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EMPOWERING STREET VENDORS THROUGH LEGAL AID AND AWARENESS

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INTRODUCTION

Street vendors constitute one of the most visible and indispensable segments of the urban informal economy in India. From the early hours of the morning, the rhythm of everyday life in cities and towns begins with the calls of vegetable sellers, fruit vendors, hawkers, and small traders who bring essential goods directly to the doorsteps of households. Their presence is so deeply embedded in urban life that it is difficult to imagine a neighbourhood that does not rely on them for daily necessities. Street vending, therefore, is not merely a marginal occupation; it is a vital economic activity that sustains the livelihoods of millions of urban poor and migrant workers while simultaneously ensuring the availability of affordable goods and services for the working population.

Historically, street vending has been an integral part of India's socio-economic fabric. From ancient times, traders travelled across regions and even countries to sell goods in local markets. In contemporary India, street vendors continue this tradition by providing accessible and low-cost products such as food, clothing, and household items. Their services reduce the cost of living for the urban poor and contribute significantly to food security, supply chains, and local economies. In essence, street vendors perform a crucial socio-economic function by subsidizing the daily needs of the urban working class, a responsibility that ideally falls within the domain of the State[1].

Despite their indispensable role, street vendors often operate in a hostile environment marked by social stigma, harassment, and regulatory uncertainty. Civic authorities frequently treat them as encroachers on public spaces, while sections of the urban elite view them as obstacles to city aesthetics and traffic flow. At the same time, the very consumers who rely on their goods and services continue to depend on their presence. This paradox reflects the complex relationship between urban development and informal livelihoods. The challenges intensified in the era of economic reforms, making the need for legal recognition, regulation, and protection of street vendors increasingly urgent.

The Constitution of India provides a strong foundation for safeguarding the rights of street vendors. The Preamble promises justice, social, economic, and political, and equality of opportunity. Fundamental rights such as the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 and the freedom to practice any profession or trade under Article 19(1)(g) collectively affirm the right to livelihood and dignified work. Judicial interpretations have further expanded the scope of these rights, recognizing that the right to life includes the right to live with dignity and the right to livelihood[2]. The Government of India revised the National Policy on Urban Street Vendors in 2004[3]. The policy sought to reflect the constitutional promise of equality before the law and the freedom to practise any profession, occupation, trade or business by granting legal recognition to street vendors and permitting them to operate in designated areas such as hawker and non-hawker zones. However, the policy failed to adequately address the practical and administrative challenges faced by governments in implementing its guidelines.

Subsequently, the policy was revised in 2009 as the National Policy on Street Vendors, which largely mirrored its predecessor. A draft Model Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Bill was introduced, but it did not result in substantial legislative action. Later in 2009, the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Bill was presented; however, it drew criticism for overlooking several pressing concerns. Notably, it failed to recognise the concept of natural markets that emerge in response to consumer demand, neglected the rights of existing vendors, and inadequately addressed the numerical realities of street vending while treating eviction merely as a last resort.

The Supreme Court, in *Gainda Ram & Ors. v. Municipal Corporation of Delhi & Others*[4], underscored the necessity of a comprehensive legislative framework and directed the Government to enact an appropriate law by June 2011. In response, a revised Bill was prepared with the assistance of the National Advisory Council and introduced in the Lok Sabha in September 2012. After sustained efforts, the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act was finally enacted in 2014 and received Presidential assent on 4 March 2014.

However, the existence of legal frameworks alone does not ensure the effective realization of rights. A significant gap

[1] *Sharit Bhowmik, "Legal Protection for Street Vendors," Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XIV, No.51 (2010)*
[2] *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation AIR 1986 SC 180*
[3] *Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India, retrieved from <http://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx> visited on 05 March 2026 at 1.45 pm*
[4] *(2010) 10 SCC 715*

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persists between law and practice, largely due to lack of awareness, limited access to legal aid, and socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by vendors. Many continue to face eviction drives, confiscation of goods, fines, and exploitation, often without knowledge of their legal protections. In this context, legal aid and awareness emerge as powerful tools for empowerment, enabling street vendors to assert their rights, engage with regulatory mechanisms, and secure dignified livelihoods.

Against this backdrop, the present study titled "Empowering Street Vendors through Legal Aid and Awareness" seeks to examine the socio-economic importance of street vending, the constitutional and legal protections available to vendors, and the crucial role of legal literacy in bridging the gap between rights and their realization. By focusing on empowerment through awareness and access to justice, the study aims to highlight pathways for creating inclusive and equitable urban spaces where street vendors can thrive with dignity and security.

National Policies and Schemes Relating to Street Vendors

From a national perspective, the constitutional framework of India strongly supports the protection and promotion of street vendors' livelihoods through both Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy. The Constitution gives force to the welfare notion of the State by recognising the importance of livelihood and self-employment. Article 19(1)(g) guarantees every citizen the fundamental right to carry on any trade, business, or occupation, thereby conferring upon street vendors the right to engage in vending activities as a legitimate means of livelihood. However, this right is not absolute and may be reasonably restricted by the State in the interest of the general public, including through regulations relating to professional qualifications or state control over certain trades[5]. Judicial interpretation has further strengthened this protection.

In *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*[6], the Supreme Court affirmed that the right to life under Article 21 includes the right to livelihood, emphasising that life cannot exist without the means to earn a living. The Court directed that eviction of pavement dwellers should not occur without prior notice, identity documentation, and provision of alternative accommodation, thereby recognising the vulnerability of those dependent on informal occupations. Additionally, Article 39(a) of the Directive Principles mandates the State to secure the equal right to adequate means of livelihood and to promote opportunities for self-employment and income generation through activities such as street vending. Together, these constitutional provisions and judicial pronouncements form the foundation of national policies and schemes aimed at safeguarding the rights and welfare of street vendors[7].

In *Bombay Hawkers' Union v. Bombay Municipal Corporation*[8], the Court recognised the 'right to hawk' as part of the right to carry on business under Article 19(1)(g) while directing local authorities to create hawking and non-hawking zones and regulate licensing. In *Municipal Corporation of Delhi v. Gurnam Kaur*[9], the Court clarified that the right to carry on business is not absolute and cannot be exercised without complying with municipal regulations governing public spaces. Similarly, in *Sodan Singh v. New Delhi Municipal Corporation*[10], the Court affirmed that vendors may conduct business on sidewalks but cannot claim a permanent right over any specific spot. These judicial pronouncements laid the groundwork for a balanced approach between public convenience and vendors' livelihood rights.

In 2004, the Government of India introduced the National Policy for Street Vendors, later revised in 2009, to provide a comprehensive framework for legislative, regulatory and administrative measures at the central, state and municipal levels.[11] The policy emphasised periodic surveys and certification of vendors, issuance of identity cards, and allocation of vending spaces near vendors' preferred locations. It mandated urban planning agencies to earmark land equivalent to 2.5% of the urban population for vending activities and required the creation of restricted, restricted-vending and no-vending zones through Town Vending Committees (TVCs). The policy also addressed hygiene, infrastructure and public safety at vending sites, and mandated that eviction cannot occur without a 30-day prior notice and access to grievance redressal before TVCs. Importantly, the committees were to include representatives of traders, residents, NGOs and at least 40% vendor representation, including one-third women vendors.

Parallel to regulatory recognition, livelihood-oriented schemes were introduced to support the economic empowerment of urban informal workers. The Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rojgar Yojana (1997) aimed to provide self-employment and wage employment opportunities for the urban poor through programmes such as USEP, UWSP, STEP-UP, UWEP and UCDN[12]. This was replaced in 2013 by Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Urban Livelihood Mission (DAY-NULM), also known as Rashtriya Shahari Ajeevika Mission, which focuses on skill development, credit access, social security and provision of suitable vending spaces for the urban poor including street vendors. Under DAY-NULM, the 2018 Support to Urban Street Vendors – Revised Operational Guidelines introduced vendor surveys and ID databases, city vending plans, improved infrastructure, skill training, financial inclusion, subsidised credit and linkage with social security schemes such as health and life insurance[13].

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[5] *The Constitution of India, 1950, Art. 19.*
[6] *1986 AIR 180.*
[7] *The Constitution of India, 1950, Art. 39(a).*
[8] *(1985) 3 SCC 528.*
[9] *1989 AIR 38.*
[10] *1989 AIR 1988*
[11] *Bony M. "A promise still to take roots: A Review of the National Policy for Street Vendors in India", 10 (9) IJCRT 656-666 (2022).*
[12] *Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana, Ministry of Housing & Urban Poverty Alleviation, (1997) retrieved from: http://smb.gov.in/schemes/Swarna_Jayanti_Shahari_Rozgar_Yojana.pdf (Last accessed on 14 February 2026).*
[13] *Support to Urban Street Vendors -Revised Operational Guidelines under DAY-NULM, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, (2019), retrieved from:*

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A major step towards financial inclusion came with the launch of the PM Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi) scheme on 1 June 2020. The scheme provides collateral-free working capital loans of ₹10,000, followed by ₹20,000 and ₹50,000 tranches with interest subsidy, incentives for digital transactions and monthly cashback benefits[14]. In August 2025, the Government approved its reconstruction by extending the scheme till 31 December 2029, increasing the first two loan tranches to ₹15,000 and ₹25,000, enabling access to UPI-linked RuPay credit cards, enhancing digital cashback benefits, and strengthening capacity-building through entrepreneurship, financial literacy, digital skills and food safety training in collaboration with FSSAI. The 'SVANidhi se Samriddhi' component further integrates welfare services through Lok Kalyan Melas, thereby reflecting a holistic national perspective that combines constitutional protection, judicial recognition, regulatory policy and socio-economic schemes to secure the livelihood and dignity of street vendors[15].

Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014

The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 represents a landmark step in recognising the long-ignored rights of street vendors and providing them with a comprehensive legal and institutional framework. For decades, street vendors have contributed significantly to the urban economy and distribution systems of cities, yet they have continued to face harassment, exploitation, eviction drives, confiscation of goods, and displacement, particularly during city beautification drives, political rallies, elections, or visits of dignitaries. Although the judiciary had earlier recognised their fundamental right to carry on trade and livelihood, the absence of a uniform national legislation meant that vendors continued to function in a hostile and uncertain environment. The growing pressure of urbanisation, economic reforms, and the advocacy of organisations such as the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI)[16], along with international developments like the Bellagio International Declaration of Street Vendors, created the momentum for a rights-based national law. Responding to these developments and directions from the Supreme Court, the Street Vendors Act, 2014, was enacted as a central legislation with the objective of protecting the rights of urban street vendors while simultaneously regulating street vending activities in a balanced manner.

The Act is premised on the recognition that street vendors form an essential part of the informal economy and play a crucial role in urban poverty alleviation by generating self-employment opportunities for millions who lack access to formal employment due to limited education and skills. It seeks to balance three key objectives: securing the right to livelihood of street vendors, ensuring congestion-free public spaces, and promoting the convenience of vending services for consumers. One of the most significant contributions of the Act is the transformation of the status of street vendors from being treated as encroachers to being recognised as legitimate economic actors. The Act provides a uniform legal mechanism across the country and lays down a structured process for the registration of vendors, their regulation, and protection from arbitrary eviction or relocation.

A central feature of the Act is the mandatory survey of all existing street vendors by Town Vending Committees (TVCs) at least once every five years[17]. No vendor can be evicted or relocated until such survey is completed and Certificates of Vending (CoV) are issued. This provision protects vendors from arbitrary actions of authorities and ensures recognition of their right to conduct business. The Act also mandates the constitution of Town Vending Committees in every local authority to ensure participatory governance. These committees include representatives from municipal authorities, planning authorities, police, market associations, civil society organisations, banks, and most importantly, street vendors themselves, who must constitute at least 40% of the members, with one-third being women. The TVCs are entrusted with the responsibilities of identifying vending and no-vending zones, conducting surveys, preparing street vending plans, issuing vending certificates, and promoting inclusive decision-making[18].

The Act further emphasises regulation rather than prohibition by requiring local authorities to demarcate vending zones where vendors can legally operate, while also identifying no-vending zones to maintain public convenience and traffic flow. Vendors are granted rights along with responsibilities, such as maintaining cleanliness, ensuring public hygiene, avoiding traffic obstruction, and complying with the conditions of their certificates[19]. Importantly, the Act provides strong safeguards against harassment by police and municipal authorities by ensuring that vendors who operate according to the terms of their certificate cannot be prevented from exercising their rights by any authority.

Another key component of the Act is the establishment of an independent grievance redressal mechanism. Disputes and complaints of vendors are to be addressed by a committee usually chaired by a judicial officer, ensuring fairness and

https://nulm.gov.in/PDF/NULM_Mission/NULM-SUSV-Guidelines.pdf (Last accessed on 14 March 2026).

[14] PM Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi), Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, retrieved from: https://www.myscheme.gov.in/schemes/pm-svanidhi (Last accessed on 14 March 2026).

[15] PIB, Cabinet approves restructuring & extension of lending period beyond 31.12.2024 of PM Street Vendors AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi) Scheme, (2025), retrieved from: https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2161157 (Last accessed on 14 March 2026)

[16] Street Vendors and the Law, retrieved from <https://www.wiego.org/informal-economy/articles/street-vendors-and-law/?utm_source=perplexity> (Last accessed on 14 March 2026).

[17] Ray, Reeju. "Right to the City: The Street Vendors Act of 2014 and the Collective Struggles of Women Vendors."

[18] Narang, Prashant. "Street Vendors Act 2014: An Analysis of Cases, Rules, and Schemes." Student Law Review, vol. 33, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1-25

[19] Bhowmik, Sharit K., editor. Street Vendors in the Global Urban Economy. Routledge, 2010 pp.100-120).

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impartiality[20]. The Act also lays down detailed procedures for relocation, eviction, and confiscation of goods, clearly stating that relocation should be the last resort and that vendors must be involved in planning rehabilitation measures. It recognises natural markets that have existed for decades and provides protection to vendors operating in such spaces. Additionally, the Act promotes self-regulation, organisation of vendors, civic discipline, and access to participatory urban planning processes.

Overall, the Street Vendors Act, 2014 marks a paradigm shift in the governance of street vending in India by moving from a regime of eviction and control to one of recognition, regulation, and protection. It creates a conducive environment in which street vendors can carry out their business with dignity, legal security, and reduced fear of displacement, thereby contributing to inclusive urban development and social justice.

Free Legal Aid and Street Vendors

Free legal aid plays a crucial role in strengthening the rights and protection of street vendors by ensuring access to justice and legal awareness. Article 39A of the Constitution of India mandates the State to secure free legal aid so that no citizen is deprived of justice due to financial or other disabilities[21]. Various legislations, including the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) and the Code of Civil Procedure, also provide free legal services to economically weaker and marginalised sections who are unable to afford legal representation in civil or criminal matters before courts, tribunals, or authorities. These services are primarily governed by the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 through specialised institutions such as the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), which undertakes legal awareness campaigns through mass media, print media, awareness camps, and Lok Adalats for amicable dispute resolution through Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). Free legal services include lawyer representation, payment of court and process fees, witness expenses, drafting of pleadings and appeals, provision of certified copies, legal advice, and assistance in accessing welfare benefits, and they extend from subordinate courts up to the Supreme Court of India. Eligible beneficiaries include Scheduled Castes and Tribes, women, children, persons with disabilities, victims of disasters, industrial workers, persons in custody, trafficking victims, and persons with low income as prescribed by the government[22].

In the context of street vending, free legal aid becomes particularly significant because vendors frequently face police harassment, arbitrary eviction, and seizure of goods by municipal authorities. The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 provides safeguards against illegal eviction or relocation through mandatory prior notice of 30 days and the establishment of a dispute redressal mechanism under Section 20, consisting of a chairperson who has served as a civil judge or judicial magistrate along with two professional members[23]. Legal aid lawyers play a vital role in representing vendors before these committees and courts, enabling them to challenge illegal eviction orders, arbitrary seizures, and police high-handedness, thereby preventing loss of livelihood and capital[24]. Legal aid also ensures that vendors' right to vend in designated areas is respected and helps prevent harassment and eviction drives[25].

Street vendors are often uneducated and unaware of the laws enacted for their welfare, and legal aid helps bridge this gap by conducting workshops and awareness campaigns about their rights, social security schemes, and the process of formal recognition[26]. Legal aid also assists vendors in filing complaints, resolving disputes, and accessing government welfare and credit schemes such as PM SVANidhi by helping with documentation and eligibility verification. In practice, however, vendors frequently face corruption and illegal practices such as seizure of goods without receipts, forced payments for relocation, and extortion by local mafias, largely due to lack of awareness of their legal rights[27]. To address this, the Centre for Civil Society has launched a mobile application called "Jeevika," which aims to protect street vendors from abuse of power by ensuring legal awareness and systematic record-keeping. The application provides an online repository of legal information, functions as an SOS platform connecting vendors with lawyers and law students, enables geo-tagging for verification of vending rights, and creates heat maps based on reported harassment. Collectively, free legal aid mechanisms thus play a transformative role in empowering street vendors, strengthening their access to justice, and ensuring effective implementation of their legal rights.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the journey of protecting and recognising street vendors in India reflects a gradual but significant shift from viewing them as encroachers to acknowledging them as integral contributors to urban economies and inclusive development. Constitutional guarantees under Articles 19(1)(g), 21 and the Directive Principles of State Policy laid the normative foundation by recognising the right to livelihood and self-employment. Judicial interventions by the Supreme Court of India consistently reinforced this framework by balancing

[20] *Narang, Prashant. "Street Vendors Act 2014: An Analysis of Cases, Rules, and Schemes." Student Law Review, vol. 33, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1-25*

[21] *The Constitution of India, 1950. Article 39A.*

[22] *Legal Aid, retrieved from: https://nalsa.gov.in/legal-aid/ (accessed on 14 March 2026).*

[23] *The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014. (Act No. 7 of 2014) Section 20.*

[24] *Narang, Prashant. "Street Vendors Act 2014: An Analysis of Cases, Rules, and Schemes." Student Law Review, vol. 33, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1-25*

[25] *Ray, Reeju. "Right to the City: The Street Vendors Act of 2014 and the Collective Struggles of Women Vendors." Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 57, no. 26-27, 2022, pp. 1-10.*

[26] *Bhandari, Parul. "Street Vendors' Act, 2014: First Year of Implementation in the National Capital, Delhi, India." Social Science Research Network, 2021, doi:10.2139/ssrn.5387999.*

[27] *Sharit Bhowmik, "Street Vendor in India get Legal Protection", Global Labour University Column, retrieved from: https://learn-india.org/assets/Research/Street-Vendors-in-India-get-Legal-Protection.pdf (Last accessed on 14 March 2026).*

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public order with the right to hawk, thereby paving the way for a comprehensive policy and legislative response. The evolution from the National Policies of 2004 and 2009 to the enactment of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 demonstrates the State's commitment to participatory governance, regulated vending, and protection from arbitrary eviction.

Equally important has been the role of national livelihood and financial inclusion schemes such as SJSRY, DAY-NULM and PM SVANidhi, which recognise street vending as a viable form of urban self-employment and seek to provide credit access, social security, skill development and digital integration. However, the effectiveness of these legal and policy frameworks depends heavily on awareness, implementation and access to justice. In this regard, free legal aid and legal awareness initiatives play a transformative role by enabling vendors to assert their rights, challenge unlawful actions, and access welfare schemes.

Taken together, the constitutional vision, judicial guidance, legislative protection, national schemes and legal aid mechanisms create a comprehensive ecosystem aimed at securing dignity, livelihood and social inclusion for street vendors. Yet, the persistence of harassment, eviction and lack of awareness highlight the need for stronger implementation, continuous legal education and participatory urban governance. Strengthening these mechanisms will be essential to ensure that India's urban development remains equitable, inclusive and truly reflective of the constitutional promise of social and economic justice.

Declaration
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