

BETTER AVENUES

Shortage of truck drivers may turn speed bump for economy

By SHALLY SETH
shally.s@livemint.com

MUMBAI

The loneliness of the long-distance trucker may have been romanticized in novels and films, but hard realities such as punishing work schedules and harassment at octroi posts have created a shortage of truck drivers in India at a time when easier and more attractive employment options are available to young men.

Twenty-five-year-old Bittu Singh echoes the woes of his profession when he complains: "No one likes a truck driver. Everyone harasses us." His typical day involves haggling with the men manning toll booths, paying off policemen and managing the paperwork needed to ferry cargo to and from Mumbai in his truck.

A growing shortage of young men to climb into the driver's seat may seem a prosaic problem at a time when an expanding network of interstate highways and the creation of a seamless national market after the introduction of the goods and services tax could make it easier for companies and distributors to ferry industrial in-



Eye on future: Basant Bhanuja, a trucker for more than 15 years, has been working overtime to ensure his sons don't end up driving trucks.

puts and finished goods around the country. But officials in the logistics industry and fleet owners warn that the looming driver shortage could eventually harm economic activity.

N.L. Gupta, managing director of Caravan Roadways Ltd, which owns 300 trucks, said: "Competition to get freight from clients was always there.

Now there's competition to get drivers."

He added that 5-15% of the fleet is idling at most transport firms at any point of time due to shortage of drivers. Gupta said his own fleet expansion plans have been hit.

While young men seek other alternatives, older truck driv-

TURN TO PAGE 2 ▶

Truck driver shortage looms

▶ FROM PAGE 1

ers say they would rather not have their children stepping into their shoes.

Basant Bhanuja, 49, has been a trucker for more than a decade-and-a-half. He manages to send ₹5,500-7,000 every month to his family in the Kutch region of Gujarat. Bhanuja said he has been working overtime to ensure his two sons do not end up being truck drivers. "I want them to get into some other line," he said.

The Indian trucking industry has around 5.6 million vehicles on the road and needs around 700,000-800,000 new truck drivers every year, according to an estimate of New Delhi-based Indian Foundation of Transport Research and Training. An estimated 80% of the freight in India moves on road rather than rail, with trucks doing most of the heavy lifting.

Officials at transport and logistics firms say there has been a radical drop in the number of people who migrate from states such as Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal, Punjab and Himachal in search of employment in the transport industry.

Jasjit Sethi, chief executive officer of **TCI Supply Chain Solutions Ltd** with a fleet of 1,300 trucks, said his firm is seeing a shortage of people coming from the villages since government programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which offers 100 days of work to all rural households as a right, encourages people to stay in their villages.

"The incentive for them to come and work as truck drivers is not very high and the pool of available people has been re-

duced," he said, and added that the driver shortage has not yet hurt the firm's profitability, but "it is becoming an irritant".

A well-meaning government notification has also complicated matters by raising the educational bar for truck drivers.

To ensure road safety, the ministry of road transport and highways in 2007 made it mandatory to have a class X pass certificate for drivers carrying hazardous goods such as chemicals, kerosene and diesel, and class VIII pass certificate for those carrying regular cargo.

Rajkumar S. Inde of Shri Swami Samarth Logistics Ltd said the regulation has also impacted the availability of drivers. "Having studied till class X, they will be keener being an office boy and not a truck driver," he said.

But what rankles above all is the treatment meted out to truck drivers by policemen.

Sukhwinder Singh, who started off as a truck cleaner and now owns six trucks, said: "One cannot leave a truck unattended even for a minute, even to attend to nature's call. They treat us like animals."

"No one can challenge the policemen who behave like goons and resort to extortion," he said. "A driver has no choice, but to give in to their demands."

While fleet owners are bearing the brunt of the burden right now, truck makers are also aware of the fact that the shortage of new drivers could eventually hurt fleet expansion plans and, hence, the demand for trucks.

Ravi Pisharody, president of the commercial vehicles business at **Tata Motors Ltd**, said

the driver shortage could slow growth in commercial vehicle sales from 25% to 20%.

Most truck makers are engaging with driver-care programmes at three levels—launching trucks that not only offer a better power to weight ratio, but also have better creature comforts that make the life of a driver a bit easier.

For instance, **Ashok Leyland Ltd's** U-Truck vehicles and Tata Motors' Prima range of trucks offer features such as air conditioning, sleeping cabins and music systems.

Truck makers are conducting driver-training programmes either through full-fledged schools or encouraging fleet operators to send drivers to their factories.

Some like Ashok Leyland have also been working in the area of healthcare and education for truck drivers and their families.

The Chennai-based truck and bus maker runs driver-training institutes at Namakkal in Tamil Nadu and at Burari near Delhi, training 40,000 drivers at the two institutes every year. It plans to add more such facilities at Khaital in Haryana, Chindwara in Madhya Pradesh and Jaipur in Rajasthan, said an Ashok Leyland spokesman.

Tata Motors' Pisharody said the company, which has been encouraging large customers to send drivers for training programmes at the testing tracks of its factories in Jamshedpur and Lucknow, is now in talks with several state governments for driver training schools. It plans to train close to 50,000 drivers over the next three years, he said.

It's not the vehicle makers

alone that have taken up driver training as a cause. **Shriram Transport Finance Co. Ltd**, which offers credit to small individual transporters for pre-owned and new trucks, has also been affected by the driver shortage. The company, in association with a non-governmental organization of Indian Institute of Technology graduates, is setting up a driver training institute in Kolhapur in Maharashtra to train 600-700 drivers in a month. This will be followed by three more—one each in the north, east and south—in a year's time, said R. Sridhar, managing director.

The makers and buyers of trucks warn of the wider implications of the looming driver shortage. Vijay Sankeshwar, chairman of **VRL Logistics Ltd**, said: "If the government, transporters and vehicle makers do not take adequate steps to improve the condition of truck drivers, the days are not far when everything will come to a standstill," he said.

"Pet paalna hai, jo naseeb mein hai, so hoga (we have to earn our livelihood, what's written is your destiny)," said a stoic Bittu Singh, as he stands up to get behind the wheels for his next journey from the trucking centre in Kalamboli in Panvel near Mumbai.

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VIDEO



After years in the profession, some truck drivers want to ensure their children don't follow their footsteps.

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