

ThePrint

Schemes, loans & evictions — how Mumbai's hawkers become political fodder before every election

February 3, 2023



Representational of a Mumbai market | Photo: ANI

Text Size:

Mumbai: For the past 15 years, Shameem Sheikh has set up his cart selling ladies' garments on a street near Chembur railway station in Mumbai. Having witnessed three Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) elections go by, Sheikh has always noticed how hawkers like him find a mention in the manifestos of all political parties come election time. They are offered some scheme or made some promises, but most come to naught.

So, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his visit to Mumbai in January, disbursed loans worth Rs 10,000 to 1.25 lakh to hawkers under the newly-introduced PM Street Vendors' Atmanirbhar Nidhi (SVANidhi) scheme, Sheikh was less than hopeful.

After the Union government announced the SVANidhi scheme last month, the BMC selected around 8,000 hawkers who would receive this loan from each ward.

“What will I do with the loan?” asked Sheikh. “Even if I apply for it and get it, I will have to pay interest on it. Then one day the BMC will come and try to evict us from here, my wares will be confiscated or I will be fined. So, more money will go anyway.”

Hawkers like Sheikh are an integral part of Mumbai’s street culture. They number approximately 5 lakh, according to the Azad Hawkers’ Association, which represents hawkers across the city.

They’ve often been caught in the political crosshairs, with all parties using them as part of their campaign strategy one way or another.

The Congress has traditionally tried to back street vendors and spoken about protecting their rights, while the BJP and the Shiv Sena have in the past emphasised the need to ensure they have licences and domicile certificates.

Parmeshwar Kesari, a hawker who has been selling garments in Chembur for the past 27 years, said: “Politics is being played in our name. And it is not about the Sena, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) or the BJP. Everyone is here only for politics.”

The BMC elections are expected to be held this year.

‘Everyone is doing politics’

Since its inception, Raj Thackeray’s Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) has been targeting North Indians in Mumbai and, by extension, many of the city’s hawkers.

In 2017, MNS workers had vandalised dozens of stalls in Santacruz, Kalyan, and Dombivali after party chief Thackeray gave an ultimatum to “illegal” hawkers to clear out of railway stations.

As a counter to the MNS’ aggressive stance, its arch rival, the erstwhile Shiv Sena, maintained a diplomatic stand on the issue over the years, expressing support for licensed hawkers in the city, but staying silent over the issue of illegal hawkers.

In 2017, the then BJP-Shiv Sena-led state government had cleared the formulation of a hawkers’ policy and said that anyone with a domicile certificate (proof that they’ve been residing in the state for the past 15 years), would be considered for a hawking licence.

However, according to a survey done by the BMC in 2016, of the 1,28,444 hawkers surveyed, only 15,361 were found eligible to get a licence.

Last year, the state government scrapped the requirement for a domicile certificate, in a move that could give a fillip to the ruling coalition. Explaining the decision, the urban development department — which comes under Chief Minister Eknath Shinde — had

said that since most hawkers were migrants, they wouldn't be able to produce such certificates.

A report by the Praja Foundation, an NGO working towards enabling accountable governance, said that in April 2022, "BJP in their manifesto had promised provision of all facilities to hawkers and peddlers, NCP (Nationalist Congress Party) promised specific Hawker zones will be made, INC (Indian National Congress) manifesto stated improvement in hawker licences."

The report also said that the BMC's standing committee received an average of 32 questions about hawkers from councillors each year between 2017 and 2021. However, just 6 per cent of these questions were from the four major parties — BJP, Shiv Sena, Congress and NCP.

"We are distressed. Hawkers' zone is not finalised, the survey that was done five-six years ago has not been completed. No vending certificates have been issued, no party is looking after us, everyone is doing politics," said Jaishankar Singh, general secretary, Azad Hawkers' Association.

Delay in bringing in a 'hawkers' policy'

The Supreme Court passed an order to frame a hawkers' policy in 2013. In the subsequent year, Parliament passed the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act and the BMC in 2016 began the survey of hawkers.

Currently, the Bombay High Court is hearing a matter related to illegal hawkers and has sought information from the BMC and the state government on the current policy on hawkers who function outside hawking zones, hampering pedestrian movement on the street.

Now, despite the introduction of SVANidhi, many hawkers ThePrint spoke to said they don't have high expectations.

"We hear about the policy in the news but nothing has been implemented yet," said garment seller Parmeshwar Kesari. "It is vote bank politics, all talk and no action. There is always an environment of fear as we wonder when the BMC will throw us out."

Hanuman Prajapati, a hawker for over five decades, says he knows the ups and downs of this business well. "We have no one to support us. But since I don't know any other work, I will continue to do this. Nobody thinks for us or our families."

ThePrint reached BMC's Additional Municipal Commissioner Ashish Sharma via phone and text messages, but a response was not received at the time of publishing this report. The article will be updated once a response is received.

What political parties have to say

The BJP is hopeful that SVANidhi will work for them in the BMC polls.

“Others are not interested in upliftment of hawkers, only in politics. The MVA government did not implement anything that will benefit hawkers. PM Modi first researches and then announces any policy,” municipal councillor and BJP leader Vinod Mishra told ThePrint.

The Congress, meanwhile, claims to have fought for about a decade to protect hawkers’ rights. “I don’t know if anyone is doing politics or not, but I have fought for hawkers’ rights for nearly 10 years and they should be given security,” said former MP and Congress leader Sanjay Nirupam. “The law has to be implemented by the BMC. The Shiv Sena has not shown willingness to implement the law, and the BJP also was not keen. But we don’t need any political promise on this. Just implement the law.”

While the erstwhile Shiv Sena supported a regulation for hawkers, the BMC, which the party has ruled for 25 years, has still not finalised a hawkers’ policy.

“Our policy is ready. Documents are ready but a case is going on in the court. We want to say that hawkers’ zones should be designated and there should be discipline. We understand that one cannot remove the entire community. Their livelihood should be taken care of. They should be given licenses as well but it should be done systematically,” said Kishori Pednekar, former mayor of Mumbai and Shiv Sena (UBT) leader, to ThePrint.

(Edited by Zinnia Ray Chaudhuri)

Link : <https://theprint.in/india/governance/schemes-loans-evictions-how-mumbais-hawkers-become-political-fodder-before-every-election/1349874/>