**Delhi’s vendorss struggle to stay on the street as lasting solutions remain on paper**

At the break of dawn, Shyam, 52, leaves his one-bedroom shanty in Laxmi Bai Nagar, Central Delhi, to buy vegetables from the Ghazipur wholesale market. By 7 a.m., he returns to set up his vegetable cart for the day. He is one of the many registered street vendors who have applied for the Prime Minister Street Vendor’s AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi), a government initiative providing them collateral-free working capital loans.

Four years after the interest-free scheme was launched, initially to get vendors going after they lost employment due to COVID-19 lockdowns, Shyam sees his fellow street vendors go through the ordeal of first getting the loan and then paying it off. He has now decided against availing of it, because he is unsure when he will be evicted from his spot on the street, threatening his income.

The scheme offers a loan of up to ₹10,000 under the first tranche. If vendors pay it back within 12 months, up to ₹20,000 is offered for the next 18 months under the second tranche and up to ₹50,000 for the next 36 months under the third tranche.

“First, when the Street Vendors Act came [in 2014], I thought I would be allowed to live my life with dignity, but it was never implemented seriously,” he says. The Act was meant “to protect the rights of urban street vendors and to regulate street vending activities”. Now with the loan scheme, it’s the same cycle, complains Shyam.

The Act covers any person engaged in vending goods or services to people in public spaces, especially on pavements or from a temporary built-up structure, or by moving from place to place. Fruit and vegetable sellers who pushed their carts around localities; roadside stalls selling tea, pakoras, and paan in shacks; those selling second-hand clothes or books; and traditionally held weekly markets were all covered, among others.

All street vendors were supposed to be provided licences to continue their work under the Act. However, the surveys to provide licences have been on halt for two years now. Delhi has approximately over six lakh street vendors, as per union records.

A Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) official on condition of anonymity said, “There are several factors for this, including the unification of MCD and lack of a standing committee in the civic body. The MCD has hired a company to conduct the surveys, but since it’s supposed to be done through biometrics, they are awaiting permission from UIDAI.”

Poll politics

Ahead of the Lok Sabha poll, leading national parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian National Congress, and Aam Aadmi Party raised the issues of street vendors. They have made street vendors poll promises of security, respect, and finding a lasting solution to their problems of harassment by the police and authorities.

In February this year, members from the Delhi Congress met a delegation of street vendors, assuring them that if they were elected, they would implement the Street Vendors Act, 2014, which was passed by the Centre under their governance.

In March, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed an audience of street vendors in the Capital, saying that there were lakhs of vendors working hard to earn a living for their families. “Inke thela dukaan bhale hi chhote ho, lekin inke sapne bade hote hai (Their shops might be small, but their dreams are big),” he said.

AAP also reached out to street vendors ahead of the election, promising to carry out the stalled surveys of vendors by the MCD, and facilitating vending zones in the Capital.

Shakeel Ahmed Siddiqui, the general secretary of the Delhi Pradesh Rehri Patri Khomcha Hawkers Union, a trade union of street vendors affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, says these promises look good on paper, but every party needs to look closely at the on-ground conditions before they make promises, let alone bring about change.

During the G-20 meetings, several vendors were removed by urban local bodies (ULBs) from their spaces in the name of cleaning up streets.

Stories from the streets

Siddiqui explains the loans have done the bare minimum. Street vendors receive almost no protection from the authorities and are often at the receiving end of anti-encroachment drives. “Street vendors contribute to the country’s Gross Domestic Product heavily. Farmers and factories depend on us to get their products into the market, and households run through our services, but we are treated like second-class citizens.”

Nizamuddin, 60, sets up his clothing vend in the busy Jama Masjid market, located next to the Kasturba Gandhi Hospital. He mostly sells menswear, making ₹1,000-₹1,500 a day, depending on the customers and the time of the year.

Only a few months after receiving the loan from the SVANidhi scheme, his vend was razed in an anti-encroachment drive. It has been almost five months and they have not let him set up his stall again. “I have somehow managed to pay off the loan in small segments by asking friends and relatives for money, but how long can I keep this up,” Nizamuddin asks, rhetorically, stroking his long grey beard. “I thought I would not have to face these issues after I received the loan, since it is an indicator that I have all the paperwork necessary to vend, but even after struggling for formal recognition, I have faced this.”

He is an elected member of the Town Vending Committee (TVC) from the area in which he had his stall. Yet, he says the TVC, meant to give vendors a voice within their ULBs, has not held any meeting in over a year now.

Support systems

Unions such as the Rehri Patri Khomcha Hawkers Union, Self Employed Women’s Association, and National Association of Street Vendors of India work as the backbone of many street vendors, who are often unlettered. Many work to connect the government with street vendors, educating vendors about laws and rights that support them, and conveying vendors’ tribulations to the government. They help vendors with legal aid and provide an umbrella to meet and find viable solutions to their problems.

Urban activist and researcher Aravind Unni says the scheme has worked on some level, especially after COVID-19, when monetary issues needed to be addressed. However, he feels the scheme is just an add-on to the 2014 Act, and until that is implemented, true change will not be seen on the ground.

The Urban Development Ministry has the power to make decisions for street vendors. “There needs to be a push to decentralise decision-making with training and capacity-building so that it can trickle down to those working on the ground, such as ULBs or TVCs,” says Unni.