

Heroes of the Market: Street Vendors in Vadodara

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Street vendors, popularly known as “*larri wallahs*” in Gujarat are an integral part of the economy of any city, and so it is in Vadodara. These people sell items of all kinds, from leather goods to pottery, to stationary and eatables from all cuisines: from Chinese to Punjabi!

An evening out in the city is incomplete without a visit to these keen traders who provide variety, affordability and easy accessibility to the frequenters of the market. Their sharp marketing and bargaining skills would be a lesson to any entrepreneur.

But the government of Gujarat holds a different view. It seems to have made up its mind, that these vendors are simply a nuisance to society, which keeps coming back, and is to be dealt with, keeping this in mind. So, though we do have some outdated legislation for the livelihood of these vendors, at present, their regulation consists of nothing but harassment and extortion.

Street vendors are a part of the informal sector of our economy. Due to this the volume of their trade and its monetary value is left unrecorded. It is a very fast expanding entry-level profession, since many people who don't get employment, or lose their jobs, start street vending, as it is an inexpensive occupation, which provides daily earning. According to an economics professor, Ashir Mehta of the M.S.University, the contribution of street vendors to the economy is underestimated and the lack of recognition being given to this profession has resulted in rampant extortion from these people.

The “larri” culture!

Street vending as a profession in Vadodara is perhaps as old as the city itself. It is an indispensable part of the culture and the shopping circuit. The majority of these vendors are found in the old city area, called Raopura.

Other parts where they can be frequently found are Fatehgunj, Ellora park circles, outside the campus of the MS University, residential areas and so on. I mention this information as I found out in my research that vendors in different areas come across somewhat different problems.

Street vendors can be divided into two major categories- the mobile street vendors who own larris or simply move around with their goods in hand (like vendors selling handicraft or stationary items) and ‘stallholders’ who set up tent like shops in public places on a more or less regular basis. But this distinction cannot be made very clearly as even those vendors who have larris prefer to have permanent spots and use their vehicle's mobility only to ‘run’ (this I will elaborate on later). Every street vendor constantly works towards increasing his or her scale of operations. The larris with eatables place chairs for the customers to sit, with growth in business; the cloth vendors prepare displays outside stalls, and so on. They also keep on increasing their knowledge base as well as customer base and actually manage to give brand value to their products through maintaining quality and affordability. Old timers in Vadodara city are often known to frequent specific ‘larris’, which have been their favourites for more than a decade.

The variety seen in the goods and, yes, the services provided by these innovative professionals is staggering. I came across men sitting with weighing machines, charging people for weighing themselves, key ring makers, women vendors selling trinkets and applying ‘*mehndi*’ and the like. They also adapt to the seasons and festivals in order to increase sales. Vadodara being a city of festival lovers, one will find

clothe and shoe vendors selling accessories during 'Navratri' time and kites at the time of 'Utterayan', the kite flying festival.

That is why; it is difficult not to associate these people with the culture and traditions of Vadodara.

Licensing: messy business?

There is actually nothing much to speak about the licensing of street vendors in Vadodara. The last time vendors were issued licenses by the Vadodara Municipal Corporation (VMC) was in 1992, when a national street vendor-licensing scheme was taken out; and since then no more licenses have been issued. These licenses too were issued only to larri wallahs selling eatables. About 1500 licenses were issued at that time. There are more than 5000 such eatable selling vendors in Vadodara at present. Licenses that had been issued earlier than 1992 were all revoked.

The VMC has divided the city into 10 wards and each ward comes under the purview of one ward officer. According to ward officer of ward office no.10, about 150 licenses were issued per ward. The procedure at that time was quite simple (for a change), in which the applicant was simply required to submit an application to the ward officer along with two passport size photographs.

On 2 May 1986, the Supreme Court passed an order by writ petition no.657, directing the VMC to formulate a scheme for hawking and non-hawking zones in each ward of the city. On making a review of the report prepared for the VMC following this petition, I found out that all the areas, which hold good potential for selling wares, are marked off as non-hawking zones. For example, the area around "R.C.Dutt road" which also faces the biggest market complexes in the city is marked as a non-hawking zone as vendors 'obstruct traffic and cause vehicular accidents'. In the length of my stay in Vadodara, I have observed that the eatable vendors on this spot attract many customers and do not appear to obstruct traffic. There are a number of other rules given in the report too, concerning the recovery of 'license fee' from vendors on a daily basis and it goes to the extent of specifying what kind of vendors should be assigned to a particular spot, for example, vendors selling flowers, coconuts etc. be assigned areas around temples and mosques. Not much of this seems to be in practice these days, considering more than 90 percent of vendors are doing business illegally. The report mentions that there are 10,000 hawkers in Vadodara, and this was in 1987. At present there are at least 20,000-30,000 vendors in the city. Nobody, including the VMC officials could give me even an approximate number, so there are probably more.

So what becomes of these vendors doing business without licenses? They are easy prey for the officials in the municipal corporation and the omnipresent traffic police.

Vadodara, as mentioned earlier, is divided in wards and each ward is divided into hawking and non-hawking zones. The officials of each ward office are responsible for the regulation of street vendors in their respective area and now let us see, exactly what this 'regulation' consists of. The street vendors who already have licenses have to pay Rs150 every six months to retain the validity of their licenses and the vendors without licenses have to pay 'administrative charges' to the VMC officers. There is no fixed time for the VMC officials to go on 'vendor checking' trips. Thus our street vendor does not have any time to prepare him or herself for any eventualities.

While going on field trips to check street vendors, VMC officials are supposed to check the license of the vendor, if they have one, and the 'hygiene level' of the eatables being sold. They might take food samples and get them tested, but once again, this is up to their own whims. The ward officer very considerably left the thousands of other types of street vendors out of the discussion, implying that they leave them to do their business in peace and only the traffic police deal with them in case they are crowding the roads.

Now coming to the ground reality, which is basically harassment and more of it. Since so many vendors do not have licenses, the officials have a ready-made excuse for picking up their goods or larris. Vendors in old city areas simply RUN on the sight of any VMC officials. I came to know from the vendors

that the officials simply come and pick up the larris, without any hesitations. They remove the goods and often damage them and cause great losses to the vendors in the process. According to the VMC official that I talked to, license renewal costs Rs150 per six months, but the licensed vendors told me they had to pay Rs200 every month. Wonder where that goes?

Vendors in other areas too are vulnerable. Those with licenses too have to look out for the officials and keep in their good books. This is because VMC officials are known to make unexpected field trips and they actually destroy larris of the vendors. For example, during 1996, the VMC went on a kind of 'vendor cleaning' drive and the officials destroyed around 100 larris in the old city area. No official was willing to talk about this, of course.

The extortion trophy is won hands down by the traffic police. They are the ones who keep regular 'check' on the vendors. Officially, traffic police officials are supposed to give *challans* to the vendors, in case they are 'obstructing traffic'. They can also get the larris picked up. But, according to the admission of the ward officer himself, no traffic police officials ever pick up any larris or even hand out any *challans*. They have fixed 'rates' actually called '*hafta*' (the ward officer used this term too) which the vendors pay to them on a weekly basis. About Rs10-20 suffice for this particular requirement, but on Sundays the rate goes up to Rs60. On payment of the *hafta*, the vendor can obtain 'permission' from the cop to take some liberties, like putting a few chairs on the roadsides.

Thus, if a modest Rs10 is taken from a street vendor by, say two cops in a week, it totals up to Rs 4,00,000 extorted from vendors per week!! And considering there are 250 traffic police officials 'checking' the vendors, this would be an underestimated figure.

The Supreme Court ordered the municipal corporation to formulate a new scheme for hawking and non-hawking zones, following a petition filed by Baroda hawker's association and others against the VMC, so that the vendors could earn their livelihood in peace. But though an elaborate scheme was prepared, there has never been any implementation. Interestingly, the departments of VMC for the regulation of street vendors are formulating a new plan. The town-planning department is working on the re-division of the city into new hawking and non-hawking zones and a new procedure is being finalized for issue of licenses to vendors. But, sure enough, this process has already been going on since the last one year and no plans have materialized as yet. The VMC officials have also no idea when the plans are going to be finalized. And even after they are, the plans have to be first approved by the Commissioner, a standing committee *and* the general body of the corporation. So no point talking about time limits here!

I tried to find out exactly what work had been done till now on the plan but the town planner could never be found in his office and his secretary too could not help me. But whatever the plan is going to be, the VMC is making the same mistake once again. The division of the city into hawking and non-hawking zones should be done after the exact number of street vendors has been assessed, for which a proper registration procedure is required. Only then can the scheme be made implemental, with the suggestions and co-operation of the vendors. But looking at the way things are going on right now, the new scheme is certainly going to result in another 'vendor cleaning' drive.

Case Studies

Eatables' vendors

Amar: chat larri wallah (Raopura)

Amar runs a larri in the old city area, selling eatables. He has been doing business here for the past ten years but does not have a license. His larri was one to be destroyed by the VMC officials in 1996. His place of business is on the side of the '*sur sagar*' lake, which is a non-hawking zone but has at least 60-70 street vendors.

Last month, VMC officials picked up his larri, and they threw the eatables on it away. He had to go to the VMC office and pay Rs 500 and then get his larri back from a place about 5 km away called 'Moochmowda' on Padra road. And that too in a damaged state.

Rajendra khumavati: cold shakes vendor (Fatehgunj)

Rajendra has been running a larri for the last 12 years. He is one of the few vendors who actually possess a license. It is not his own license, but was obtained by his uncle. Though, officially these licenses are non transferable, most vendors who have licenses have an unofficial arrangement with the VMC officials, through which they continue running the larri on somebody else's license after paying an amount of about Rs 1500 to the officials.

The vendors in his area face all kinds of harassment from police officials. They can be asked to remove their larris at any time. If there is any disturbance in the area due to fights between college students etc., these vendors are made scapegoats by the police and cleared out or sometimes may be arrested too.

Accessories vendor (leather goods, clothes, jewellery etc.)

Suresh bhai Nemad: leather goods vendor (Raopura)

Suresh bhai has a stall in one of the most frequented markets in Vadodara and sells shoes, belts and such leather items. Though he has been operating here for quite a while, he doesn't have any security and has to pay Rs 50 to traffic police officials every week.

He too, simply closes shop and runs whenever VMC officials come on field trips.

Mohammad mia: clothes vendor (mangal bazaar)

This man has been running a larri for the last 25 years. He had obtained a license in 1984 but it was revoked in 1992, on the pretext that his 'file was lost'.

He knows that he is operating in a non-hawking zone but told me that he had no choice as the areas marked as hawking zones were inaccessible to the customers to whom he catered. These are people living in villages nearby who come to the city to get cheap and attractive items.

Paan-bidi wallahs

Sharda ben: (Raopura)

These vendors occupy a lower income bracket, as compared to others, earning only about Rs1000 per month. This woman had to start running a larri last year due to lack of income in her family of five. She told me that VMC officials come to check the larris approximately once in a month, and she does exactly what everyone does: run. But if any of these people do not get timely warning and are caught, they have to pay Rs 50 'fine'. It seems that the VMC officials adjust their demands according to the incomes of the vendors.

None of these people are aware of the division of Vadodara into hawking and non-hawking zones, let alone know whether they are operating legally.

Vegetable and fruit vendors

Pradeep bhai: (Ellora park)

Pradeep runs a vegetable larri in a specific area marked out for vegetable vendors (unofficially) that contains about 15 larris huddled together next to a road leading to a residential area. Though none of them have licenses, they are not troubled much by the traffic police, but the VMC officials do come on

checking trips and take their 'administrative charges'. But this is not as often as in other areas, as this a hawking zone.

But this case is one in a thousand and most of the vendors do not get off so easily. For them each day is like a fight for survival, struggling to keep their means of livelihood going on. On an average, a street vendor earns about Rs2000 per month. From this, at least Rs100-200 is used up for paying bribes. Running a household on such an income must certainly be a very difficult task.

And there are no agencies to help them out. There is a union which represents street vendors, called the 'larri galla' association, but out of the 20 odd street vendors I talked to (in different areas), none were aware of its existence. Ironically, it was the VMC officials who informed me about it and it seems that the union's only function is to be a nuisance for the VMC officials. The issues took up by them mostly concern fights that the vendors get into.

For people who lend so much to the city, these *larri wallahs* are living miserable lives. Having to run again and again from their place of business for no concrete reasons at all is torturous, but these heroes of the market keep coming back to assert their right to earn their livelihood. Following changes in the system would go a long way in establishing these people's life and self-respect, and would provide much needed employment to many.

Ripe for a change!!

- The first thing that the government needs to change: its very own attitude towards these traders and should start treating them with the respect and credit they deserve. Though even government officials concede that the populace couldn't do without them, the vendors are still subjected to constant insecurity, harassment and extortion. As one street vendor himself explained to me, it is they who attract crowds of villagers to the city and thus help the big shops in business too. The government is simply working towards disturbing this symbiotic balance.
- Once again traffic police officials are out to have a ball at the expense of the poor *larri wallahs*. It seems that all senior officials turn a blind eye to this state of things, with the municipality placing the blame on the police department and the police department not accepting the reality (at least with me). The autonomy given to the traffic cop should be reduced considerably.
- The new procedures being formulated should be in tune with reality, and not be based on the whims of any officials of the VMC or else they would provide scope for corruption and extortion. The space provided even in the old report, in the hawking zones; following the Supreme Court order, is woefully inadequate for the growing numbers of hawkers. The licensing procedure too, if any new one ever comes out, should not be lengthy and tedious otherwise the 'tout' system will become prevalent.
- Actually, an official but simple procedure for registration should be formulated first, before working out any new scheme for hawking and non-hawking zones. Some criteria can be devised on the basis of which licenses should be given, like condition of larri, quality of products to reduce the number of street vendors, if required. Only after doing this can a practical scheme be formulated. Also, suggestions of street vendors must be taken.
- Proper implementation of this scheme is required. For this, awareness must be spread among the street vendors; they should be informed about the new hawking and non-hawking zones. None of the vendors wants to do business illegally, but it is the impractical regulations, which force them to.

But all these things are easier said than done. At present it seems that the situation is going to remain the same. I can make the suggestion of the market for licensing of larris being freed and auctioning of space in hawking zones, but hardly any chances of that happening.

Is it fair to be treated like a criminal, simply for trying to earn a living?