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The Politics of Hawker Eviction in India

By: Anirban Mukherjee

'Any comprehensive approach to the hawker crowding of streets in cities must address two key questions: how to accommodate the continuous entry of new vendors, and how to manage hawker presence in the most congested locations without disrupting their livelihoods.'

Satyajit Ray's *Jana Aranya* is set in the Kolkata of the 1970s—a period marked by widespread poverty, unemployment, and political violence. In the film, Bishu recounts his journey as a businessman to his protégé, Somnath, the central character. A refugee from East Pakistan with neither money nor a college education, Bishu earned his first income by selling fruit on the street.

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His story reflects the predicament of countless hawkers. Driven by economic distress, people migrate to cities in search of work. When the limited formal sector fails to absorb this labour force, many turn to informal employment, and street vending—more commonly known as hawking—becomes one of the few available options.

Most existing laws give hawkers no legal protection. Even the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014—the most comprehensive legislation on the subject—confers no property right. It grants only a conditional, revocable, location-specific licence, contingent on being surveyed, enumerated, and certified—a process that in most cities remains incomplete.

Yet, in a country with limited formal employment opportunities and minimal social security, the state has rarely been able to enforce the law mechanically by evicting them. Nevertheless, eviction drives are conducted regularly.

This article explores that apparent contradiction. It argues that eviction drives function less as instruments of enforcement than as political signals, whose social meaning shifts with changes in the global economy and popular aspirations. Moving beyond the rhetoric surrounding these drives, the article examines the issue through the lens of institutional economics and proposes a set of concrete policy solutions.

Despite the state's general tolerance of illegal encroachments on public space, hawker eviction drives have been a consistent feature of post-independence urban history. The current drives underway in and around railway stations in Kolkata (Banerjee and Bhattacharya 2026) and Mumbai (Mutha 2026) should therefore be seen as a continuation of a longer legacy.

Kolkata witnessed three major campaigns between 1969 and 1975. The largest, Operation Hawker in 1975, formed part of the nationwide "sanitisation drive" associated with the Emergency, during which Sanjay Gandhi allegedly oversaw the demolition of a slum at Turkman Gate in Old Delhi (Bandyopadhyay 2016).

Despite these campaigns, successive West Bengal governments were broadly tolerant of hawkers, barring a few instances such as Operation Sunshine by the Left Front government in 1996 (India Today 2017) and a brief eviction drive launched by the All India Trinamool Congress government in 2024 (Ghosh 2024; The Print 2024). However, hawker evictions acquired renewed momentum in Kolkata after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in West Bengal in 2026.

Such periodic hawker eviction drives are not limited to Kolkata—most major Indian cities have experienced similar drives every now and then. Bhowmik (2001) documents the treatment of hawkers by the state in seven Indian cities. Beyond Kolkata, the hawker question in Mumbai and Delhi has been extensively studied. In both cities, eviction drives gained momentum during the early phase of liberalisation (Anjaria 2006; Kaur 2020).

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These eviction drives have also generated extensive litigation. Various organisations have approached the high courts and the Supreme Court either to prevent or to enforce eviction drives. Although most judicial rulings have held that hawking rights lack a clear legal basis, they have generally acknowledged the state's moral obligation not to deprive individuals of their means of livelihood. Courts have thus tended to demand procedural fairness and prior notice rather than prohibiting evictions outright.

A parallel tension runs through public discourse, where the debate is more often framed in moral than in legal terms. On one side, hawkers and their supporters argue that street vending is the only viable source of income for many of the urban poor. On the other, residents' associations and citizens' groups emphasise the right to an orderly environment and unobstructed public spaces.

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Hawker policies in independent India, including the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, have sought to reconcile these competing claims. Most have relied on some form of spatial rationing-dividing cities into hawking and non-hawking zones-or on temporal cut-offs that permit only those vendors already in business before a specified date.

Hawker Eviction as a Signal

What the historical record makes clear is that the state's objectives and popular attitudes towards hawkers have shifted markedly across economic regimes.

In a low-growth economy tightly controlled by the licence raj, with unemployment among educated youth very high, drives such as Operation Hawker signalled to the middle class that the state was in command and actively tackling widespread poverty. But broad sympathy for hawkers remained, and citizens were sometimes seen confronting police who attempted to arrest them (Bandyopadhyay 2016).

The drives of the 1990s were different in character. Coming at a moment when globalisation seemed ascendant, they signalled investor-friendliness to global capital, and middle-class aspirations fell into alignment with that signal, producing active-rather than passive-support for eviction (Anjaria 2006; Bandyopadhyay 2016; Roy 2003: 184-185).

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The current wave of evictions is, in some ways, a hybrid of these two earlier regimes. Across the world, right-wing populism has combined anti-migrant rhetoric with growing scepticism towards free trade. India is no exception. Private firms continue to play a central role in the economy, but competition in many sectors remains limited, with politically connected business groups dominating markets. This is a configuration reminiscent of the pre-liberalisation era.

The state's aggressive approach to hawkers is also consistent with a broader style of governance that prizes visible decisiveness. Policies such as demonetisation and the stringent pandemic lockdown signalled the state's willingness to exercise authority in highly visible ways. The current eviction drives can be read in the same light.

Such episodes, however, rarely emerge in a vacuum. Periods of statism are often preceded by public disillusionment with the prevailing order. The disappointments of the early post-independence decades contributed to the statist politics of the 1970s. Likewise, the uneven outcomes of globalisation have generated a renewed demand for state intervention and strong governmental action. The present moment reflects this broader shift in political and economic sentiment.

Economic Framework

Hawker eviction signals the intent of the state but fails to address the central issue. The key economic problem is the failure of the formal sector to absorb the surplus labour that migrates to cities in search of jobs. This "reserve army of labour" also includes people who lost their livelihoods to specific shocks-partition in the case of Kolkata, or the decline of the textile sector in the case of Mumbai. Eviction drives can clear the streets in the short run, but the problem will not be solved unless displaced people can be meaningfully employed elsewhere.

The rationale behind eviction drives embeds an implicit solution. By controlling public space and imposing order, the state signals its commitment to an investor-friendly environment. Global capital is expected to respond by investing in these cities, which in the long run should absorb the surplus labour.

This grand narrative has never been realised. The formal and informal sectors in India co-exist rather than substitute for each other (Kesar and Bhattacharya 2020), and economic growth has not translated into commensurate employment growth-resulting in an expansion, rather than contraction, of the informal sector (Kapoor 2014). Against this backdrop, hawker eviction has functioned only as a political signal whose meaning varies with the economic moment.

This section asks whether institutional economics can offer a more durable approach. A hawker's pitch derives its value largely from location and footfall. It is, in economic terms, a source of pure rent. The central challenge is therefore one of allocation: what institutional mechanism should govern access to these scarce locations?

Market auctions offer one possible solution. Economic theory suggests that when a resource becomes scarce and individual actions generate significant externalities, clearly defined property rights can improve efficiency (Demsetz 1967). Following this logic, auctioning access to valuable public spaces may appear attractive. If competition is sufficiently intense, the government could capture much of the economic surplus and, at least in principle, redistribute it to those displaced by the policy.

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However, two difficulties arise. First, politically connected firms often acquire valuable land and resources at prices below their market value, limiting the state's ability to capture the full surplus. Second, and more fundamentally, the small parcels occupied by hawkers-outside railway stations or along busy footpaths-are unlikely to attract large commercial bidders. If there are no serious alternative users, the efficiency argument for privatisation becomes considerably weaker.

Any eviction policy without adequate compensation creates winners and losers. Hawkers clearly lose. The position of non-hawkers is less straightforward: pedestrians gain from less congested pavements, but many consumers-particularly low-income ones-also value the convenience hawkers provide. The same goods may be available in formal markets, but purchasing them there entails search and travel costs that workers with long hours and limited incomes can ill afford. Online commerce is another option, but delivery charges, minimum-order requirements, and limited digital access often make it less practical for poorer households.

Policy Suggestions

A complete ban on hawkers is neither feasible nor desirable in a country where formal employment opportunities remain limited. The existing policy framework relies primarily on spatial rationing: cities are divided into hawking and non-hawking zones, and vendors are permitted to operate only in designated areas. Its principal weakness is that it treats hawking as a static phenomenon, ignores the continued entry of new vendors, and has repeatedly failed to prevent evicted sites from being reoccupied.

The fundamental problem is not the existence of hawkers but their concentration in a small number of high-footfall locations. Governments have repeatedly attempted to relocate vendors to less congested areas, only to find that many eventually return to their original sites (Ganguly 2008). Their reluctance is understandable. The value of a hawker's pitch depends largely on pedestrian traffic, and a remote location cannot replicate the economic advantages of a busy railway station or commercial district.

In the case of agricultural land, a displaced farmer can in principle be compensated with a plot of equivalent fertility. The hawker problem is harder. It is not just enough to provide an alternative pitch; the government must also ensure the associated locational rent is as high as that of the original site. Such rent is high wherever footfall is high, but high-footfall locations are typically traditional commercial hubs that are already congested.

It is precisely this congestion that makes hawking in those places undesirable in the first place. This is the inherent contradiction of any relocation scheme for hawkers. Any comprehensive approach to the hawker problem must address two key questions: how to accommodate the continuous entry of new vendors, and how to manage hawker presence in the most congested locations without disrupting their livelihoods.

Auctions provide one legal alternative, but they would favour vendors with greater financial resources and could reinforce existing inequalities.

One response is to create new public spaces-parks, pedestrian plazas, public squares, recreational zones-in relatively underutilised parts of the city and permit hawking within them. If such spaces successfully attract visitors, they can generate new centres of economic activity and gradually reduce pressure on congested locations. Unlike simple relocation, this approach attempts to decentralise footfall itself rather than merely redistribute vendors.

Even this strategy leaves the problem of locational rent unresolved: established commercial hubs will likely continue to draw greater pedestrian traffic than newly developed sites, and most hawkers will therefore prefer to operate there. At present, access to such locations is often mediated through informal political and social networks, which open the door for political clientelism and mafia raj.

Auctions provide one legal alternative, but they would favour vendors with greater financial resources and could reinforce existing inequalities. Since vendors already operating in the most lucrative locations earn higher incomes, they can make a higher bid for those locations than the new entrants, making the spatial distribution of hawkers unaltered.

A lottery-based system offers a fairer possibility. Under such a regime, licensed hawkers could be assigned locations through a periodic lottery, with reassignment taking place every few years. Vendors would enjoy secure tenure between draws, but access to the most valuable spots would rotate over time.

Such a system would distribute location-based rents more evenly while reducing the influence of political patronage. Unlike an auction, it does not require vendors to command financial capital beyond the cost of a licence. The principal drawback is administrative: organising periodic lotteries for thousands of vendors in a transparent and credible manner requires substantial institutional capacity.

Technology presents a third possibility. Digital platforms such as Uber, Swiggy, and Zomato have demonstrated how technology can connect service providers and consumers while reducing the importance of physical location. A similar platform could aggregate local hawkers, allowing customers to browse products and place orders online, with goods stored in nearby collection points and delivered to homes or workplaces.

For this to work, the platform would need to avoid the high commission structures that have generated controversy in other sectors-suggesting a publicly run model, along the lines of Yatri Sathi, the taxi aggregator launched by the West Bengal government. Such a system would substantially reduce the importance of location-based rents.

None of these proposals is without limitations. Yet the persistence of the problem suggests that the traditional toolkit of spatial and temporal rationing has reached its limits.

Significant obstacles remain. Many consumers prefer to inspect goods before purchasing them, and a considerable proportion of hawkers lack smartphones or digital payment facilities. One way of addressing these constraints would be to establish representative kiosks at major transit points, where customers could view sample products and place orders. Such kiosks would function much like app-based taxi booking counters at railway stations and airports, providing a bridge between the digital platform and customers who are less comfortable with technology.

None of these proposals is without limitations. Yet the persistence of the problem suggests that the traditional toolkit of spatial and temporal rationing has reached its limits. Pilot projects and the creative use of technology may offer more promising avenues than repeated cycles of eviction and reoccupation. Without such innovation, informal occupation of public space is likely to continue, sustained by the networks of patronage and rent extraction that have long characterised Indian urban governance.

(The views expressed in this article are the personal views of the author.)

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