

## **Shortage of Truck Drivers Looms Large**

Transportation and truck drivers, the vital units which support business, are the proverbial backbone, muscle and sinews of the logistics industry. The Indian logistics industry has in the past had an abundance of truck drivers. But the situation is set to change dramatically as industry is facing an unprecedented shortage of drivers. This is likely to cascade into an endemic problem that will chip away at the growth of this sector. While the West is already facing an acute shortage of truck drivers, Indian industry, which was comfortably placed, suddenly finds itself staring at a problem which could have been avoided with greater resourcefulness and to which, regrettably, there are no easy and quick-fix solutions.

### **Labor shortage**

Mr Bal Malkit Singh, President, Bombay Goods Transport Association, notes that while “the shortage in India is not comparable to Western countries, there is definitely a shortage. For every 100 vehicles, there are at least ten which have no drivers. In future, I expect even greater problems as the labor class is not easily available.” According to Mr Malkit Singh, there are approximately 72 lakh commercial vehicles (both large and small) in the country, while the number of drivers has correspondingly reduced by five percent-ten percent. Colonel Vijay Nair, General Manager-supply chain, Hypercity Retail (India) Ltd, agrees that “with the way the economy is growing, there is a shortage, not only of drivers, but also of vehicles. While the situation is not as severe as in the West—retailers have their own captive transport and for outstation transportation, logistics service providers (LSPs) are always there—if I want a driver today, I may not get someone at a competitive rate. Besides, before festivals like Holi and Divali, drivers are just not available. The transport sector has always been vibrant, but an unorganized sector.” It is due to the unorganized nature of the sector, coupled with callous indifference and a reprehensible lack of foresight, that the problem is set to assume serious proportions. Why, in a country with high unemployment and a bountiful supply of labor, should it be difficult to recruit drivers? The answers emerge thick and fast as one probe deeper.

### **Job Challenges**

Mr P C Sharma, President and CEO, TCI XPS, refers to a report prepared in 2008 by KPMG-CII, which estimated that “by 2015 India will need five million truck drivers, whereas currently the road freight segment has only three million truck drivers for heavy and medium commercial vehicles.” He points out that “in India trucking is an extremely challenging and physically demanding job. Truckers spend long hours driving in extreme conditions. Drivers are away from home for weeks at a time—of course, local drivers return home in the evenings.” The situation becomes dire with innumerable and time consuming stoppages at entry points and check points to pay toll charges and taxes like octroi and sales tax. At the toll nakas, conditions become murkier as drivers are compelled to bribe rogue police officers or the staff at the nakas. Says Mr Sharma: “Often they are forced to pay bribes to get their vehicle papers back or pay ‘challans’ issued for overloading even though they are within the road limit.” According to industry sources, various corporate are crystal clear about the bribes that are extracted at these nakas and pay the required amounts to their drivers to grease the palms of officials and ensure quick and easy movement of goods!

Representations to the government by various truck drivers’ associations have borne no fruit. Nothing, just nothing, has emerged from these meetings with the government,” says a disgruntled Mr Singh. “All our representations have fallen on deaf ears. We are supposed to be given various facilities at the nakas, but there is no such thing. What’s more, in the toll collections too there is no transparency— it’s just systematic looting with the nexus of politicians.” On an average, truck drivers ply between 200-340 km. Per day on roads which are sometimes smooth as silk, but more often, rutted and in an unnervingly abysmal condition. Jolting along these decrepit roads, the hapless drivers travel 24-25 days in a month, accompanied by a single ‘helper’ or khalasi and seated in a crude, overheated driving cabin. In the West the driving cabins are comfortably air conditioned. The workday stretches from ten hours and in certain cases, according to Mr Purvin Patel, Chief Operating Officer, Radhakrishna Foodland Pvt. Ltd even more than an interminable “24 hours at a stretch! We have seen drivers do even that kind of a routine! But as a company, we ensure that our drivers are not allowed to drive more than the mandated eight hours and there is always a second driver on long hauls.”

### **Paltry Perquisites**

For this rigorous work life, truck drivers are paid a meager `30,000-`35,000 per month, inclusive of a paltry `250-`300 per day for food! Facilities for rest, recreation? “Nothing, nothing,” sputters an angry Mr Singh. “You can’t even compare this with drivers in foreign countries. We have no facilities whatsoever.” A sympathetic Colonel Nair agrees and says sotto voce, “they have no good places to eat or rest on the highways. Drivers need way stations on the road, like logistics centers in the West, where not only can they eat and rest, but they can also get some repair work done on their vehicles before they travel onwards. It’s a very tough life and they are in this profession at all only because they are very hardy and need the money.”

### **No Medical Care**

Equally brutal is the complete absence of good medical facilities on our highways. Remarks Mr Sharma: “India still lacks proper roadside medical facilities and in case of accidents, help is generally not found near at hand.” Mr Singh curtly

agrees and notes that this callous insouciance has led to “drivers generally seeking medical help on their own.” Even more dangerous has been the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections on the country’s long and lonely highways. At special risk are long distance truckers who are separated from their families for varying and indefinite periods and are then afflicted by AIDS and other harmful diseases. The spread of HIV and a variety of other diseases from the nation’s highways to society at large has long been a recurring nightmare for corporates and central and state health officials. Industry has recognized the potential of these hazardous diseases to cripple it and some have stepped out to meet the challenge. Says Mr Sharma: “My company, TCI, realizes the importance of truckers in its business and has launched a specially targeted project, known as Project Kavach, to reduce the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections among long distance truckers. There are other similar programs by NGOs and the government. Increasing attention is now being paid to educate by using behaviour change communication to encourage truckers to adopt safer sexual behaviour and practices.”

### **Lack of security**

Truck drivers are also scrupulous about their personal safety as security on the nation’s highways is conspicuous by its absence. Highway patrolling and a helpline are options that the powers that be have cynically ignored rendering, as Mr Singh points out dismissively, the nation’s highways fearsomely unsafe. Colonel Nair mentions in an undertone that in certain states like Jharkhand where the fear of the Maoists abounds, drivers first congregate at a dhabha and then decide to travel together as a group through such terror-afflicted states.

### **Fading interest**

Most truck drivers hail from the northern states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, Haryana and Jammu from the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Truckers from the south apparently prefer to limit the scope of their operations to the southern states. While earlier truck driving was an occupation passed down easily from father to son, today the younger generation, more educated and also disgruntled with the hard scrabble conditions of this livelihood, have rebuffed this profession and turned to greener pastures. There is a flip side to this story too. In states like Haryana where land prices have reached stratospheric levels, several landowners, according to Colonel Nair, have sold their ancestral lands, invested in some trucks and become owners themselves! “There are now a lot of opportunities in the interiors of the country too,” points out Mr. Singh. “With the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) wages are good and so fewer people are opting for this profession.”

The logistics industry’s growth and in a sense, even its future, rests on the humble truck driver. With most goods being transported by road, a shortage of truckers could curdle the hopes and dreams of the industry. And now with the decision to permit multi-brand FDI in retail looming on the horizon, a free-flowing supply of drivers is a compelling necessity. Both the government and industry must recognize this need and urgently ameliorate the working environment of its drivers to give industry that much-desired impetus to growth.