. Therefore, this study should be seen as an amplification of existing theorem, aiming to fill the gap between present theoretical approaches and the complex reality in such a heterogeneous environment as the life of Indian urban lower middle classes. At the same time, this is a fundamental condition towards a praxis-oriented access to resilience.

After the discussion of the basic idea of vulnerability and of some relevant risk theories ([Chapter 2](#)), [Chapter 3](#) describes the social environment of the studied group on which the interview analysis is grounded. An important aspect of an emic risk approach is the study of societal discourses on food and health related issues ([Chapter 4](#)). With the setting of local conditions given, lower middle class women speak about their risk perception, evaluation and mitigation behaviour in [Chapter 5](#), resumed and concluded in [Chapter 6](#).



Figure 1: Risk and benefits
 Source: Bayerische Rück 1993: 42

Methodology

As indicated above, in order to understand people's reaction to stress factors and risks, their cognitive structures, rooted in the local social and cultural framework, must be recognised and analysed, which can only be accomplished through the empirical study of the living environment. For the valuation of risk perception, it furthermore has to be taken into account that this report deals with subtle risks which are - unlike natural disasters, technological faults or animal pests - not easily quantifiable through death toll or economic damage. *Objective* risks are received *individually* and *subjectively*. Herein, as well as in the latent nature of food and nutrition related risks, present study found its difficulties.

With the intent to preferably reach comparable results, two residential areas were selected according to their prevalent income range and Hinduism as the dominant religion ([Chapter 3](#)). The focus was set on the lower middle class section as their economical assets not only secure the households' basic services but also allow the purchase of costlier products at least to a certain. But for all that, they usually lack larger savings and are therefore still vulnerable to risks. The interviews were conducted with housewives in their function of risk managers in the everyday life. In psychometric studies, risk perceptions are usually assessed by statistical methods. Yet, as was outlined earlier, the perception of risks is manifold and depends on the background of the perceiver. Thus, instead of using mathematics, an open-ended qualitative study approach was chosen in order to *allow a deeper insight in the respondents' own systems of meaning* (Royal Society Study Group 1992: 106). The intensive study of the prevalent literature in the field of risk perception gave the basis for a set of interview questions. However, during the pretest phase, the questions turned out to be too far off local realities. As a consequence, interviews were kept even more open in order to discover those risk-semantics, which play a major role in the household management of the sample group without pre-given stimuli. Repetitive answers marked certain themes as more relevant than others and were thus placed in all interviews for reasons of comparison and general statements.

In October and November of 2009, 54 qualitative interviews were taken with an average duration of 50 minutes. All households, except for two families belonging to the Sikh community, were members of the Hindu religion. 34 of the women had a school education, ten of which had a college degree, 16 visited school until class ten (where standard education ends), eight respondents had left school before the eighth class. Two of the interviewees were

educated young women with a college degree but not yet married. One of the two was a Muslim and belonged to the higher income class (R-52, see box three), the other was a member of the main group of lower income households (R-53). While the median age was 36 years, one respondent of this income level was a 75 years old woman (R-51) whose appraisal is summed up in box two. One conversation was held with the dietician Mrs. Radha Reddy. All women of the main group were married and had on average two children living in the household. The mean income was Rs. 14,500; three families disposed of less than that.

¹ *Leben mit Risiko heißt also in allererster Linie, aktiv mit gesellschaftlichem Wandel und sozio-ökologischen Transformationen umgehen zu lernen, um auf die Unsicherheiten, Störungen und Überraschungen in den Risikowelten von morgen eingestellt zu sein.*