What the Lived Experiences of Srinagar's Street Vendors Tells Us About Their Plight

Deepanshu Mohan, Aman Chain, Najam Us Saqib and Zahid Iqbal Shah

11/Aug/2026

Fieldwork with nearly 200 vendors shows how the struggle for a place on the street shapes livelihoods, dignity and everyday lives in two of Kashmir's prominent markets.

Hazratbal Market in Srinagar, August 2026.

This is the first article in a three-part series from a field project on informal work in Kashmir and how it has affected vulnerability and marginalisation amongst vendors. Focusing on two critical city-markets of Batamaloo and Hazratbal Dargah in Srinagar, the series examines how informal workers negotiate livelihood, precarity and everyday regulation. Through these market spaces, the authors examine the social and economic conditions that shape the governing dynamics of urban informality across Kashmir.

The Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) team conducted around two hundred interviews at two prominent markets in Srinagar, Hazratbal and Batamaloo, to explore how informality and street vending operate on a daily basis. The interviews included cart vendors, women producer-sellers and other street hawkers. The field interviews and observations uncovered a condition of suspended legality, wherein the right to the street is neither denied outright nor meaningfully secured, but negotiated each day, quietly and precariously, by the vendors.

The larger framework for the study is also the policy framework of the government of Jammu and Kashmir. For example, the government said in a written reply in the legislative assembly in February 2026 that it was preparing a broad, aspirational "Vision Document" for a qualitative overhaul of labour welfare policy. Prima facie, this announcement is promising and resonates with the normative objectives of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, which formally recognises street vending as a legitimate and protected means of livelihood.

But our fieldwork in Srinagar showed that for the thousands of hawkers who line the city's main arteries, such administrative promises often register more as a contradiction. Their situation mirrors what is routinely dismissed as a procedural lapse in many contested spaces but is actually experienced as a steady erosion of rights.

Even as the fiscal machinery of an administrative unit might speak the language of welfare, such as by indexing entitlements to inflation, the municipal apparatus continues to treat street vending as a problem – a visible problem that must be removed rather than accommodated. Vendors are thus caught between two arms of the state that appear to speak past each other. Law, in this setting, does not function as a shield. It becomes a technique for regulating absence, clearing space to serve the "world-class" aesthetic priorities of urban elites.

Proceduralism as a tool of extortion

Our findings identify a clear mismatch between the state's proceduralism and the day-to-day street realities. For instance, the 2014 Act prohibits the eviction of any street vendor until a comprehensive survey is conducted and Certificates of Vending (CoV) are issued to them. This right still hasn't materialised in the sprawling Batamalaoo market in Srinagar city.

Here, most hawkers reflexively claim to possess a "permit" to ward off immediate trouble, but longer conversations with them revealed a reliance on expired documents, permits registered to third parties or licenses obtained by greasing the hands of officials. Other Indian metropolises have something called the "Paoti culture", wherein receipts for fines paid function as proof of existence. In Batamaloo, the system is even more precarious, as even such documentation is often absent or the fines are paid "informally".

Vendors report paying informal fees ranging from Rs 50 to Rs 200 to municipal and police officials, not to secure a legal right or permanent solution, but for a temporary reprieve from confiscation of their wares and carts.

One vendor said, "Anyone who comes in the name of the municipality is treated as someone who collects money." This disturbing pattern of bribery as tax shows that vendors are considered legal enough to pay money to the authorities, but not legal enough to have their rights protected. Their vending continues only as long as the government or municipality allow them to exist on the fragile lines of illegality. The moment the state decides to launch a beautification drive, they will no longer be tolerated.

Sovereignty and space

The experience of law for the vendors of the markets is not uniform. It is determined by who governs those markets locally. Our research revealed a clear regulatory pluralism between the market models.

The Hazratbal Model can be described as one of religious quasi-legality, administered by the Auqaf Committee of the Hazratbal shrine rather than by the municipal authorities. The market functions through a regime of "informal recognition", wherein the Auqaf operates as a quasi-state actor by allocating fixed vending spots in exchange for a nominal daily fee, typically beginning at Rs 50. As observed in this space, the law is quite predictable, with police harassment limited to vendors negotiating for space during high traffic flows for Friday prayers.

By contrast, the Batamaloo model exemplifies a form of *hostile urbanism*, marked by a far more coercive assertion of state sovereignty. Governed by the Srinagar Municipal Corporation (SMC), vendors in Batamaloo are routinely constructed as "encroachers" to be removed in service of an urban aesthetic aligned with the Smart Cities Mission. Over 70% of vendors report having been asked to vacate or shift at least once, often without the thirty-day notice mandated by the 2014 Act.

Vendors occupy unique spaces at Hazratbal and Batamaloo. Photo: Najam Us Saqib

Why formalisation is not enough

In our interviews, we found that even those vendors earning Rs 2,000-4,000 a day said they would leave street vending immediately if a "better" job were within reach. This aspiration to exit street vending cannot be explained solely through concerns over income security, even though nearly 40% of the interviewed vendors described their earnings as "unstable or highly precarious".

Instead, this response is shaped by the persistent criminalisation of their everyday working spaces and the constant need to negotiate informally for the right to remain on the street.

As scholars such as Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, Sharit K. Bhowmik and Debdulal Saha have argued, processes of "formalisation," including digital identity cards for vendors, offer little protection against the routine indignities they face, such as the confiscation of carts or their being treated as a "nuisance" by municipal authorities and street-level collectors.

The state's formalistic imagination of regulation thus remains largely indifferent to the lived, and often gendered, dimensions of dignity embedded in informal work. In the Hazratbal market, this dynamic becomes particularly visible among elderly women vendors selling "self-produced" goods such as spices. Unlike many of their male counterparts who retail factory-manufactured products, these women function as producer-vendors. Their presence in the market represents the final and most visible link in a longer, home-based chain of production.

Thus, when the authorities criminalise their presence, they shake up the end point of a production livelihood. In Srinagar, the absence of sustained political intermediation has produced a regulatory vacuum that is frequently occupied by what may be described as a "horizontal violation", wherein relatively powerful vendors assume informal gatekeeping roles and marginalise weaker actors who also need access to the same spaces and customers.

This erosion of street-level solidarity stands in sharp contrast to vendor ecosystems in cities such as Kolkata, where trade unions and collective associations have historically enabled vendors to negotiate a shared "bundle of rights" through organised bargaining.

Further, contemporary legal frameworks conceptualise the vendor as a homogeneous juridical subject, overlooking the deeply stratified hierarchies of gender, capital, age and local influence that structure street economies.

Women vendors at Hazratbal Market. Photo: Zahid Iqbal Shah

Reclaiming the right to the street

The streets of Srinagar are a testament to what sociologist Asef Bayat terms "quiet encroachment of the ordinary". The systemic exclusion faced by the vendors of Hazratbal and Batamaloo is not merely an economic issue but a fundamental human rights violation.

Until the state meaningfully operationalises TVCs as democratic and representative institutions, the 2014 Act and subsequent regulatory codes are likely to remain on paper, never realising the aspirations of constitutional rights. There must be clear limits on municipal discretion and accessible grievance redress mechanisms are essential to prevent arbitrary evictions and informal rent extraction.

The state must transcend its "money-collector" reputation and recognise street vending as a legitimate right to livelihood and not as a nuisance that needs to be erased from the streets.

Deepanshu Mohan is Dean and Professor of Economics, O.P. Jindal Global University. He is a Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics (LSE) and a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Oxford. Najam Us Saqib is an Assistant Lecturer at IDEAS, Office of Interdisciplinary Studies and an Assistant Director at Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES). Zahid Iqbal Shah is a PhD candidate at Central University of Kashmir and was associated as a field researcher on this project. Aman Chain studies Law and is a Research Analyst with Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES).