

देश देवादे



Ramesh Kumar

Desh Chaalak

Ramesh Kumar

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Message from the Author

Building a prosperous nation presupposes an inclusive society. Long haul truck drivers play a pivotal role in such nation building activity. Yet their contribution goes unnoticed and unrewarded. These sepoys on highways remain unsung. It's time to rectify this anomaly. This initiative warrants the collaboration of all stakeholders. Better late than never.



| A soulful meet on the road

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नितिन गडकरी
NITIN GADKARI



सत्यमेव जयते



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जन्तु महोत्सव

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सड़क परिवहन एवं राजमार्ग
भारत सरकार
Minister
Road Transport and Highways
Government of India



भारत 2023
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Foreword

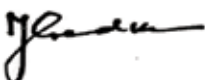
As India accelerates towards a \$5 Trillion economy, the Government has rightly identified logistics as one of the key drivers of growth. The target of bringing cost of logistics in India to under 9% of GDP will be achieved by developing large infrastructure such as roads and highways, digitisation of processes, decarbonization of the supply chain and reducing operational risks for all stakeholders. To that end, our government has already taken several initiatives such as expansion of national highways from a meagre 97,000 kms to over 2,000,000 kms, upgradation of 2-lane highways into 4-lane highways, creation of green highways with integrated infrastructure such as electric charging stations, adequate rest stops & emergency services etc.

However, most of these initiatives may not bear fruit unless equal attention is paid to one of the most important stakeholders of the larger logistics ecosystem, truck drivers. Like frontline workers, truck drivers are the literal “drivers” of the logistics infrastructure, enabling delivery of goods and services to the last mile. They weather extreme conditions, challenging terrain and stiff timelines despite modest pay, inadequate protection and demanding work schedules which may keep them away from their families and loved ones for over 300 days in a year. It is no surprise that a majority of truck drivers do not encourage others to join the trade.

It is clear then, if we are to achieve our goal of improving logistics in India, equal attention must be paid to this community of drivers. While many initiatives to enhance road safety and augment driver training infrastructure have been undertaken by the private sector and the Government alike, much more remains to be done. There is a need to take a larger view on how to organise and dignify this community and an important step in that process is to acknowledge their challenges and celebrate their contribution.

This book, “Desh Chaalak” chronicles the stories of these unsung heroes; of how they go above and beyond their call of duty to ensure that a rapidly growing India runs at a rapid pace. I am deeply appreciative of the Mahindra Group, and Mahindra Logistics in particular, for using their brand and platform to raise awareness on this issue. Literature is a potent medium for change as it can aid the imagination for generations. I must commend the author, Shri Ramesh Kumar, for giving these drivers a voice through this book, weaving their experiences in wonderfully worded stories which not only educate but also inspire. I am confident that this book will help us all develop a new appreciation for truck drivers and enable us to bring-in their perspective as we shape the future of the logistics sector.

Place: New Delhi



(Nitin Gadkari)

Foreword

Move in India, Make in India

The past 75 years have seen a period of significant growth in our nation. We emerged in the post-colonial era, a country with great aspiration and poor resources. Slowly our nation has grown to emerge as leading economic power across the world. Today we stand at an inflection point, moving forward aggressively towards our aspiration of a \$5 Billion GDP, and taking our rightful place as an economic super-power driven by grass-roots transformation across all sectors.

Over these years, the growth has been closely linked with growing connectivity, for cargo and people movement. As the country expanded its infrastructure, the movement of cargo followed. The road transportation infrastructure, fleets, and ecosystem has thus been the largest catalyst for our country's growth. In comparison to any other developed nation, we continue to have a very high share of road transportation with over 65% of cargo moving by road. This is likely to continue with the deepening of networks, increasing consumption, and programs to accelerate rural growth. The transformation of the highways & road transportation sector which is underway, with increasing infrastructure, decarbonization, and investments in the overall ecosystem will accelerate this.

While we have seen increasing infrastructure, new automotive technologies, digitization, and increased formalization, the driver community continues to languish. Drivers are the very soul of our road transportation system. Our drivers are more than drivers, they are part owners, troubleshooters, and problem solvers. Despite diverse ground conditions, challenging infrastructure, time away from home, and lack of festivals and celebrations - they move India. During the Covid-19 pandemic, our nation's bounce-back was only possible due to the thousands of drivers who braved their personal welfare for the nation's revival through the movement of emergency goods, food, and vaccines. Despite their vital role, they remain challenged by low social recognition, inadequate financial rewards, and dire living conditions on the road. These collectively have created a significant challenge with a sharp fall in new entrants, low satisfaction levels, and a rise in health-driven accidents and safety incidents. It is imperative that we address this – across fleet owners, logistics companies and regulatory bodies.

At Mahindra Logistics we have always been seized by the cause of driver welfare. Over the years we have undertaken several initiatives

- Training of over 13,000 drivers under the PMKVY scheme for safety and standards
- Support for drivers through the HOPE program for financial support during Covid-19
- Physical and emotional wellness campaigns impacting over 7,000 families
- Scholarship & educational support, especially for the girl child
- Promoting diversity and inclusion through gender & LGBTQ+ focused driver development

We have always been focused on the cause of raising social inclusion and respect for drivers. Educating the mainstream community is a key lever for this. It's our pleasure to present "Desh Chaalak", a tribute to our road warriors.

We are thankful to Shri Nitin Gadkari, Hon Minister for Road Transportation & Highways for his support for this initiative. His visionary thinking and leadership is shaping the transformation of our road transport sector, and his patronage of issues of driver safety and health remains an inspiration for all of us.

This book is the creation of Shri Ramesh Kumar, who has been a leading advocate for driver causes. This is our second collaboration together and we are thankful to him and wish him great success in this venture.

Lastly, our appreciation to our customers and fellow industry players who continue to invest in giving drivers their rightful place in the ecosystem and are leading advocates for change. Our collective will to ensure the well-being of drivers will help our nation rise to its true potential.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mansi Nagri". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Ms Mansi Nagri
Mahindra Logistics Ltd.

Chapter 1

Truck Drivers Lack Self-Esteem And The Drive

In episode 5 of the first season of Boston Legal - one of the world's most popular TV series, the legal eagle Alan Shore states: "Every human being is entitled to respect and dignity." He was fighting on behalf of a patient who was being allegedly taken for a ride by a general practitioner.

A noble statement indeed. I paused and replayed that part. I heard it closely again, and realised that Alan Shore sounded a lot like Sushil Cherian, a licensed commercial vehicle driver and a veteran supply chain consultant I had met in Kochi. Another friend, Rajesh Ranjan Jha, currently managing logistics for a reputed cement company, also endorses the respect and dignity angle in the profession to build a decent pool of good truck drivers.

These veterans bring our attention to the pertinent question 'Why is there a lack of pride and dignity in the profession of truck driving?' Society too lacks a sense of empathy and towards this community. It's a bitter pill which we must not only swallow, but also heal the problem with.

Cherian reflects, "In my childhood, my friends were proud of their father's work. Several of them were sons of rail engine drivers or even firemen who shovelled coal into the steam engine's furnace to ensure the train had ample energy to move forward. They played a critical role in ensuring that the passengers / the cargo reached their destination. It was the purpose of the occupation that brought a sense of pride.

This story is reminiscent of my own childhood. In the erstwhile Madras state, my playmates in the Perambur locomotive workshop colony were also self-confident because their fathers were firemen or engine drivers. These men were proud of their work and never suffered from low self-esteem. That positivity and pride reflected on their wards, undoubtedly.

However, owing to the past and current structure of societal perception or behaviour, the truck driving community does not take pride in calling themselves truck drivers. They feel the occupation is below one's dignity. I really wish they would realise it is far from true and that they deserve every ounce of respect for the value they add to society. I wish society realises that too. And this narrative is a step towards that.

How do we nip the problem in the bud and help someone who suffers from an inferiority complex?

In 2014, I was visiting my friend - a trucker, and his uncle - Vikram Singh, who works for a trucking company. They live in Jhunjhunu, the hub of truck drivers, in Rajasthan. I spent a decent amount of time travelling with them across the country- from Pant Nagar in Uttarakhand to Hosur in Tamil Nadu, carrying new trucks in a novel truck-on-truck format for Ashok Leyland over five days.

The nephew was a good driver, and it was just a question of time before he would independently start earning on his own. Yet, his mother was not happy about her son being a truck driver. One evening, over dinner with the entire family, she lamented, "Please get a peon's job for my son in some sarkari daftar or in a private company in your city. I don't want my son driving trucks'!

According to her, it was better to be a peon in an office than a truck driver! Quite an unfortunate and a painful status quo.

Similarly, during my interactions with other families, it struck me that the children of truck drivers, who actually study in good high schools across India, prefer to describe their father's or brother's job to be "in the transport business" over being a "truck driver." The "transport business" tag is more wholesome and sounds dignified. It may mean an agent, broker, booking clerk, or something else in that vertical. In some instances, driver-fathers have invested their earnings or taken cheap loans from truck manufacturers to change their job description from "truck driver" to "fleet owner" by buying one truck or more.

This is simply to manage their children's imagery in society. It is like an act of sacrifice, in the sense that most of these owner-drivers are owners for namesake. They continue to function as a driver, knowing very little about critical aspects of the trucking business, which are essential for survival.

Of course, there are thousands of truck drivers who don't worry about society's behaviour based on their job profile. They remain loyal to their job, ensuring the welfare of their family.

But I draw the line where the well-wishers of the trucking community are actually battling to change the designation of drivers to "pilots." This change in terminology would be purely cosmetic. What's required is a change in the mindset of the society per se towards these soldiers on highways. Yes, there is a dire need for societal transformation. We cannot attain this goal easily and quickly. But it is worth pursuing.

"When truck driving as a profession ensures pride, respect and dignity to the driver, the so-called driver shortage will automatically vanish. But where do we begin?" was Cherian's rhetoric question as a parting shot.

That is my question too.

Chapter 2

An Approach To Tackle Driver Shortage

For decades, economists have been discussing the concept of 'full employment,' an ideal situation for overall prosperity. But in the economic history of the world, no nation has managed to achieve this status. Similarly, the problem of 'driver shortage' is perpetual too. Even if we want, we cannot achieve the ideal situation of driver abundance.

The latest International Road Union (IRU) report on the topic of driver shortage validates the reality of driver shortage - a fact which no one in the world can refute.

Coming to the moot question - does a shortage of truck drivers affect economic growth adversely? Yes and no. Yes, because it certainly stunts economic growth. No, because it is a seasonal phenomenon, not perennial. But in the current situation, it is primarily the rich truckers, the manufacturers of tangible goods and stakeholders who outsource logistics/transport services that are facing the heat.

What can we attribute the driver shortage to? The two primary reasons I can cite after years of observation - poor working conditions and bad living conditions for these drivers.

For instance, on the work front, the payment mode is mileage-wise and not timewise. The distance-based remuneration model does not consider the inefficiencies of the 3PLs, hence the drivers who are paid as per the distance travelled, end up getting a raw deal.

Secondly, owing to the hectic lifestyle, truck driving does not appeal to the educated class of the next generation, as a career option. Consequently, there is a shrinking supply of freshers. Plus, ageing drivers are choosing to opt out of this tough occupation, further leading to a shortage of drivers.

Ramesh Agarwal of Agarwal Packers & Movers is of the opinion that for every 1000 trucks, there are 700 odd drivers. Even the government concedes that there is a 22% shortage of drivers.

So how are we dealing with this situation, keeping in mind that this is not just a local problem, but a national-level problem?

The positive news is that multiple remedial measures have been deployed. To begin with, the per truck payload was increased, enabling existing trucks to carry extra load and reducing the need for trucks. This is an efficient solution and a welcome one.

Secondly, higher payload trucks of up to 55 tonnes replaced the 16-tonne commercial vehicles. Instead of three trucks of 16 tonnes, the business owner needed only one 55-tonner, hence reducing the need for drivers from three to one.

Third, better highways with seamless borders and other road infrastructure have been enhanced to make the driving experience smoother and faster for the weary trucker.

All in all, one strategic solution that has come in play is to reduce the over-dependence on road transport. In wake of this, a well-mounted multimodal transportation policy has been rolled out wherein the three critical transport networks of road, rail, and waterways have been combined to improve the logistical efficiency.

Besides resolving the driver shortage issue, this multi-pronged approach also addresses the climate change battle to achieve zero carbon emission by 2070 as per India's commitment to the global fora level. The ballooning oil import bills are another reason why the nation should reduce the dependence on road transport. This will indirectly help in solving the driver shortage problem.

Owing to the pandemic, there was a modal shift from roadways to railways. The latter is now responsible for ferrying an increasing number of loads of all types of materials across India. The Government is also thinking of commercial viability. Freight fetches better revenue on timely delivery; hence The Dedicated Freight Corridor is a smart solution that will reduce the need for road transport.

Similarly, waterways, though in their nascent stage, are way cheaper than road transport, more environment-friendly and indirectly addresses the driver shortage challenge.

In a nutshell, driver shortage is a tiny aspect of the entire matrix. The International Road Union is alerting us of future possibilities.

The other myth doing rounds is that driver shortage is leading to operational cost escalation due to higher compensation demand by drivers and therefore, adding to inflationary tendencies. However inflationary dissertation is the effect of several causes and not only due to drivers demands.

Let's stay sharp and weed out the causes of truck drivers' shortage.

Chapter 3

Driver Training - The Dronacharyas Of Driving

Being a truck driver is nothing less than being a warrior. You need to be sharp and have a keen presence of mind, because driving heavy vehicles on highways or steep roadways can be trucky.... well...tricky.

So, the community needs Dronacharyas or doyens of driving to train them and acclimatise them to the tough lifestyle of this no-frill job. Plus, they must ensure that the drivers ride safely, follow all the traffic rules, and stay alive.

To cite an example, there are expert trainers like Professor Ganesan and Prof. Dhanasekharan of the Logistics Sector Skill Council (LSC). Prof. Ganesan is in charge of the curriculum for diploma or degree courses in Bachelor of Logistics taught at high schools and universities, supported by the government under the Skill India project. Prof. Dhanasekharan designs the Qualification Package for various logistic skills, including driver training and plays a stellar role in the placement of freshly skilled logisticians.

Similarly, I happen to know an ace trainer - Nijum Riyaz, Principal and Secretary of the Driver Training Institute at Silsila, who was training young Anjaneyalu, an inter-pass Telugu bidda from Telangana. Anjaneyalu was undergoing the 100%-subsidised 90-day driver training course anchored by Ashok Leyland.

On his 55th day of the course, Riyaz asked the young trainee to sleep in the cabin of the truck that was parked inside the spacious institute premises, for a night. Anjaneyalu was stumped and gaped at Riyaz. Sleep inside the truck?

“Yes, I would like you to sleep inside the truck tonight,” Riyaz repeated.

Though the request was a bit unusual, Anjaneyulu realised it is just a few more weeks to complete this course and earn his drivers' license, so he decided to go with the flow. He took his blanket and a pillow into the BS-6 Leyland truck and spent the night in the upper berth behind the driver's seat. Along with a family of mosquitoes to give him company.

So why did Coach Riyaz subject his trainee to a tough task?

Born in Alleppey, Kerala, Riyaz was a veteran employee of Ashok Leyland, serving the country's second-largest truck maker of various sizes and capacities at home and abroad. Ashok Leyland and the State Government of Telangana had set up the driver training institute jointly. Riyaz opted to head the newly set up driver training institute. “I love challenges,” he said over the phone during one of our regular interactions.

After he and his team trained, certified, and got the driving license for the first batch, he placed a few of them in local transport companies on a trial basis. “This way, they can get real-world exposure and experience as truck drivers.

Truck driving is an overwhelming occupation. As a driver, you must spend nights inside the truck however uncomfortable it may be. The chances of finding a secured parking space en-route, and sleep on a proper bed are bleak. Even if wayside amenities exist, drivers prefer to sleep inside their cabins to ensure the safety of the cargo and avoid theft of fuel or tyres while they sleep.

But the newbie drivers were unaware of this, and returned from the pilot project, dejected, and refused to go back. They complained that they were made to sleep inside the trucks, and obviously, it did not go down well with them.

“As a coach, I realised it was not their mistake but mine. I did not prepare them for reality. I should have made them aware of what the driving occupation entails,” says Riyaz. “For example, during the three-month training course, they were sleeping on cots with pillows and blankets under the ceiling fan.” he cites. “But when they are on the job, traversing long distances with fellow drivers, they had no choice but to sleep in the truck cabin. They were not trained for that or mentally prepared. So, they got upset and left. I had not bargained for what transpired, subsequently,” he elaborates. “I decided to tell my students what the actual life of a truck driver is - no glossing over. Hiding the inevitable from students is a fallacy. So, from the second batch, I made it compulsory for students to spend an entire night inside trucks parked within the campus, by rotation,” adds Riyaz.

A remarkable candid confession by the veteran. He realised that teaching aspirant drivers only the technical side of truck driving was not enough. He had to prepare them for the harsh realities of the occupation. And he integrated that as a part of the training with the subsequent batches. Hence trainees like Anjaneyulu would now develop the mental as well as physical preparedness for actual life.

Narrating his experience, Anjaneyulu said “I did not expect this semi-practical training exercise, but if this prepares me for the reality of the life of a truck driver, I should know the intricacies of sleeping inside a truck cabin.” But that experience was no party either. He had to confront the swarm of mosquitoes on the first night. The next night, he armed himself with mosquito repellents.

Riyaz, meanwhile, is happy with this change he brought into the training. “Nothing is constant or etched in stone. We need to keep learning, changing and improving all the time. After procuring the driving license, I am confident this second batch will be better

experienced and not return from their jobs. However, I cannot rule out new challenges that will crop up. But I am ready to think out of the box again,” says the wise Dronacharya of the driving institute, Coach Riyaz.

This invaluable learning should also be integrated by driver training institutes who must think beyond CMVR (Central Motor Vehicle Rules) norms and impart soft skills training to them as a part of the plan. It is heartening to see that this has been put into practice.

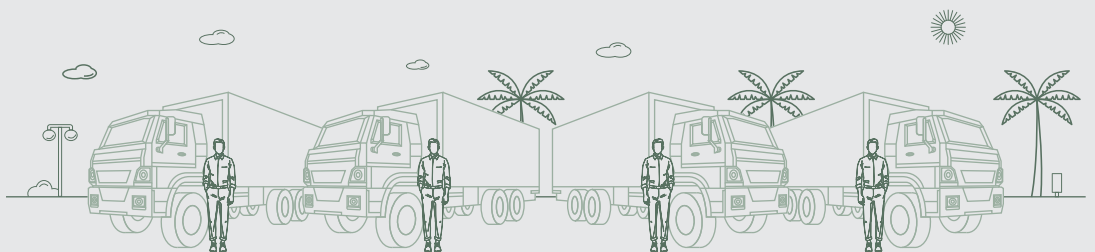


| Aaj ki taaza khabar

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Chapter 4

Arun Lakshman - The Father Of Driver Training Institutes

I sat in a cosy conference room on the eighth floor at Samvardhan Motherson Corporate headquarters. The steaming hot tea placed before me adds to the warmth of the tone of the hour-long discussion with Arun Lakshman, the Father of Driver Training Institutes.

We are in the middle of an interesting conversation about truck driver training, when he narrates the story of 'The Tailor and The Topi'. (cap)

A man went to a tailor to get a topi made. The tailor also sold cloth.

He asked the tailor 'How much cloth do I need for the cap?'

“One metre”, said the tailor.

The man agreed, bought the cloth, and left saying that he would come back for the cap tomorrow.

As he walked ahead, a thought struck him, “The tailor is a cloth-seller and a cap-maker as well. What if he is cheating and saving the extra cloth to resell it?

So he returned to the tailor and asked him: “Can you make two topis from same cloth I bought”?

“Yes, that's possible”, said the tailor.

The buyer still felt he could get more out of the same cloth.

So we went back and negotiated to get ten topis made out of the same one-metre cloth.

He returned the next day to find that his ten caps were ready, but those caps could fit only the fingers, not the head!

Why did Lakshman narrate this story to me?

During our conversation with respect to Driver Training Institutes(DTI), I had asked him about the size of land needed to set up a Driver Training Institute for aspirant drivers. To which he explained that the setting up of a DTI is one of the key solutions to mitigate the 22% driver shortage in India. Hence a purist like him would not settle for anything less than 15 acres for the truck driver training and 20 acres for trailer drivers training. Another purist sets canvas between 3–5 acres, citing the high land acquisition cost.

However, there has been no consensus on the ideal requirement for a skill training institution like this one. So, the story came with the message that we should cut the cloth according to one's need- neither smaller, nor larger than needed. The essence is to be efficient.

I was impressed with his foresightedness and pondered about dedicated people like him.

So, who is Arun Lakshman? Born on August 16th, 1960, he is the eldest son of an Indian Army officer. He stood tall at 5 feet, 11 inches and always wanted to pursue a career in cricket or basketball. But destiny veered him across various bends and turns. Today, he has emerged to be what we fondly call him - the Father of Driver Training Institutes and driver training. His knowledge, his wisdom and passion is unmatched.

Along his journey, he earned a Mechanical Engineering diploma with a post-graduate diploma in Marketing and Sales Management. His first job was with Eicher Tractors as Junior Engineer where he spent his first four years learning about the industry from the ground level.

He then shifted base to Maruti Udyog Limited - now known as Maruti Suzuki Limited. It was in the year 1984, a few months after the late Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi handed over the key to the maiden Maruti 800 passenger car to Harpal Singh.

Lakshman then spent the next three decades at India's numero-uno passenger car manufacturer in various capacities where he was involved in many firsts. For example, he was the first person to drive India's then iconic Gypsy.

Under late Jagdish Khattar's stewardship, Lakshman was selected to run the Driver Training Institute which was actually owned by the Delhi Transport Department but handed over to Maruti Udyog, in Wazirabad. That's when his tryst with Driving Training Institute began, and still continues even post-retirement.

He was instrumental in building several such institutions across India for Driver Training & Research or IDTR, an organisation fully anchored by Maruti Suzuki. "The Wazirabad facility was a small unit when Maruti took over, but he built it to be a premium Driver Training Institute in India. It had State-of-the-Art facilities to train drivers of every type: two, three, and four-wheel passenger vehicles, commercial vehicles of various capacities, etc". Today, the IDTRs train forklift drivers too.

Lakshman became a noted name in the industry, and a part of the Automotive Skill Development Council (ASDC). His DTI and road safety prowess can be judged from the fact that bureaucrats in

some states gave in-principal approval for setting up DTI in their state, simply because Lakshman was a part of the visiting team. The inclusion of Lakshman in those preliminary meetings meant a clear yes to start the project. So slowly, the wheels of fortune started turning in his favour and he earned the title of 'Pitamah' of DTIs!

Therefore, when he narrates the 'tailor and topi' story, one gets the gist. He is an ardent advocate of the minimum 15–20-acre land for DTI. “Trucks are not passenger cars. They need more space to be steered. The recommendation of 2–3 acres is acceptable for car driver training, but certainly, not for truck driving,” he states.

Lakshman had also suggested using such premium institutes as mother institutes in the state and establishing smaller ones as well to ensure quality

This is exactly why even post-retirement; he was corralled by the automotive giant to advise them on setting up a full-fledged skill training institute using their CSR funds. He agreed to do it on the condition that they stick within the 'Lakshman Rekha' of minimum 20-acre track for trailer driver training.

The man who played cricket and basketball in his earlier years, and helped build cricket teams at the corporate level, has everything it needs to shape an accident-free India through good driver training.

Chapter 5

Teaching Drivers Should Be Fun, Not A Dull Affair

An integrated drivers' training program is in progress at the Hazira depot of Indian Oil near Surat, Ahmedabad. The trainer, Raghuram Sharma, who is hosting a session on road safety & signages for 45 truck drivers, posed a simple question: How would a speech-impaired person demand a glass of water?

The entire class played out the action of drinking water using their right thumb to touch their lips. "Good," responded Raghuram, patting the student.

Raghuram's next question was: How would a deaf person ask for milk?

There was pin-drop silence. Somehow, the audience knew it was a trick question. Some crouched behind others to avoid being asked to answer the question. Some simply looked away to save the embarrassment.

A few moments passed. Then one of the students stood up to enact the milking of a cow.

Raghuram searched for a reaction from the audience. But an air of silence prevailed. So, he broke the silence with wit - "He is deaf or suffers impaired hearing, but he can speak, right?"

And the class broke into peals of laughter, including the student who had just milked a cow virtually. He was teased by his classmates, of course. Initially, this interaction may appear

unimportant. But it is critical for such driver training sessions. Raghuram believes that audience participation and a dialogue is most effective in monologues as a seasoned trainer, and he wants audience participation. Without a two-way communication, the sessions would become an overbearing monologue. So how does Raghuram ensure his sessions are lively even for lesser privileged community like truck drivers whose lives are already an uphill drive?

As the Dronacharya of creating interactive sessions, his 'raam-baanh' is Humour.

Humour is an integral part of Raghuram's repertoire. His well-balanced combination of humorous anecdotes woven into the serious work talk is his signature style of tutoring. This was true even years ago, when he was head of the cabin crew in Air India and trained several thousand teams in cabin etiquette. He was so popular that new and veteran crew members both attended his sessions religiously.

Today, Raghuram has shifted gears to teach basic soft skills to the lesser privileged truck drivers. But that does not change his style of conducting classes. He still uses humour as his secret ingredient to make the training sessions more palatable.

Training these drivers is a Herculean task. They are mostly interested in their trip incentives. For them training seems to be a more imposed exercise which they would like to avoid. So, it is imperative to create sessions that appeal to this audience. "Humour is an effective tool to break the monotony and make the trainees participative," reasons Raghuram.

And this works like a charm. At the end of daily sessions, drivers line up to pose with Raghuram for a selfie. What's so special about him?

“We have attended several classes over the years. All they do is give lectures, like politicians and we were passive listeners,” says one of the drivers. “No one has spoken and interacted with us like Raghu sir till date.”

However, Raghuram's classroom sessions are not just fun and games. He also weaves in meaningful messages. For instance, he gets them to play games but also drives home a hard-hitting message.

One day, he divided the class into two teams for a two-minute game. He gave each of them a balloon to blow, and a toothpick. He explained that the game is all about keeping the maximum balloons intact and the group that manages to do that would be the winners.

Once he announced the game open, there was complete mayhem. The groups attacked each other's balloons and popped them all with the toothpick. Every single balloon was gone. In the end, the entire floor was messed up with balloon rubber. There were no winners.

Raghuram then gathered them and gave them a life-transforming learning from the game. He said “Both groups would have been winners if only you had thought for a while before attacking each other. If you had only stood still, not doing anything for 2 minutes, we would still have all balloons intact and both the groups would be winners.

But unfortunately, there was no thinking, no discussion within the group and no strategy. Each one of you acted on your own and attacked the other team. And in the end, you all lost, when all of you could have easily won,” he explains.

There was a huge impact on the trainees who understood the underlying message so well that this lesson will remain etched in their memory.

Raghuram knows that not just drivers, but any team from any workforce - be it from blue-collared or white-collared jobs, would have behaved in the same way. It is human instinct. But this instinct needs to be replaced with some collective teamwork thinking.

He is also aware that some members had also thought of the 'no attack' formula, but they lacked a sense of leadership so could not implement it. So that trait too needs to be inculcated.

Adult education is a tricky affair, he feels. It is easier to teach children than adults because the latter come with an "I-Know-All" mindset. Some display that arrogance openly while most hide that trait successfully. It's a challenge he has taken on and trying to make learning fun.

Chapter 6

Fuelling The Career Progress

“Career progression is the new minimum wage,” said Ardine Williams, Vice President of Workforce Development at Amazon, for the Wall Street Journal.

Like several other HR honchos of the American corporate world, he has emphasised on the importance of sponsoring higher education or courses, to build the capabilities of the existing workforce, and enable them to move vertically or horizontally in the same company. William's sole objective was to retain talent or ensure job stickiness. Covid19 and the labour shortage must have affected organisations like Amazon heavily, whose backbone is logistics, literally speaking.

Career progression is a universal theme. In the Indian trucking context too, the experts echo the same thought that the drivers' career should be fuelled with various changes.

“A person with 20 years of experience is a driver. A person with 5 - 10 years' experience is also a driver in this profession. So, what is the difference between the two? There is no weightage given to experience”, says Selvan Dasaraj, Ex-Mahindra Logistics employee.

So, are all drivers equal? Yes. One joins the trucking profession as a driver and remains one till he hangs his boots. Some, no doubt, graduate to supervisors provided the owner wants to reward them for their loyalty to his company. But this is rare.

Especially because Drivers' loyalty to their fleet owner is weak. There is no formal employer-employee relationship, no proper appointment letter with perks like a provident fund, and no medical/accident insurance. Plus, the drivers' compensation is per kilometre basis, and not based on one's experience like in a corporate job. Therefore, they get more or less similar pay, irrespective of their experience. So, when a driver gets an opportunity to earn more, they have no option but to jump 'trucks' from one owner to another. After all, it's the question of their livelihood. The more pay they get, the better life they can give their families.

However, many drivers do stick to the same company for decades. In fact, they even induct their next of kin into the same company through the referral process of the recruitment process.

What's in a name?

Once, I was sitting with Punit Verma - an experienced truck driver, by a highway dhaba in Sikar, Rajasthan which is one of the key truck driver sourcing belts in North India. As he sipped his sugary chai, he looked away and asked nonchalantly, "Does it matter what they call us?"

One can sense the same sentiment within the driver community across the length and breadth of Indian highways. They don't really feel the need for fancy designations or words.

Nijum Riyaz, Principal of the Driver Training Institute thinks otherwise. He is the torchbearer of any positive change that might positively affect the truck drivers' occupation. "First of all, let us stop calling them truck drivers. A word like 'vehicle pilots could be considered, right?" he states.

After spending more than 18 years in Afghanistan and West Africa selling Leyland vehicles, he returned to Hyderabad India. Here, he opted to manage Leyland's Driver Training Institute. As a passionate and ace trainer, he is keen to address the driver shortage challenge in India.

He knows that the root cause of the stigma attached to truck driving as a profession is a harsh reality. But he is determined to remove this stigma in whatever way possible and make truck driving a preferred career choice. That's where the change of nomenclature from truck driver to vehicle pilot or something along similar lines is necessary," elaborates Riyaz.

As a part of his dream to make the truck driver an attractive career option, he is keen on working out a career progression plan. And Riyaz is not the only one who is trying to realise this dream.

Mumbai-based Mohan Subramaniam of Transmitra Sewa Foundation, a registered NGO, utilises his educational institution visits to propagate the idea of a potential job as truck drivers to higher schools' students.

His guidance comes from a vision that Logistics is a star industry today and of the future. The way our economy is shaping currently, one cannot live in an illusion that a degree is a passport to getting a job. Companies - big or small or medium - prefer the automation route to avoid human labour challenges. Hence there are fewer openings for freshers. Plus, Post-Covid19, MSMEs, that are one of the biggest job generators, are still in a coma. There are hardly any job opportunities left," explains Mohan.

Still, he believes that there are ample other opportunities in the sea of India's growing economy. According to him, India's growth trajectory, with a US\$5 trillion goal combined with the 'Make in India' campaign, offer a glimmer of hope on the job front, particularly on the logistics front.

“Make In India, simply put, means producing tangible goods. India has successfully embraced the globalisation route; that is, we have opted for the outsourcing path. Big companies assemble components or parts bought from vendors from different locations. Tatas, Birlas, Ambanis, Adanis, Mahindras, etc., produce a lot of tangible goods with outsourced items. And it is the Agarwals, Nandas, Kotwals, Sharmas, and Singhs who lend their fleet for inbound operations and also help the conglomerates move their products from factories to stores,” adds Mohan.

We can safely say that there will be a huge demand for transportation, especially for trucking.

Technology in trucking

Today, both Mohan and Riyaz concede that the trucks coming out of Heavy Commercial Vehicles (HCV) OEMs are getting hi-tech: BSVI with onboard digital or electronic items. “A better understanding of gadgets on-board opens up jobs for better educated and fresh job seekers,” says Riyaz.

If one adds a well-designed career progression chart, two challenges get addressed: primarily, employment opportunity and simultaneously, the 22% driver shortage.

Ramesh Venkat, Head-New Business of the Logistics Skill Development Council, proposed to the government to create a new course in the Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) whose curriculum will include maintenance, materials, and operations for students. These trainees can then be absorbed by the automotive industry, the biggest job generator or into Driving as a career. Yes, over time, these new entrants with better education can impact several aspects of trucking. It's a long haul, but worth pursuing.

I sincerely hope that our drivers soon get a career boost and an upper berth in society's hierarchy of perception, with these winds of change.

Chapter 7

Driving Away Technophobia

One of the critical skills which the current and future generations of the truck driver community will need is adaption of technology. It is a bit worrisome though that the willingness to adapt to new tech is low in the trucking industry.

Over a period of a few weeks, I spoke with three different tech specialists over conference calls - one from the Bay Area, Silicon Valley, United States; the second Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, and the third was from Chennai, India. The common agenda of all these calls was technology induction for the Indian trucking segment.

The team from the US was a group of techies who were experiencing the Covid-induced supply chain disruption. One of them expressed his concern saying, “We are watching the supply chain disruption in the United States and there is a lot of discussion about supply chain visibility, driver shortage, port congestion etc.” His submission was: being a techie with a deep understanding of logistics and supply chain, he wanted to enable tech-based solutions to the Indian trucking segment. But the question was 'Is the Indian truck driver ready to accept technology?

The second team was a transporter-turned-entrepreneur from Indore who had migrated to Dubai. He wanted to try the Uberfreight model in the UAE and his drivers were mostly from Pakistan. He wanted to know whether the traditional truck drivers would accept apps to do business.

The third group was a team of techies in Chennai, Tamil Nadu who had developed an app to improve operational efficiency of the transport ecosystem. They also asked me the same question: Will they accept new tech or not? And how do we win their confidence and help them download their apps?

Yes, technophobia is rampant in the Indian trucking scenario. Not only truck drivers, but even fleet owners are a bit sceptical to go digital. For instance, the adoption of GPS in long-haul trucks has not yet gained complete acceptance, despite its advantages.

So, the auto industry who outsource car carriers to move their vehicles from plants to dealer points across India, had to coax the fleet owners to see reason.

The drivers were also unwilling to use tools and apps initially, especially GPS. They thought it would be an invasion of their privacy. However, they realised that the owners are resolute about this because infusing Technology into trucking would boost the business. If the end-user/shipper insists on GPS-fitted vehicles while contracting transporters and include this element in the Service Level Agreements, it would certainly help build better operational efficiencies. Hence, they too agreed to using GPS/apps.

However, using GPS or other apps / technology come with their own bugs. One of the biggest hurdles is the prevailing payment system for drivers. The relationship with the truck driver is more of an oral contract to compensate the driver for every km driven. It is a less formal arrangement.

Secondly, GPS installation alone does not improve logistics efficiency. It needs a buy-in of drivers for this goal to be met. Most drivers prefer to take a halt at their home for a day/night. In such cases GPS would alert such infringements to the load-giver and

lengthen the delivery schedule. It can be argued that the drivers have committed to a pre-fixed delivery schedule so there is no need to track the vehicle's movement.

The techies and the truckers, both have their respective opinions. So, what can be the resolution in this case?

Of course, there is one.

The recent Coyote Logistics survey in the United States showed a perfect balance of technology (56%) and humans (44%). However, in 2020, the survey pointed out a 3% shift in favour of humans compared to the previous year.”

With such an incredible global trend pushing digital adoption, surely the balance would move further towards technology, right? But the report says, 'Not quite'.

The survey sheds light that Humans scored over technology in 2020 - at the height of Covid - on five parameters:

- Resolving delivery problems
- Load scheduling
- Communicating with brokers and 3PLs
- Obtaining quotes, negotiating prices, and
- Communicating with customers.

Even the trucking fraternity came to realise that the best way to accelerate the logistics industry is to adapt the perfect combo of humans and technology.

“During the pandemic, and after a year of remote work, the logistics industry has become much more comfortable with digital communication, but there is still a strong demand for taking spontaneous decisions,” adds the report.

Thus, technology is here to stay in the logistics business, and as an integral part of this industry, the trucking community has also evolved to use relevant tools and apps for their comfort and growth. This is indeed a welcome shift for India.

Chapter 8

Let's Drive Home The Point That Our Drivers' Welfare Is A Priority

The nation's progress and the economic growth of a 1.4 billion people partly rests on the shoulders of our 9 million truck drivers. Hence, they are aptly called 'desh-chaalaks', not just 'vaahan-chaalaks'.

The fresh vegetables we need as food, the clothes we dignify ourselves with, the medicines we need to stay alive etc, are just some of the critical essentials made available to us timely only because the driver spends sleepless night behind the wheels.

However, little attention is paid to the driver community and their plight. There are several underlying issues which are imperative to address sensitively and empathetically. For instance, our drivers lead a backbreaking, nomadic lifestyle. The 3AM shifts, non-stop driving amidst lonely and dark roads away from families, pollution, health risks etc. make truck-driving one of the most arduous and nomadic occupations.

Consequently, their democratic rights are not exercised especially when it comes to voting. Their priority is to maximise their miles and income to make their ends meet, hence they do not show any inclination to exercise their vote on the D-day.

The stark problem is, however, not ignorance but negligence of the community's problems which needs immediate attention and resolution. The country's administration needs to consider the voting rights of these 9 million citizens and rectify the situation.

Citing another example, the Farmer community enjoys special status w.r.t. voting, and can influence the policymaking in a meaningful way. But the truck-driving community loses out on this front.

For instance, when the All-India Transporters' Welfare Association (AITWA) approached the government to determine whether the national survey captures truck drivers per se as a category, they realised that Truck drivers, as a category, are non-existent. "We were shocked to hear that there is no such a category yet," states AITWA President, Mahendra Arya.

It is interesting to note that collectively, the Truck Driving community can wield ample power to persuade the Government to take cognizance of their plight. They are the heroes on a mission. They keep the wheels of India's economy running. For instance, during the Covid19, the drivers were not recognised as frontline workers category for special insurance coverage and other benefits bestowed on sanitary workers, law and order, and medical fraternity. Despite this, these drivers ensured the nation was kept alive with a seamless supply of essentials, including life-saving medicine right through the pandemic with periodic lockdowns - nationwide for some time and state or city-wise.

So yes, they deserve dignity and attention. For a change, the spotlight should focus on them to highlight their critical issues and make positive changes from their perspective. Perhaps address the challenges they face through a different approach. As an organisation that has deeply studied the challenges of the truck-driving community, we are dedicated to contributing to change. Our approach suggests an innovative solve to the current challenges:

For instance, the first step is to understand what drivers want. One of their key needs is 'comfort driving' which means better roads,

removal of state borders, better roadside amenities, less paperwork and an increase in digital document submission and verification.

Fortunately, in the past decade, the country has been focussing on enhancing changes like bettering the road infrastructure, removing state borders where drivers were forced to spend long hours etc. Digitization is also happening, though at a slower pace.

The National Highway Authorities of India (NHAI) is gradually rolling out wayside amenities on highways. For instance, there are Highway Nests, but they are not adequately marketed, with many of them remaining empty or inoperable. Hence these issues need to be addressed.

If the driver community fails, it would mean a full stop on transport & dispatches, a colossal loss in production and will impact business negatively. So, besides the Government, various stakeholders also undertake responsibility for the community on whom their business relies.

For instance, the shippers are utilising their CSR funds to educate them on basics like health, hygiene, civic sense. Though shippers have outsourced their transport to third parties or via 3PLs, looking after the basic needs of transporters or truck drivers is also their responsibility.

Secondly, the corporates / white-collared community who deal with truck drivers at the ground level also understand their issues and can definitely partake in resolving the root causes.

The trucking industry is growing. The truck purchases have grown. Companies like Tata, Leyland, Mahindra, Daimler, and others continue to do business. Maybe their product portfolio has changed. Maybe they churn out higher payload vehicles for long

hauls and low payload trucks and tempos for the last mile. Or even Electric vehicles to support the global fight against carbon emission.

As more truckers are being added to the community, their welfare is a priority for the sustainable growth of the industry.

Chapter 9

Driver Welfare Policies And Provisions Need To Be Adhered To

On April 24, 2017, S. P. Singh, Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Delhi-based Indian Foundation of Transport Research and Training (IFTRI) posted this on his social media page

“Very little attention has been paid to encourage commercial vehicle drivers to get themselves educated, trained and skilled. For the laborious and responsible job that they do, their wages, emoluments and working hours are inconsistent with the Motor Transport Workers Act, which mandates that transporters employing 5 or more workers must adhere to the law.”

As a conservative estimate, out of 2.5 Lakh transport firms/ transport intermediaries/ fleet owners, hardly 5–7 of them follow the minimum wage and social security rules.

In the maiden issue of Drivers Duniya (September 2015), titled 'Just on Paper', I had also written about fleet owners and their scepticism to invest in drivers' welfare. Ironically, they are willing to procure heavy commercial vehicles worth several lakhs on high interest rates, but they do not believe in having social contracts with their drivers.

Ideally long-haul drivers should be on the master payroll of these companies with social security benefits such as provident fund, medical/healthcare, retirement plan, etc. But sadly, for long-haul drivers there are no such basic facilities.

So, do we, in India, have any special legislation for truck drivers especially with reference to their welfare?

Actually, there is a piece of legislation titled The Motor Transport Workers Act 1961. It was gazetted on May 20, 1961, after being passed by both Houses of Parliament and came into force as Act 27 in circa 1961, during the era of Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, our first Prime Minister.

There are, at present, certain enactments like the Motor Vehicles Act, 1939 and the Factories Act 1948 which cover certain sections of motor transport workers and certain aspects of their conditions of employment. There is, however, no independent legislation applicable to motor transport workers as a whole or for regulating the various aspects of their conditions of employment, work and wages.

Since then, National Highways have come up, vehicles have got upgraded and the quality of fuel has also improved considerably. But the status quo of the driver's welfare has not changed. For instance, despite the 1961 Act categorically discussing wayside amenities, there is nothing on the ground.

Hence, it is desirable to have a separate legislative measure for motor transport workers to cover matters like medical facilities, welfare facilities, hours of work, spread-over, rest periods, overtime, annual leave with pay, etc., similar to workers in factories, mines, and plantations.

“The present Bill is intended to achieve this objective,” the Government said in its statement of object and reasons while seeking Parliament approval.

Chapter IV, under the sub-head of 'Welfare and Health,' the Act reads as:

“In every place where motor transport workers are employed in a motor transport undertaking, they are required to halt at night. They shall be provided and maintained, by the employer, for the use of those motor transport workers, such a number of restrooms or such other suitable alternative accommodation, as may be prescribed.

The restrooms or the alternative accommodation to be provided under sub-section (1) shall be sufficiently lighted and ventilated and maintained in a clean and comfortable condition.

The state government may prescribe the standards for construction, accommodation, furniture and other equipment of restrooms or the alternative accommodation to be provided under this section.”

Besides what the legislation states, it is desirable that other changes are brought in for the welfare of the drivers especially when they are on the move.

For instance, the IFTRT has suggested the installation of an intelligent seat device developed by IIT-Madras to check the fatigue and performance of the driver. It also suggests that this Intellseat must have an alcohol detection alarm system to check if the driver is drunk or under the influence of drugs, apart from its important intelligent features. It should be mandatory for OEMs to supply goods carriers with a full factory built-up driver cabin with this Intellseat to contribute to the drivers' welfare.

Another pertinent point is to ensure that truck drivers must have potable clean water during their regular long journey on highways. While the Government is keen to have air-conditioned truck drivers' cabins, it must issue an ordinance to have mandatory fitment of water purifiers in driver's cabins. This will avoid water-borne diseases, improve their performance, and reduce their driving fatigue.

With these provisions laid down to ensure drivers' welfare, the right measures and corrective steps are the need of the hour. Our drivers are our heroes in their own right. They deserve a work-life of dignity and respect.

Many transporters would mention Ramesh Agarwal's Dudu/Rajasthan Driver Seva Kendra. Yes, he is doing a fantastic job. But one, Ramesh Agarwal, does not make a summer. His tribe is not ready to emulate him regarding driver welfare.

That's where I see a silver lining in the burgeoning online freight exchanges. These IIT-IIM grads, entering the unorganised transport segment, talk about driver welfare right from the word 'go' because they know in their heart of hearts that unless and until you take care of this species (road drivers), your future is bleak.

Chapter 10

A Pinch Of Respect Is All They Need

Respect. आदर (aadar). इज्जत (izzat). We can define these words as “a feeling that you have when you admire or have a high opinion of somebody/something.” Or “polite behaviour or care towards somebody/something you think is important.”

But my favourite definition is “treating others in the same way that you want to be treated.”

Respect is a form of intangible wealth. And every human deserves it. Irrespective of their occupation, societal status and income. Every human craves it, especially the average common man, who values respect more than money.

Unfortunately, several sections of society do not get the respect they deserve from others, owing to pre-conceived notions. And our truck driving community is one of them.

If our Highways and Expressway are our lifeline, the drivers are like the arteries. They are critical for smooth functioning and economy of the country. If we think deeper, our very existence depends on them. If they stop plying, our uninterrupted supply of food and other essentials will be affected. The products will rot in warehouses, the farmers or manufacturers will suffer humungous losses and we, the common family consumer, with all our plush homes and wealth will be deprived of fresh food.

Because, if we look behind the scenes, ultimately, we need a smart driver to ensure that these essentials or raw material reach their destination timely. Else the supply chain will be affected, and entire industries will collapse. Such is the power of the humble truck driver. Yes, every element in the chain is equally critical. Though he is the lowest link in the supply chain, the driver is an integral part of it. And the human element is irreplaceable in the chain.

Technology can be replaced. New tools and apps can be created. But can we recreate drivers with the experience we need to drive the goods safely along hazardous roads? Not quite. So, we must realise they are human beings who hold an important role in society and respect them for them.

Let's do a reality check. Why does this issue exist?

One insight that I derived is that because of their lack of grooming i.e., they don't dress well or don't shave for days.

It is also because of their lack of education. There are a lot of such factors that contribute to the problem.

They lament that owing to their appearance, even the security guards at the factory or distribution centres (warehouses) mistreat them. Appearance and overall grooming do matter as it is the first impression and perception that creates about you as an individual. So does education. If you are educated, you carry yourself better. So, the manner in which the drivers carry themselves aggravates the problem. Unfortunately, as humans, we rarely move beyond appearance to value the real person.

Hence despite the fact that drivers earn more than the average security guard, their societal status remains poor, and they bear the brunt of being disrespected.

What adds to their woes is the nature of the occupation as well. In most cases, there is a lack of basic amenities of wash and change along the roads. Or at the warehouses. So, freshening up or even combing one's hair can become a luxury.

The job of driving the cargo in dust and dirt in open non-AC cabins does not help keep their appearance. However, with the right training, this issue can be resolved.

Given the pressure-cooker atmosphere in the current just-in-time or no-inventory regime, delivery delays cause heart attacks, production disruption, or supply chain disruption. This may lead to the 3PL team being pulled by the plant head in the case of manufacturing. Or the distribution centre boss who expects quick docking, unloading and stacking inbound items/pulling and pushing out in the shortest possible time. Hence for the drivers overlook execution of timely delivery overwrites everything. They do not care whether their shirt is creased or stained. Or whether the stubble is showing. All they care about is 'samaan time par pahunch gaya'.

But again, inbound drivers are rarely appreciated for their good work and for ensuring that the material reached on time. No one greets them with a smile or asks them about their journey, if they faced any problems en-route. The human touch is absent. At the end of the long tiresome journey, for these drivers who are facilitating the GDP growth and contributing to the company's top and bottom lines, there is no decent social interaction. In fact, they are berated for any delay.

Sometimes, if they reach the destination after the 3PL team have left, they have to wait outside the factory gates or distribution centres for hours. In that case, they have to sleep inside the driver cabins and attend to the call of nature in open spaces owing to absence of adequate basic amenities. And once the gates open, there is no expression of basic hospitality.

Secondly, even after gaining entry into the premises, the loading or unloading of goods might take a while. Drivers might have to again wait for long hours without access to washrooms or food facilities. Even cooking is not allowed. This is the plight of the drivers today.

What about the stakeholders? Take the fleet owners for instance. More than respect, they fear drivers because drivers possess skills which no one else does. Truck driving is no easy feat. It takes special training, the guts, the courage to face road hazards. Therefore, there is a great dependency on drivers.

But why the fear? Because there is no proper employer-employee relationship between them. It's just a verbal contractual obligation and compensation based on per kilometre driven. It's more transactional. There is no real bond or loyalty, hence the fear of the driver leaving is rampant.

Plus, fleet owners operate through their white-collar subordinates who work at comparatively lower salaries and for long working hours. Hence, they wield more power because they 'settle' drivers' accounts at the end of every round trip. Fleet owners do not always settle in full with drivers. They ensure there is always a sizable amount pending for drivers in their kitty to hedge against contingencies like driver decamping with cargo or accident or some penalties, etc. So yes, there is a lot of trust deficit and little scope for respect.

Yet, they all coexist out of necessity and mutual dependence. The complex psyche of stakeholders makes it difficult to expect a sudden transformation in the behaviour. So, drivers neither expect nor desire respect from stakeholders. This is not a desirable situation, from a societal evolution point of view. But I guess, we have learned to live with it.

Or should we? My personal view is that with awareness and conscious changes, it is possible to turn the situation around. Being human is not just a smart line, but a deep-set change of heart and mind required on an individual level. With tiny steps, we can bring in a transformation. Let's treat them with respect.



| A nap before covering the gap

Chapter 11

Driver Welfare

Recently, business dailies carried an interesting story of labour issues at Foxconn, a Taiwanese company based in Chennai, that supplies critical components to Apple Inc. The workers, mostly women, went on strike till their grievances were resolved. Their issues were mainly related to adequate living and working conditions for its contracted labour.

It was an issue under the ESG framework. ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) is a framework that helps stakeholders understand how an organization is managing risks and opportunities related to environmental, social, and governance criteria. It is a mantra reverberating in the global corporate corridors. And this was a social issue.

The State Government had to intervene and ask the company to address the problem. Consequently, Apple Inc's temporarily suspended its new orders for the critical components from Foxconn until an independent audit about worker amenities was completed.

There was, of course, a supply chain disruption leading to business problems. Hence the company had no option but to course-correct immediately.

As mandated by law, companies spend two percent of their net profit (averaged over three years) on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). And CSR is expected to address the concerns of the 'S' element of ESG. I sincerely hope that

companies are spending adequately to take care of their workforce. My main concern is for the truck drivers. They sometimes are deprived of basic amenities which is must along long journeys.

For instance, most of them do not have driver restroom facilities outside their factory premises. Nor they have decent places to eat at the premises while they wait for the unloading. They are even barred from entering the factory canteen at certain places.

But unlike the Foxconn labour, the truckers are not aware of their rights and not smart enough to demand.

While business enterprises adopt villages near manufacturing sites and build toilets for girls in high schools, they should certainly create basic amenities in their premises for labour like truck drivers. Even if they are contractual and do not belong to their regular workforce, ultimately, it's about social equality. Drivers' welfare should be their concern as well.

So, corporates must start taking the 'S' of ESG and S of CSR Seriously even for truckers. Ensure better working and living conditions for this workforce who tirelessly toil to ensure efficient functioning of production or marketing. It's not just for business interest but societal interest. A well-rested truck driver would automatically translate into safe cargo movement. There would be fewer accidents on highways and that will ensure the sustainability of their businesses.

I echo this sentiment expressed by Lea Cassar, professor at the University Regensburg, Germany, and Stephan Meier, Professor at Columbia Business School, in a paper published in the Economic Journal: "CSR can't feel like human resources or a marketing trick. It needs to be a core value."

Hence Drivers' welfare must figure in the overall sustainability matrix. It is never too late to address such disorders. Just as financial inclusion is a national topic of conversation, so also societal or social inclusion should be made a cultural must. Till then, just like the Foxconn workers, the truck drivers should unite and demand better living and working conditions.

Chapter 12

Play Along As They Ply Along

The 29 x 29 inch brand new carrom board sits at the centre of all action. 4 drivers surround the board, waiting to commence the game. 20 eager pairs of eyes are transfixed on the board. The first player breaks the coin arrangement. Over the next 30 minutes, amidst all the tension is ample drama, back-slapping, excited comments, cheering and exchange of foul language (that's the seasoning of their bonding), as the game proceeds. After all, it's all about winning the queen.

Setup under a tarpaulin shed in a large parking yard in Chinchwad, Pune, the board is a gift to the long-haul truck drivers of R. Sai Logistics. The company is a car-carrier logistics enterprise, established by Ulhas Ambegaonkar in 2017. Supervisor Safrosh Khan of R. Sai Logistics has himself handpicked the players for the inaugural ceremony of the carrom board.

This was a fantastic way to engage the drivers while they waited for the cargo from Tata Motors to be unloaded at this parking yard. Usually, they would hunker around their trucks, simply idling away till they get called in by the logistics department inside the plant. But adding an element of gaming was an opportunity to bond and socialise- a silver lining along the lonely journey.

Supervisor Khan concedes “None of us thought of playing games and engaging our drivers to keep them busy while they wait.”

Kamal Kishore Dargan from R. Sai Logistics, Head of Driver Training Institute based at Manesar, says he had engaged his drivers at Sohna Road yard in badminton. “At times, we made them play throwball also,” he adds.

“Card playing is the favourite game for drivers,” asserts Khem Singh, “but they bet with financial implications. Singh is a heavy commercial vehicle license holder, who has worked with an NGO focusing on driver welfare in the National Capital Region. He knows the quirks and habits of the long-haul drivers and reveals them to me as he stands outside the Tughlakabad Inland Container Depot.

I have recounted earlier that the lives of our truck drivers are pretty vigorous. Long hours of driving, lack of physical exercise, unending waiting hours at factories/ manufacturing sites etc makes them dull and dreary. They should be encouraged to spend that time usefully and maybe add value to their lives in the interim.

So the company's supervisors, who manage these drivers, initiated the excellent idea of using games or sports to help drivers from diverse backgrounds utilise this time and bond. After all, there does exist a huge chasm between drivers and their handlers. This is an effective way to bridge that gap.

I am happy to state that several initiatives like these are being taken to contribute to Drivers' welfare. This is a great sign because it adds a human touch to their otherwise lonely lives.

Many transport company owners conduct games on the occasion of Drivers' Day, held in mid-September and give away prizes to winners.

The shippers' 3PL team also engage them with games, quiz or edutainment — including a bit of safety education subtly,” says Mohan Subramaniam, a Mumbai-based truck finance professional and trainer.

Pallia Transport Logistics conducted a cricket match between its drivers and staff. The drivers even won the match, and one of them walked away with the Man of the Match award.

If motivated enough, the driver community will be eager to participate in team games. Transport Mitra has seen active participation of drivers in games such as tug of war, running races, musical chairs, and others over the years. Pre-Covid, Transport Mitra managed a dozen highway dhabas catering to the long-haul truck drivers for Exxon Mobil in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Besides carrom boards it also provided a volleyball court, wherever possible, at these dhabas.

Indian Oil, at its Gumjal (Punjab-Rajasthan border) retail outlet, provided a volleyball court for resting long haul truck drivers desiring to play.

So yes, transport companies are trying to do their best to add value to the drivers' lives. American philosopher George Santayana wrote in the 1894 issue of *The Harvard Monthly* “These changes will be an exercise to keep the mind clear and the body fit for work.” Are we game?



| *Some fun moments on the go*

Driving happiness through engagement

Ensuring driver engagement by:

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- Organizing 'Chai pe Charcha,' an interactive session with drivers across different locations
- Engagement initiatives covering 235000+ beneficiaries



Chapter 13

Driver Loyalty Needs To Be Earned

“Is it true that drivers have no loyalty towards their fleet owners?” asked a pink paper friend who covers the logistics beat.

I smiled and nodded. It's the sad truth. The concept of loyalty barely exists. It needs to have a sound grounding to build a strong relationship. So yes, there is a dearth of a strong bond between fleet owners and the drivers.

There is no law that spells out contractual obligations to legally bind them. As I have mentioned earlier, it is purely transactional.

“You drive my vehicle, and we will compensate you on a per kilometre basis plus give you an incentive” is the apt description of their business ties. As long as things are smooth, the cargo is delivered on time, and the fleet owners compensates the truck driver well, there is no skirmish. Of course, there might be differences in the business relationship, but if these are ironed out amicably, the association continues. If not, they part ways. And then it's like what you read at the back of a truck 'Tata, bye-bye!'

Ideally, fleet owners prefer longer association with their drivers. The frequent change of drivers is a pain point for them. Looking for a new driver who is trustworthy, depending on referral systems, and trying out new people are risks which can lead to wrong hiring and undesirable consequences.

Even the drivers seem to get emotionally attached to the truck. It might sound outlandish, but the drivers love their trucks more than their spouses! They practically spend half their lives with the truck.

They travel in it, they go places, they find comfort and shelter in the truck. It is like a home away from home for them.

Hence this unusual driver-truck relationship is one of the reasons why it is safer to continue with the same driver who will ensure that the truck and the cargo are protected.

Having said that, there are rare instances of 2–3 generations working with the same fleet owner. They orient their sons or nephews into the same fleet through referrals. So, unlike the white-collar types, job insecurity is alien to truck drivers. If they wish, they can walk out from one fleet today to land up another trucking job tomorrow. This is the market dynamics.

Sometimes the fleet owners resort to the rest-and-relay formula to counter this driver shortage.

So, say, in a long haul trip of 1500 kms from Delhi to Mumbai, the driver is changed every 250–300 km and the vehicle continues the journey without losing time. So, at least five drivers are changed en- route.

But in this model, there are two critical issues: The wear and tear of the vehicle due to this multiple handling practice, and the operations cost for fleet owners shoots up.

How does the truck undergo more wear & tear under this model?

No two drivers steer the same way. Their driving style and skills are diverse. They are trained under their father / uncle / elder brother/ neighbour, in a very individualistic pattern of skill education. They are not trained at a driver training institute or taught the same syllabus. Owing to different drivers using the same truck differently, the maintenance and usage of the truck is not handled well.

Secondly, this rest-and-relay formula leads the operations cost to shoot up. No shipper/receiver bears even a part of these extra expenses. After all, the customer wants to keep his logistics cost as low as possible.

Earlier the customer would have agreed to part with some premium for speedy delivery. But ultimately, transportation is a commoditized service and the transporter can be easily replaced. So, whoever delivers at a lower freight, is the winner. The end customer dictates the freight rate, and he is not concerned about the economic viability of the fleet owner's decision.

Under such circumstances, the fleet owner has few options. He must accept the offered freight which affects his margin. But the distance between the pick-up and delivery points remains unchanged and their expenses towards drivers' compensation stay the same. If they reduce the driver's compensation, the driver can immediately exit. There is but little loyalty in this business.

So earning a driver's loyalty is critical and fleet owners should ideally realise this and work towards a change in their behavioural and mindset norms. Ultimately this is a human-dependent business, so adding a bit of professionalism and humanism can go a long way, literally.

The other query my pink paper pal had was: “Do you genuinely believe there is a driver shortage?”

In my 13 years of experience within the Indian trucking ecosystem, and close interactions with drivers, I cannot recall any of them seeking my assistance for placements.

On the other hand, the list of fleet owners pinging me regularly to get drivers to steer their vehicles is long. Simply put, there is a perpetual demand for this skilled job. But supply is limited. So yes, driver shortage could be a reality.

There are subtle signs of this status quo all around you. There are always openings for truck drivers for short- or long-haul or first or last-mile delivery. VRL trucks on highways often display advertisement of “Drivers Wanted. Contact xxxxx xxxxx”. The tempos that enter my housing complex for last-mile delivery also have brightly printed 'Drivers wanted' messages. The Zomato delivery executives perched on their two-wheelers outside eateries also concede that the company is looking for more drivers / delivery executives.

So, yes, there is definitely a shortage of drivers in every segment.

The million- or trillion-dollar question here is: Is this demand-supply mismatch affecting the economy?

Yes. It is safe to conclude that there are products and vehicles waiting to be ferried but there are no drivers to do that job. And until the tangible products reach the end-user, the value chain is incomplete and value realisation fails. This idling of assets is uneconomical.

Till the products reach the shelves and are bought by end consumers, retailers cannot replenish stock. In turn, manufacturers will not produce if the products idle in trucks or on market shelves. Consequently, they will not buy raw materials/ components from their vendors. Lesser the demand, lesser the production, leading to a slow-down in economy, affecting the GDP. It turns into a vicious cycle.

And since job hopping by drivers is very common, my friend asked a pertinent question: Is driver shortage and absence of loyalty interlinked?

In my opinion, not necessarily. In this materialistic world, workers from any walk of life aim for a regular source of income or sustainability. But unlike them, career progression is not an issue for truck drivers.

When there is no formal employer-employee relationship between fleet owners and truck drivers, the only way to ensure loyalty is to ensure decent working and living conditions, implying good wages and prompt payment.

If logistics is the backbone of the economy, we need to strengthen it further. Or drivers deserve to be looked upon as a critical support and steps need to be taken to win their trust.

On this highway of progress, we need to make way for transformation. Let's begin with the humble driver.

Chapter 14

Advantage Of Middle-aged Experienced Drivers

In November 2010, during a rainy monsoon afternoon, Sardar Bikram Singh - a 40+ year old truck driver, and I were having a conversation outside the erstwhile General Motors parking yard at Halol, near Vadodara, Gujarat. That day he had told me that he'd had a good run-in truck driving and that he wanted to quit soon. He had two little sons (who visited me a few years later along with his wife). He was probably missing the family side of his life and wanted to try a different career path.

One can hear similar instances of several drivers in their mid-40s or older, setting career goals aligned to their familial responsibilities. E.g., “Once my daughter is married off, I will give up driving,” or “After my son gets a decent job, goodbye to trucking.” Trucking is indeed a lonely job with little social interaction and journeying through long winding roads with only your assistant for company. So many drivers continue only as far as their income needs are met.

Bikram was one of them. I called him recently to know his whereabouts. When he answered my call, I could hear a lot of honking cars in the background. “Sirji, I am at the Airport,” he responded, explaining that he was waiting to ferry passengers in his radio taxi outside the Delhi airport. It was a revelation for me that he had actually moved away from trucking to driving an Uber/Ola. He had quit the tough trucking occupation as he had once told me and resorted to city driving.

I was indeed pleased to know that his kids were in high school, and he had managed to build his three-storeyed house on the land he had inherited from his mother-in-law in Chattarpur, in the outskirts of Delhi. After spending three years building that house, he took to driving a radio taxi. However, there was no compulsion on him to return to driving as he had decent savings plus a regular rental income. But the reason he cited to continue this profession was “to pass time doing something he knew and give space to his wife.’

That was indeed an interesting concept and insight. It is healthy for a normal human to keep active for as long as they can, to avoid mental health issues and that emptiness. It gives them a sense of purpose.

What also interested me is that several senior drivers shared Bikram's views that their spouses needed space. Kishan Malik, another 50-plus long-haul truck driver, says: “For years, our wives have been leading an independent life as we used to be away from home on a driving assignment for weeks together. So, they had to manage all the responsibilities single-handedly. Right from kids' education to marriage, financial management to home related issues, she diligently took the onus and fulfilled her role as a life partner. She deserves that space she is used to now. She took a big responsibility off my shoulders. My children have settled down wherein my daughter is married, and my sons are educated and employed.”

And Malik himself still drives.

Anil Pandeyji is originally from Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh and settled in Nagpur, Maharashtra since, 25 years. He is proud of the fact that with his truck driving income, he provided for the studies

of his younger siblings and married them off. He also funded his son's education in electronics and saw him working for an MNC software firm in Bengaluru. He married off his graduate daughter too. He happily shared photos of his grandkids saying, 'I am promoted to being a grandfather' and chuckles. He is contented with whatever life he has earned, but he is an active driver even today despite his age and moves steel pan-India for companies.

"I am still healthy with good eyesight, and I hold an excellent accident-free record of 30 years. The money is decent, and I have a good employer. What more can I ask for?" he asks.

So while many senior drivers prefer to quit, several like to keep driving. There is no set retirement age for them. So, like a lot of corporate employees they prefer to stay employed. Some of the reasons of this trend are:

- Longevity of life, courtesy medical advancement
- Advent of the nuclear family wherein children prefer to move out of their parental homes and lead an independent life

Plus, this trend also works to be a win-win for drivers as well as the fleet owners who prefer elderly drivers owing to the loyalty and safety they offer. Despite the lack of a formal employer-employee relationship, the loyalty of senior drivers to their job is a boon.

Indore-based fleet-owning transporter, Gaurav Vyas, proudly states that 90% of drivers operating his fleet are in the 40-plus age category. Moreover, two-third drivers of this 90% are in the 55-plus age group!

His reason for keeping older drivers is pretty clear and reasonable. "The 45-year-old truckers have thousands of miles of

experience. They are masters of long-haul journeys and can face any crises. They are matured, they know the roads well. Seniors have a long-term commitment but expect a higher compensation than the 22-year drivers.

On the other hand, the 22-year-old drivers are energetic, curious, love to travel new roads, are low maintenance, and can drive longer. However, their crisis management skills are yet to develop, and their running hours are less.

Hence, we conclude that the best solution would be to have a mix of both. Like a boss and his manager who team up together to fulfil their targets.

“It's a good combination. Both balance the other out. Youngsters are adventurous and the older drivers abide by the rules strictly” says Mohammed Islam Khan, driver counsellor at the car carrier Sushila Transport. Khan served two and four-wheel motorised vehicles from manufacturing plants to dealer points or regional stockyards across India. “You can be 100% assured that the track record of accidents will be better of the older drivers than that of the younger lot.”

Another key finding that Khan points out is the distraction angle. According to him, elderly drivers are not tech-savvy and even avoid taking calls while driving. But the exact opposite is true of the youngsters as smartphone usage is high among them.

What is the assessment of the 65-year owner of R. Sai Logistics? His flock of drivers comprises 60% in the 40-plus age category. He says, “Every transport company looks for a good mix: experience and youth. This equation depends on the supply pipeline.”

Arun Lakshman, the leader of driver training institutes in India says, “The difference between new (20-25 years) & experienced (40-45 years) drivers is highly visible. When new drivers start out, they are full of energy but low on experience. So naturally they commit various mistakes and learn from them. As they start gaining experience, they incorporate their daily learning into their work. By the time they reach 40-45 years, they become more responsible about all aspects of life,” he explains.

Pune-based fleet-owning transporter, Manish Sharma says, “Realistically, it is not easy to compare the drivers with different age groups. Young drivers are enthusiastic and highly self-motivated; they focus more on their monthly kilometre drive. On the other hand, highly experienced drivers carry many of these factors with lots of experience; they desire to run the vehicles with the best fuel efficiency.”

In such a scenario, what does he prefer?

“Our organisation prefers experienced drivers for their sense of responsibility. They handle the vehicle with care and are generally soft-spoken. Their smart ways of dealing with people help resolve issues with fewer escalations. The younger drivers, on the other hand, are quick with new-age tools like the GPS on a smartphone. Owing to the combination of wisdom and learning, many youngsters seek advice for route selection and other vehicle information.”

Mohan has worked in the entire transport ecosystem - from vehicle financing to running driver training programs focused on hazardous goods movement. He says: “The referral route adopted in hiring drivers is inadequate. The senior drivers who profess to teach driving in the Guru- Shishya outfit would mostly

share their heroic experiences. The mentee has no choice but to listen to the foibles even though he knows the tutor's shortcomings.”

Fleet owners are learning adapt to the trends. The matured drivers will continue to hold on to the wheels for as long as their healthy permits, and the supply of the younger drivers will keep trickling in.

What is the optimal size of experienced versus young? We don't have a number yet. But the owners manage to keep India running.

Chapter 15

The Hiring Of Drivers

Owing to high attrition and younger generations not willing to join the rigmarole, the hiring process plays a large role in this issue. But it is also a cumbersome one, and there are several reasons for that:

In the trucking segment of the transport vertical, no owner/manager would conduct walk-in interviews for hiring truck drivers. The only route to gain entry into the truck driving world is the referral route. The employers would adduce that criterion to secure their business interests.

And then, there are schisms within the community. Drivers from Bihar, UP, Rajasthan, Punjab, Jharkhand, Mewat, and others have created factions amongst themselves. The drivers from South India are excluded because the major supply of long-haul truck drivers is from the Northern / Hindi belt. As a natural tendency, a driver from Bihar would recommend a fellow- driver from the same state to the fleet owner under a referral system.

So how does the fleet owner replenish his truck drivers' team?

Considering how vital the role of a truck driver is, owners/managers prefer hiring new drivers based on referrals only. They would be wary of hiring even an experienced driver if he is not known. The reason for this is simple:

There is a lot of value, risk and money riding on that one truck. First of all, the vehicle itself costs above INR 25 lakhs. Add to that, the cargo value itself runs into a few lakhs or even a crore. There is always a fear of trusting a completely unknown driver, however veteran, this value of business. What if he decamps? Or absconds?

So, there is an unusual practice in recruitment through referrals in the trucking business. The driver who refers a fellow driver is entirely responsible for any negative incidents by the latter.

This enables owners to shift the risk burden to the existing driver who recommended the new hire.

So, when a truck goes missing and owners cannot trace the same, the onus is on the recommending party to recover it. He has to take the responsibility of tracing the missing items (vehicle, cargo, and the driver,) by pressuring the drivers' family as he knows them. If he is from the same village, the person's misdeeds can affect the job prospects of the entire village whose youth might be keen to enter the trucking occupation. Moreover, the recommending driver's dependability suffers, and he loses the seniority position in the driving hierarchy within that company. This also hampers his chances of making some extra earning off the candidate he referred, & monitoring or disciplining his 'wards.' So, hiring through this referral system comes with its pros & cons.

The other hiring source is through driver suppliers. These people may or may not be on the company's rolls, but they guarantee their drivers' actions as long as they are in service. The suppliers are compensated by the owners every month for their service. This modus operandi suits the owners because they need not keep the drivers on their payroll nor manage them. Plus, they detest the statutory compliances.

Such practices automatically lead to groupism amongst drivers based on states, districts, or villages. Drivers do prefer to have their exclusive group for better bargaining power with the owners. Therefore, they recommend or refer recruits who remain loyal to them. Loyalty to the leader is perceived as a valuable trait among the driving community. So however good a recruit may be in terms of experience, he could be filtered out anytime if his loyalty is under doubt.

Hence, a closed group works well. But on the other hand, this mindset affects reasons for the DTI-trained and certified truck drivers' inability to get a placement in trucking companies. The driver groups cannot predict how the recruits from DTIs will behave towards the prevailing practices. Moreover, these drivers are better trained and have a better educational background. Hence there is an issue when it comes to recruiting truck drivers from DTIs.

Let's not undermine the underlying disunity between motor lobby groups and drivers. If the lobby groups call for a nationwide bandh or rasta roko, they are not always supported by the driver community or fleet owners.

Unity is an unknown value for both the fleet owners and drivers. As a result, both suffer in perpetuity. If the drivers unite, they can cripple the economy effortlessly. But it has not yet happened and probably never will, probably due to lack of leadership, awareness or other reasons. But this is their way of life.



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Chapter 16

Desh Badal Raha Hai

Earlier in the day, our maiden touchpoint was the Madhya Pradesh integrated check post on NH47. Freight Tiger Sudhir Kumar quietly cottons onto RTO Pankaj at the checkpost after the rest of the team scoots out for a one-on-one chat. The young officer graciously engages the bearded Sudhir, who is young but deeply connected with the trucking segment.

A few kilometres later, we noticed a highway truckers' dhaba called Fauji Dhaba.”

Driver Raju alias Razack smoothly veers into the parking area. It is almost empty. We saw a senior driver and his khalasi near the taillights of one of the trucks parked chatting. Another driver is busy inside the driver cabin, tinkering with something.

“Chai?” I ask no one in particular.

A few of them replied 'hmm', so I moved into the kitchen area.

The tribal waiter of the dhaba stood there, sporting a red-knicker and blue-collarless T-shirt, wearing a broad and infectious smile.

“Chai milegi?” I asked, bemused.

“Jee!” he responds.

“Naam kya hai tumhaara?”

“Gandhi!”

I was amused. The dhaba worker carried his name with pride.

After I returned, I said “Namaste” and opened the conversation with Surjit, Darshan, and Rohit. They are from Punjab, ferrying soil cutter machines for Maharashtra.

Fresh from our RTO interaction a few minutes earlier, Sudhir shared his inputs about documentation. Darshan refuted the allegations that proper documents are available online about the load he carries, and that corruption is rampant. “The RTO will find one excuse or other to fleece you,” adds Surjit. However, they also concede that corruption on highways is on the decline and that better days are coming ahead, they predict.

Young Rohit from Rohtak, Haryana, is being groomed as a truck driver under the watchful eyes of Darshan and Surjit. He gets to drive at night with seniors monitoring him. Darshan bats that they would train him for two years before he applies for a driving license and takes up a full-time career.

Not just Rohit, but several other youngsters from remote villages in India do consider truck driving as a career. Though truck-driving is not exactly a glossy career option, they prefer steering trucks instead of studying in school and pursuing a different career path.

Gandhi reappears with a plate containing paper cups filled with garam chai as we chat with Amandeep Singh-the third-gen owner of the dhaba. The dhaba is almost 60 years old. He planned to demolish this trucker-friendly facility and shift closer to the bypass coming up. “We won't entirely shut shop. Fauji Dhaba will continue to exist but in a new place, closer to the bypass,” he adds.

After some more conversations, Razak finishes his chai and occupies the driver's seat, signalling it is time to move to the next destination. We have no idea where we are going to move now. We are on a journey of discovery – the discovery of fresh insight into the psyche of long-haul truck drivers.

Desh badal raha hai. The younger drivers especially in rural areas are optimistic about a career

in truck driving. Institutional organisations like the Government and NGOs have realized the importance of the truck driver community and taking steps towards making positive changes.

Chapter 17

The Multitasking Sarathi

Ami Ganatra is an alumna of IIM Ahmedabad. She recently wrote a book 'Mahabharat Unravalled' that clarifies several misconceptions about the epic.

I was listening intently to her 105-minute long Youtube interview about the book, when something pulsed my attention. It was her description and rationale behind Krishna's role as the charioteer for Prince Arjun. Lord Krishna played the role of a Sarathi in the Mahabharata. And in that era, Sarathis were not simply drivers of the chariot. They also had some exceptional skills of a Kshatriya (warrior). For instance, they were expected to know the battleground, the body language of the enemy, and warfare strategy. Their job was not only to drive the chariot, but also to protect the warrior.

“Not everyone could become a Sarathi. It took immense talent and skill; hence it was a highly respected role,” explained Ms Ami, in her interview.

I could not agree more. I have always maintained that drivers are multi-skilled and hence multi-taskers. And truck drivers are the most skilled of the entire driving community.

But, unlike train drivers or pilots or ships' captains, the truck driver's job is way more challenging. For instance, train drivers and ship captains do not have to worry about highway robberies. They also have access to amenities like hotel rooms or Government quarters

for rest-and-change, after their job is done. However, we have seen how truck drivers do not have access to basic facilities like these.

Plus, other drivers need not worry about the vehicle's maintenance- there are specialised teams who manage that. For example, pilots don't have to check whether the airplane's wheels are in perfect condition to land, or the train driver need not worry about the brakes. They have a dedicated crew of engineers and other mechanics to keep a check on that.

However, our truck drivers have to multitask: they have to protect the vehicle, the cargo and their lives. They have to check the tyres, cargo bay locks in containerized truck bodies, the tautness of the rope tying the tarp that covering the cargo to avoid cargo theft on highways, keep the rains from damaging the cargo - their task list is long.

Secondly, unlike their peers on ships, trains, or planes, truck drivers have no social security net.

Ami said she was enthralled to know that once upon a time, the Indian trucking scenario was quite different and better than it is today. This was true until the advent of the national and state highways, toll roads, the separation of highway policing to the transport department at each state level, and the annual budgetary targets to be met by each department.

Even today, the transport fraternity recalls the bonhomie between authorities, owners, and drivers on the non-macadamized roads linking the country. The truck drivers were at the forefront even when supply chain, logistics, 3PLs did not exist then. They were respected and they even offered bakshish to highway guardians.

Sadly, our drivers do not have those privileges today. So, as Ami points out, the modern-day drivers have to be alert, agile, and strategic to evade the several challenges and to survive, daily. Hence today, these truck drivers are the multi-tasking Sarathis.

But the big difference in the ancient era's Sarathis and today's 'Sarathi' is the element of respect. While they perform the critical task of indirectly nurturing 1.3 billion Indians, they are bereft of that privilege. Sometimes they have to be the Arjun- a warrior on the roads, and sometimes the Sarathi - the strategic driver. This is their Mahabharat in the Kurukshetra of the highway life.



| *Waiting with the weight*

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Chapter 18

The Weight Of Waiting

“Do you think we will make it?” I asked Anil Pandeyji as we began to see Lucknow's city line from the driver's cabin.

I was accompanying Pandeyji and Parvez Khan- the co-driver of Credence Logistics, in their 1900-kilometre truck journey. They were ferrying cold-rolled steel coils from Tata Steel in Jamshedpur to its regional stockyard in Ludhiana, Punjab.

We were to cross Lucknow city before the prescribed time. But Pandeyji looked at me and that told me everything. We probably wouldn't.

The Lucknow Police had banned commercial vehicles from plying through its roads between 7 AM and 10 PM because trucks impede the traffic flow of city dwellers, causing traffic snarls. We were on the road since, two days, so I dreaded the possibility of being stranded in the city for more than 12 hours in one place, with nothing to do.

We noticed the long line of trucks along the narrow road just half a kilometre before entering Lucknow city. Pandeyji smoothly parked behind the last truck in the line, removed the ignition key, and climbed down.

We were to reach Ludhiana in the next three days. Honestly, I didn't mind, now that I got used to truck trips, inching towards the magic figure of 10,000 km on Indian highways.

Pandeyji started talking to someone on his mobile, and Khan roamed around the area, looking for a decent place to sit. Pandeyji ended his conversation and came to me.

“Umesh is coming with his kids,” he said, smiling.

“Umesh?” I looked at him questioningly, as I had never heard that name from him before.

“My youngest brother. He lives here in the city. I told him we are here & asked him to come with his children & meet us,” he explained.

I smiled back and nodded. It was unbelievable to think that until three days ago, we did not even know each other. And today, we are as thick as thieves, meeting his family and all. Pandeyji had floored me the first evening when I met him at the Tata Steel parking yard. He was in his safari suit, and I mistook him for a Credence Logistics official. Luckily, the branch manager, Rai, clarified that Pandeyji would be driving me to Ludhiana over the next week.

The news of Umesh coming to meet him, brought in a sense of relief for Pandeyji. Long-haul truck drivers are away from home for long stretches. They have no weekends. Birthdays of their wards and wedding anniversaries cannot be on their calendar. I tease them by saying, “They love their trucks more than their spouses!”

Imagine being stranded for 15 hours at an unknown place in the open space with several lakhs of rupees worth of steel in your custody. You can't leave it and move around either. So, meeting the brother was a welcome opportunity.

Umesh arrived a while later on his motorbike with his sons: Aman and Prashant. Pandeyji kissed the children and hugged his brother. Several plates of hot samosas, jalebi, mithai, packaged juice and chai were handed to us.

Khan was conspicuous by his absence. We have no clue where he vanished except that he would be back at the scheduled time of our departure.

Biting into melting buttery biscuits, the kids climbed into the driver's cabin with the help of their bade papa. Umesh, followed them. Pandeyji and I too settled in there. I was happy to be a part of this little family reunion. "Papa told us that you sing well, but this uncle says you can't. Prove him wrong, beta," Pandeyji teased his nephews. I joined in the fun.

"Sing, sing," Umesh urged them.

The kids, probably feeling a bit shy, coaxed him: "Papa, you sing first!"

Umesh paused, then asked "Hindi or Bhojpuri?"

"Bhojpuri," I butted in.

And so began an hour- long song session with Umesh and the kids dishing out Bhojpuri melodies with some Lucknowi Lehza . Post that, we dined by a roadside dhaba. Khan returned as mysteriously as he had left, and joined the sangeet sabha.

After a few hours and a few hugs, the family left.

Luckily, it was a Sunday, which made it possible for Umesh to come along. Had it been a weekday, he would have to give it a skip. Pandeyji, Khan, and I would have spent time doing something else...no idea what!

And well, several hours later, during this same truck trip, we had to spend another four hours near Rampur. There had been some accident at the railway crossing. This was another hazard on road

trips. Accidents were not rare. Indeed, it is tragic to know that people lose lives on the roads, and truck drivers are not spared either.

We were told that it would take at least a couple of hours before the snarl cleared. Till then, we would have to kill time.

So I took the opportunity and my camera to capture more stories. The truck queue was more than a kilometre long on both sides. More drivers to meet, more stories on the street. Over the next hour, I gathered several anecdotes, interacting with stranded truck drivers and their woes of long waiting.

Long-haul truck drivers are now used to such lengthy waits. It is a waste of time, and time means money for them, but it cannot be helped. This is the very nature of their occupation, and they expect it. They find ways to while away their detention time.

So, my driver friends found the easiest way out - sleep! Actually, they needed to catch up on that much needed rest. So Pandeyji sat in his seat and dozed off. Khan slipped into the empty plank behind the driver's seat and slept.

It was so quiet then. I sat there, reminiscing another truck trip from Pant Nagar, Uttarakhand to Hosur, Tamil Nadu with a truck-on-truck cargo of Leyland vehicles. It was a convoy of two vehicles with four drivers. And during one such detention, we utilised that three-hour unscheduled halt to play cricket with the locals on a ground near the highway, with our trucks well in our view. And we were beaten in the game by the young chaps in the 10-over tennis ball match.

So waiting is indeed a large part of the drivers' lives. And they never know when that wait will be over.

Chapter 19

Truck Driving Is No Holiday

It is very common for our drivers to stay away from home and families for weeks or months. However, it gets worse when they miss celebrating Festivals with them too.

Once, a group of drivers reached Toy City, Greater Noida, on Diwali Day to deliver material to the factories. It was that time of the year when almost the entire country, not just the city, is almost shut, barring essential services. Plus, it was a Sunday, so the holiday stretched by another 24 hours.

But the drivers had no scope of celebrating. They could not leave material-laden trucks unattended. Their home was several hundred kilometres away. So how would they pass the 96 hours till the factory gates opened and the logistics team started the unloading process?

They had to live by the roadside for four days and nights. They did not light lamps or crackers or share special Diwali meals with their families on Diwali day. Instead, they cooked basic meal of roti and dal in the driver's cabin and ate together occasionally.

“Besides that, watching movies and songs on our mobile phones kept us engaged. We played gully cricket also,” they said. The service lane was the playground. A 3X1.5 feet concrete slab served as cricket stumps. For the bat, they used a wooden plank to hit the rubber ball. They threw straight at the batsman or tried underarm as the batters go berserk, hitting like Sehwag.

While the young drivers were bowling or batting, the elders watched from side-lines. Exerting physical energy was not their cup of tea. "I prefer card games," tells a senior driver, sitting a few yards behind the concrete stumps. So, they sit under the truck chassis on a blanket to play cards at parking yards. Or sleep till they get a load call over the public address system by the shipper or their location supervisors.

Still, it is gratifying to see drivers engage in some activity. Overseas, drivers are equipped with various exercise tools. But our drivers need to be oriented to utilise their time, as discussed in the earlier story.

Life on the road is not exactly a party for them. Long detention periods, missed festivals, unprecedented waiting time pose an immense number of challenges for them.



| Relishing meals on the go

A ray of hope to the ones who drive us

Initiatives to support drivers and their families during COVID

- Launched **HOPE** (Helping Our People in Emergencies) to support drivers financially in partnership with Samhita Social Ventures
- Conducted different relief programs such as food packet distribution, vaccine doses, and many more across different locations



Chapter 20

The Dhaba Phenomenon

When you ride the Indian highways, the one ubiquitous phenomenon is the desi 'dhaba', or the highway cafes. Apparently, the word 'dhaba' is derived from the Hindi word 'dabba' or lunch box. Its origins can be traced back to the Partition when a lot of natives had to rebuild their lives from scratch. So, they started the business of serving fresh dhaba/dabba to weary travellers or transporters on these roads, especially in the Punjab region.

Now omnipresent across the country, the humble little shacks serve as pit stops for the truck drivers and families alike. The original setup of a dhaba consists of a large open area dotted with cots and plank tables. The kitchen is the only enclosure that serves the authentic Punjabi staple diet of desi daal makhni with naan, a paneer dish, creamy lassi and a side dish of onion with green chillies.

On my truck ventures, I might have dined at a hundred different dhabas, each with its own quirks, yet striking a common chord. Sometimes you share a cot with men who have little table etiquette or zero grooming knowledge.

But I adore the desi style of dhaba dining. The diners sit cross-legged on the coir or polyurethane straps that serve as kursi. A 1 x 3.5 feet wooden plank is the table where they keep the plate and a large stainless-steel jug with cold water to rinse and wash hands on the plate without having to get up. Oh, the quirks of a desi dhaba!

Sometimes, even two strangers occupy a single *cot/charpaay* & share a table, engaging in conversation over the meal. Some prefer to sit alone, undisturbed. These *charpaay-and-kursi* type dhabas serve several million long-haul truck drivers daily across India.

When we left Tharad, we were advised by the HPCL Senior Sales Manager, Manish Rane on where to take a pit stop: “After you drive for half an hour from the Radhanpur crossing, as you reach Warai on the Saurashtra coast, you will find a Hindustan Petroleum pump on the left. Next to that is a famous Rajasthani dhaba. which serves good authentic Rajasthani truckers' khaana.”

And we were not disappointed. The dhaba was huge, with a capacity to accommodate at least 30 trucks. At this hour, the dusty parking space was almost empty. Perhaps the yard will be packed with parked vehicles at night. The traffic on both lanes was thin. We parked and got ourselves a cot.

Raj, a kid dressed in an army camouflage outfit, came to us and stood at attention to take orders. “Aap kya khaoge?” asks Syed Kausar, seated across me.

“Sev bhaji hai kya?,” I asked. Kausar looked at the kid. Raj nodded as if stating 'obviously'. Sev bhaji is a fried, crisp item made from besan flour mixed with fresh, spicy dal, with a sweet under-taste, served piping hot.

I don't know how, but I was fixated with sev bhaji for a long time. It was a mystery to me why sev bhaji was the most preferred item for drivers at their highway eateries. When I asked them, they said that sev bhaji is the freshest item any dhaba can serve. Drivers claim that any other item ordered at the truckers' dhaba can be a recycled one. The cook can reheat the day-old stuff, and no diner likes that. Besides that, daal makhni and tandoori roti were added to the order.

Our driver, Himmat Vaghela, refused to dine, stating that he had finished his lunch before picking us up at Radhanpur crossing for the next 250 km ride to Mundra. He settled for a garam chai.

I look around. Two other truck drivers were seated on another cot, relishing their food.

“Buttermilk?” The kid returned and asked. We nodded.

“Kitna time lagega?”

“Abhi toh order diya. Thoda time lagega”. The kid smiled and vanished.

We sat and waited till then, observing our neighbouring company to divert our mind from the hunger pangs. The uncouth man had cut his tandoori roti into tiny bits, mixed with dahi, and lapped it up, unmindful of the surroundings. He then finished his lunch and washed his hands in his stainless-steel plate. He then belched. No meal is complete and complimented without a belch.

But that failed to vanquish my appetite. Raju came and placed two empty stainless-steel plates on our wooden plank. He then swiftly placed a smaller plate of diced onion and salted green chilies - a typical Rajasthani/Gujarati side accompaniment. Another kid came out carrying two containers of sev bhaji and dal makhani, plus a plastic basket with two garam, mulayam tandoori rotis.

One piece of the soft roti dipped in the delish sev bhaji was followed by another piece of roti dipped in dal makhni, interspersed with bites of diced, salted onion and green chilies. It was the authentic dhaba experience with a heavenly creamy flavour.

Kausar was engrossed in his meal. I finished mine and looked at my palms. They were dry. I could have picked up the water jug and washed my hands in some corner. But instead, I picked up the water jug and washed my hands in my stainless-steel plate.

Raju picked up the water-filled plate and went back in.

I wondered how did I behave so differently at the dhaba? Usually, it would be a finger bowl to help wash the soiled hands, but since they don't serve that here, I washed my hands in the plate itself!

Did we not hear the story of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II drinking water off the finger bowl? It was at a state dinner that was hosted in honour of an African king, at Buckingham Palace. The King was unaware of the use of the finger bowl and sipped from it. The Queen did not want to embarrass her guest, so she too drank from the bowl. For once, she changed her routine.

It is the mystic ambience of the dhaba that lends a sense of homeliness and warmth to the jarred driver. The flavours, home grown recipes, authentic spices, the style and process of slicing, dicing or thumping of the kadhaai are enough to make one crave dhaba food. Have you ever tried sitting with the truck driver, cross-legged on the cot, sipping on the thick milky lassi?

Chapter 21

The Threat Of Thefts

In 2016, an entire cargo of Vedanta's material which was being ferried by Siddhi Vinayak Logistics, went missing in New Delhi. A truck-load of Hindustan Lever's goods that were being carried by Varuna Logistics for Sure Group, was also stolen. A load of Colgate products was looted near Bijapur on their way from Sanand, Gujarat to Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu. Similarly, brand new cars have gone missing, white goods have gone missing. Highway thefts by gangs and robbers is a reality even today.

Cargo loot on highways is a daily occurrence, especially during the nights. But a lot of them go unreported. Or even if they are reported, the stories of passenger looting gets higher visibility in media vis-a-vis cargo theft.

One might think, the solution is simple - drivers should avoid driving during nights. But that's neither practical nor economical. There are two reasons why long-haul truck drivers opt to drive at night:

- a. To evade checking by highway officials of state transport departments who operate during daytime only, that results in a delay
- b. The hot tropical Indian climate coupled with poorly ventilated truck cabins makes driving extremely unbearable in the day.

So, night-driving is preferable, but drivers have exposed themselves to the threat of cargo theft and also to their lives. Once, my driver friend, Anil Pandeyji, was waylaid and beaten up near Jamshedpur in an isolated location. Another friend lost his life while trying to defend the tractor load, he was carrying in Madhya Bharat. The drivers are at constant risk as they are trying to deliver the cargo safely.

In fact, with the e-commerce boom in India, the theft of goods ordered online is on the rise. The CEO of TVS Logistics, India - R. Shankar says “pilferage during the transportation is higher than during warehousing.”

What are the challenges we face to resolve this problem?

- Patrolling every inch of the highways is impossible, given the country's size. Yet, there are highway patrol squads in some states.
- Highway heists go unreported because the shippers have insurance cover. Plus, it is a time-consuming process. Shippers and transporters/fleet owners face many challenges between the time of reporting the theft & the recovery of insurance cover.

However, we live in better times where cargo, vehicle, or driver safety should not be a challenge. With technology, moment-to-moment remote monitoring of moving vehicles is very much possible today.

I wonder, if we face challenges of highway robberies even in today's modern times, what would have transpired during the Silk Road era? There were several brutal bandit groups on that 6,000–7,000 km route stretching from China to the European border for over 2,000 years. So, how did the cargo owners handle the problem?

History vouchsafes these episodes. Bruce James, a history buff, quotes the famous seventh-century Chinese traveller and Buddhist scholar Xuanzang (602–664 AD) who mentions several encounters with bandits:

“Near Dunhuang, the Silk Road split in two, to skirt the rim of the Taklamakan Desert. The roads met again 1,400 miles west at Kashgar. But between these two oases lay the Silk Road's most dangerous terrain. There were threats of starvation, thirst, bandits, and ferocious sandstorms that buried entire caravans. Bandits and robbers were a constant threat on the Silk Road. But several systems were in place to reduce the risk. For instance, there were agents that helped transport the goods. These local agents who were familiar with problems like terrain, politics, and bandits of their region, were better suited for the task of ferrying the goods and would ensure safe transit.”

Jacqueline Fewkes, a research scholar, states in her book - *Trade and Contemporary Society Along The Silk Road*: “Trade, turmoil, and turbulence go hand-in-hand on the sea or roads. Despite dangers, traders had good partners enroute, and their selection of routes depended on the political stability of the regional power. Centralised states, confederations, and regional powers promoted trade and diplomacy. They invested in communications and economic infrastructure such as secure roads, water depots, inns.”

The key solution to this problem is **investment in infrastructure for secured roads.**

Another interesting detail I would like to share is from the book 'Managing Supply Chains on the Silk Roads: Strategy, Performance and Risk', where Editors Cagri Haksoz, Sridhar Seshadri, and Ananth Iyer capture the risk mitigation tactics of

merchants on the Silk Road. “Defence against banditry took place at a private and institutional level. The institutional level had three forms: The Chinese garrisons and watchtowers beyond the Great Wall, Mongolian postal stations, and caravanserais in the Middle East and Anatolia. These institutions provided safety, supplies, and lodgings for merchants. Besides, the Chinese soldiers were informed about incidents using smoke and flag signals in real-time.”

Silk Roads expired upon European/Russian conquest and the colonisation of large parts of Central Asia and their transformation into a peripheral component of the modern industrial world economy.

Similarly, if the truck transport of goods are the arteries of the nation's economy, the Government must ensure there are no clogs along the routes for the drivers and the cargo. The police and security authorities can run a tighter ship to nip the problem in the bud. For instance, recently the Uttar Pradesh police arrested a gang for hijacking Rs.35 lakh iron rods. This shows that we are perfectly capable of resolving the issue of highway robberies, which will help secure the lives of our truck drivers.

Chapter 22

Sanitation Facilities - A Major Roadblock In Drivers' Lives

It was the third day of the Jamshedpur-Ludhiana truck trip in February 2011. We were parked somewhere on a highway in Uttar Pradesh. Holed up in the narrow 8 x 5 feet Tata Horse -cum-trailer cabin, I tried to wiggle out without waking Parvez Khan, who was in deep sleep.

My bowel movements were like the unofficial alarm clock aligned to my body clock. It was only 4 AM, but I needed to relieve myself. I did not want to wake Pandeyji, so gathering courage, I whispered “Pervez!”

A startled Khan woke up and sensing my urgency, made space for me to exit the truck. And thoughtful as he was, he quickly handed me a two-litre Pepsi bottle filled with water. Hmm...all I needed for my morning ablutions was a plastic container, but well, this was my first outing in a truck after all, so I consoled myself.

I wrote this episode in my maiden book published in 2011, titled: '10,000 KM on Indian Highways'

“I wake up at the prefixed hour, empty one's bowels, brush and gulp down a hot cuppa, sugarless tea, or coffee in that sequence. The program has not changed throughout my life. So why would it change now?

The point is when ordinary citizens like you & I travel long distances, we can access toilets at fuel pumps and highway eateries. But truck drivers are not fortunate enough to enjoy that benefit.

One option is fuel pumps, but the attendants wouldn't entertain them unless the drivers filled their diesel tank for at least Rs.1,000 of fuel. Maybe the drivers did not need diesel at that juncture, so consequently they couldn't access the fuel pump washrooms either.

What about highway dhabas frequented by truck drivers? Unfortunately, even dhabas have no restroom facilities.

So what do drivers do? They park the truck and step out into the bushes. Sometimes accompanied by a large plastic bottle.

This is exactly what I did as the driver's assistant/kalasi throughout my 30,000 KM truck journey and multiple trips across the country. I picked up a big water-filled PET bottle and disappeared behind the bushes. Ever since then, these big PET bottles disturb me. Now you know why.

Initially, it was challenging to manage these issues. I sometimes fought a pitched battle with the fuel pump staff for denying me and other truck drivers access to their locked toilets. They bluntly refused entry because usually truckers mess up the whole place. So, they are not entirely wrong in this aspect. Hence, maintaining sanity on the topic of sanitation is a task in itself. Imagine the plight of thousands of truck drivers through their driving career.

The good news is that lately, things are changing in the light of the government's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. The movement has certainly helped usher in minor mindset changes in the fuel pump

staff. Now they do permit drivers to use their toilets. Oil marketing companies have also built better driver-friendly rest rooms at select locations with huge safe parking, sleeping quarters, bathing area, and cooking section with free gas stoves.

I am simply happy that my next road trip on the truck will be free of those large plastic bottles.

Chapter 23

Investing In Infrastructure

The founder and emperor of the Afghan Sur dynasty - Sher Shah Suri (1537-45 AD), who opened the Mughal chapter in Indian history, was quite trade friendly. He enhanced the patchy pathway linking Kabul in Afghanistan, with Teknaf, Bangladesh. The stretch was approximately 2,400km long. Even in the pre-motorised era when the horse- and camel-driven caravans travelled long distances, the weary travellers and merchants needed resting places.

“The Emperor built many sarais (wayside inns) along this route. In every sarai there were separate lodgings for Hindus and Muslims. At the gate of every sarai, they placed pots of water for travellers to drink. It was a rule that whoever entered the sarais, received provisions suitable to his rank, and food for his cattle, from the government. Villages were established all around the sarais.” quotes Raghubir Singh.

He cites that even Emperor Ashoka constructed rest houses at every eight krosa (one krosa = a distance of about two miles and a quarter.

Another Indian King Harsha, built many charitable houses so that the wayfarers never found themselves in difficult straits.

The British, who usurped power from the Muslim invaders, considerably rebuilt this ancient and longest road called the Grand Trunk Road that has served traders & invaders since 2500 years. They then refocused on building better pathways for strategic purposes like enabling trading & securing conquered territories.

These historical nuggets flood my mind as I roam across the 20 km stretch of Grand Trunk Road (National Highway 91) in mid-February 2022. I wonder about the infrastructure provided then, and the infrastructure we have today, despite the fact that transport has grown multi fold. There are indeed many gaps in the right infrastructure for our drivers:

From Bulandshahr Industrial Area which houses thousands of small and medium enterprises on the outskirts of Ghaziabad, till the Aligarh bypass, circumventing the crowded Dadri town stretch, the historical Grand Trunk Road stretches to about 20 Km long. One cannot help but notice the hundreds of trucks parked on both sides of the four-lane highway.

Dotted with steel and rice mills warehouses, plus the non-stop flow of commercial and passenger vehicles in both directions, it is the hub of trading activity with plenty of eateries and logistics companies.

However, there are not many 'sarais' to provide free resting places for weary drivers of modern trade. There are a few fee-based private truck parking yards to cater to the needy travellers. They have ample huge space, and each of them accommodates at least 200–300 12-tyre commercial vehicles. There are some truckers' dhabas that serve food round the clock, but they are not very hygienic.

One of the reasons of the state of dhabas is partly due to poor handling of the infrastructure by the drivers. It is a fact that they throw bidis/cigarette buds inside toilets, spit on walls, dump empty cheap liquor bottles outside. Ironically, at home, they maintain neat hygiene levels. But once on the road, all these etiquettes go amiss.

Given India's geographical size & the trade volume (merchandise export in the financial year 2021–22: US\$400 billion, for the first time in history), the movement of physical volume is humungous. Of US\$2.5 trillion 16% of GDP comes from manufacturing involving procurement and movement of raw material from multiple locations to the manufacturing site. Finally, the finished goods are dispatched across various corners of the country

And two-thirds of this movement is by roadways, via trucks of various sizes for first and last-mile delivery. So adequate infrastructure along the roads needs to be developed.

The other issue is the ergonomics of Indian trucks. Though, nowadays, the entry of global trucking companies has transformed the way we make our trucks. The drivers' cabins are way more comfortable now, sometimes even air-conditioned.

The National Highways Authority of India has been speaking about building wayside amenities for long-haul truck drivers, yet the development is not at the pace it should be. The location of some of the truck lay-bys on highways is not well thought out, so many of them remain unutilized.

Why the emphasis on the Truck lay-bys or parking yards? They are vital from the road safety angle. Studies at home and abroad have conclusively showcased how a 'tyred' truck driver is a hazard behind the wheels on highways.

Inadequate truck parking over the past several decades is also one of the key reasons of high attrition in the occupation of trucking. This has contributed to the nationwide shortage of roughly 80,000 drivers that has exacerbated global supply chain issues, CNBC reported in one of its recent dispatches about the American trucking scenario.

The American Trucking Associations and the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association asked the US Department of Transportation to use funding from the federal infrastructure bill to construct designated parking areas for truckers to improve safety and working conditions. So the American Parliament (House of Representatives) introduced The Truck Parking Safety Act for US\$755 million truck parking capacity, but it has not materialised the plan.

The American Transportation Research Institute found that, on an average, truck drivers spend nearly an hour per day looking for a parking space, which equates to about US\$5,000 annually in lost wages. But in India, our truck drivers don't have specialised parking spots to look for. They have to wait on the roads or drive till they come to a dhaba.

Every country knows that transportation is the backbone of the economy and drivers form a critical element of this subset. But by and large, trucking as an industry is deregulated, which means there is open competition. In a bid to slash the logistics cost from 14% to 9% over the next five years as proposed by the National Logistics Policy, driver comfort, and road safety are not getting adequate attention.

We need to realise that truck parking yards on the highways are vital for the trucking business's survival, safety, and prosperity. It has wider ramifications on the economy.

In his book, *Sweatshops on Wheels - Winners and Losers in Trucking Deregulation* (Oxford University Press, 2000), Dr. Michael Belzer states: "The implications of deregulation for the US economy and our values as a society are substantial. The trucking story is an allegory, telling us a cautionary tale of unfettered competition, creating a social dilemma that, extended to other industries, could have significant consequences for the American way of life."

Before writing the book, Belzer drove 750,000 miles over ten years on the American highways as a truck driver himself. So, his insights arise out of pure on-ground experience.

Similarly, the Indian government and stakeholders should work collectively to realise their dream ecosystem of climate control, sustainability, and social justice. If we manage to remove logistic inefficiencies in the entire spectrum, we can definitely become more globally competitive.

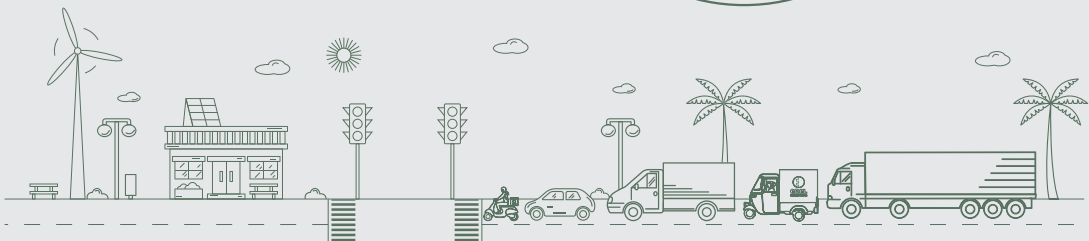


| Keeping the workplace clean

Keeping the promise of safety

Zero Accident Zone (ZAZ) project

- Launched ZAZ project on Nashik-Bhiwandi Expressway
- Conducting safety awareness programs through rallies and marathons
- Road shows on safety in schools, colleges, hospitals, petrol pumps, dhabas, etc
- Initiatives to encourage drivers to wear seat belts & helmets
- Reduced fatalities by 32% in FY23 as compared to FY18



Chapter 24

Rest And Road Safety

“The number of accidents on highways and expressways were pegged at 1,37,191 in 2019,” announced the Highways and Road Transport Minister Shri Nitin Gadkari in a winter session of Parliament.

The Government has taken several measures to create awareness about road safety, especially on the Highways where most accidents occur owing to negligence or drunk driving.

Let's take a case in example of an American truck driving incident: On December 13, 2021), a truck driver named Roger Aguilera-Mederos, a Cuban American from Texas, was sentenced to 110 years in prison.

His crime: On April 25, 2019, his tractor-trailer was speeding at 80 miles per hour and caused a 28-vehicle pile-up which killed four men and injured six. Luckily, the State Governor commuted the sentence to 10 years, and he could be out on parole after five years. A massive public outcry and agitation by various drivers' associations pressured the governor to intervene.

Yes, the focus of the court battle was on the road accident that claimed four lives and their dependents. Touching upon the historic legal battle, Lewie Pugh, Executive Vice President of the Owner-Operator Independent Driver Association (OOIDA), raised a few pertinent points: What caused the accident and the maturity of driver training?”

Without mincing words, Pugh hit upon the nail: “For far too long, we have regulated from behind because the monetary interest of driving transportation has continued to push for cheap labour. Those focused on profits, the need for unproven technology, increased insurance, speed limiters, ELDs, and ways to get younger and even less experienced folks behind the wheel. None of these things have or will make trucking safer.”

According to him, the need of the hour is real investment in training. “And it should not be about just passing a test and allowing to hit the road on a truck. We need realistic training hours in all types of weather and driving terrain and conditions. The training must be done by experienced veterans who can be awake and alert when they sit beside the trainee.”

He points out that even a barber needs 1,000 hours of training before he can be licensed to trim and cut hair. So, by those standards, a trucker definitely needs much more training. Pugh's critical observations hold water for the Indian trucking scenario as well.

Let's listen to what he says: “Do we know if the driver could read and understand the road signs in English completely? Did his carrier know his abilities? I would guess again that they didn't. They just wanted to get the load delivered because they knew if something happened, the driver would have to take the fall.”

Another key area to improve safety on highways is adequate resting. “Safety starts with a well-trained, well-rested, and a well-compensated driver behind the wheel that is treated like a professional - instead of just a replaceable commodity,” adds the OOIDA official.

The American narration is a mirror image of what happens in India. In short, adequate training, a good rest and sufficient compensation are important.

The catchphrase 'Wayside amenities' is a part of the transport ecosystem's lexicon. Beyond that, there is little tangible action on ground. There is some technological infusion via on-board gadgets, but execution is the moot point. All the stakeholders comprising the fleet owner, shippers, transporters prefer to be diplomatic with the violators (truck drivers), because they fear that strict vigilance of driving behaviour may pique them, leading to desertion and adding to the woes of driver scarcity.

Let the action begin with keeping the truck driver's cabin clutter-free and hygienic. As far as wayside amenities are concerned, oil/gas marketing companies should be mandated to provide free access to their fuel stations dotting the highways free of cost. The prevailing practice of parking-facility-for-loyalty cardholders only, should be done away with.

Chapter 25

Road Safety To Prevent Fatalities

Dr. Ramanand Jha, a distinguished fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, states: "While the percentage share of road deaths on 'other roads' is the highest, what is significant is that national highways and state highways constitute only 5.04 percent of all roads, but account for 61.11 percent of all road deaths."

The numbers terrified me.

There are several causes of road fatalities which comprise lack of driver training facilities for heavy commercial vehicles, poor road designs, and lackadaisical implementation of road rules by the concerned authorities.

The life and health of our drivers is equally important, so how do we ensure that our drivers stay safe on the road?

The situation in India can be likened to the situation in the US. In his book 'Inside The Truckers World', D. R. Flanagan - a veteran American truck driver, writes: "There is a dearth of driver education in this country. We teach our new drivers to hold a wheel and how to stop and go, but that's pretty much it. The driving educational system teaches nothing about how other vehicles operate on the road." he surmises.

What are some recommendations to ensure safety of the truck driver?

To begin with, getting rest at regular intervals during a long journey is pertinent. This is one of his key recommendations to avoid losing limbs or life. Non-stop work or driving would result in fatigue, leading to losing focus and can prove to be fatal. Flanagan points out, “Fatigue leads to aggressiveness and road rage. It could cause anxiety and high blood pressure leading to a stroke and heart failure.” Here comes the punchline: “Trucking will teach you patience or turn you into a patient.”

I recall Flanagan's advice as I listen to Satyendra Kumar Singh (see above), a long-haul chemical tanker driver with an experience of 20 years. During his journey from Jabalpur to Gandhidham, he rests after every 90–100km ride, to get some fresh air and loosen up (his) limbs. This is a great safety drill.

The 29-year-old owner, Sukatyu Gandhi, considers Singh to be one of his best drivers. “He has a clean record of zero accidents. What more can one ask for? Remember, he carries hazardous chemicals, so safety is of paramount importance,” he adds.

Driver Counsellor Subashis Moharana of Praxair shares his company's safety focus. Praxair, now merged with Linde, provides gas to major steel plants. He undertook a journey risk assessment survey from Kalinganagar (which has a plant alongside Tata Steel) to a client site approximately 600 km away. As part of this survey, the expert had to identify proper resting areas for tankers ferrying Praxair. “These parking spots cannot be anywhere where the drivers wish. We choose only those dhabas that fulfil our stringent regulations,” he adds.

With these strict safety measures and an excellent system in place, driver fatigue is out of question. They have installed five cameras in the vehicle of which three are inside the driver's cabin, monitoring every single gesture of the driver. Any halt beyond 15 minutes alerts the central control room and fleet supervisors. These vigils ensure the safety of the cargo, vehicles, and drivers. And if any driver, who is on the payroll of Praxair, breaks the rules, he is blacklisted and taken off duty. Contracted drivers and their owners lose the contract. These are simple, but effective measures to ensure effective implementation.

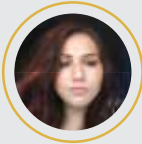
From the point of view on road safety, we need to educate drivers about their duties and responsibilities including the parking parameters, while they are at the wheels.

As far as the law enforcement agencies are concerned, we should implement the rules and regulations without fear or favour. Adequate wayside amenities and regular monitoring of driving behaviour would automatically reduce road accidents. This would be a win-win for all stakeholders, especially the truckers. And it would be a dream come true for Shri Nitin Gadkari who is championing the cause of road safety with passion and vigour.



| Filling air to the hopes

Let's hear from our Desh Chaalaks...



Manju Yadav

Embarking on the road was an exhilarating experience that came alive through MLL. It symbolized my commitment to working hard and striving for a better life. The sense of equality and confidence I experience while driving on highways is unparalleled. For the past 15 years with them, I have owned the road with pride while maintaining an impeccable safety record.



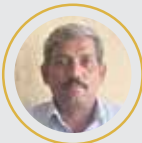
Sitaram Sahane

I never had to look back after I got affiliated with MLL. Initially, I had only 4 trucks but presently I have 16 dedicated vehicles and 40 vehicles with the help of MLL. I was aligned to MLL logistic network as a Sub-contractor for Chassis local movement from Vikhroli to Nashik Plant. MLL has helped me ascertain my business growth.



Dilip Suryawanshi

My family is my first lifeline, and MLL is my second lifeline. I have been working in this field for over 34 years, and with MLL my experience has been much more consistent. It is with the continuous support of MLL that I have become more self-aware and cautious in my professional gamut. MLL's Family Welfare program helped me ensure good education for my children while making a better future for us.



Dattatray Wagh

MLL has changed made an impact on my personal journey since 2012. My health was deteriorating as on most days I had to work from 4am in the morning to as late as 2 am in the next day. MLL with their Health & Wellness program supported me taking care of my health issues. With the help of MLL I have flourished not only personally but also in my transportation business, where now I have a couple of vehicles.

Chapter 26

The Champions Of Road Safety

September 27th was a memorable day for me. I met three remarkable road-safety warriors who are effectively championing the cause with fervour.

The first person I met was the 73-year-old Sudhir Badami, a Civil Engineer from IIT, and an urban planning specialist. We had met at the Mahindra Transport Excellence Award as jury members long ago and have known each other since then. The common interest that binds us is road safety discussions.

In wake of the tragic accident of late Cyrus Mistry (ex-Tata Sons Chairman), on National Highway 48, we decided to visit the accident spot for precise analysis. He said he would get his accident analysis report on whatever he has seen and read in the media. He had already shared his 15-page report on the Mistry accident post-mortem with a gripping narration.

But since his post-mortem is already out, why did he want to make this journey to the spot again? “Yes, I have watched several TV news bulletins and multiple newspaper reports. Everyone has an opinion on this issue and a different approach. What if something is missed out? Plus, a visit to the site is quintessential to get a better perspective,” Badami reasons.

So, I waited for him in the service lane of Kalyan railway station under a dark and damp monsoon sky. The bearded, bespectacled, pencil thin Badami reached and greeted me. We walked almost a

kilometre from the railway station to the taxi pick-up spot to travel to Charoti, a small town which was a 100km away. He managed to get a taxi, although the entry of taxis on Kalyan east is not allowed.

En route, we took a short halt at the Tabela Chai, a unique roadside tea stall with a tabela (buffalo shed) attached to it. During the entire journey, he shared a verbal explanation of the accident. That two-and-half drive from Kalyan to Charoti was like a classroom in a car with a lot of distilled wisdom about the accident and road safety being shared with me.

I realised that while we have several safety norms in place, the real challenge is in the execution where it needs to seep in as a culture, not just talk.

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The next person I met at Charoti was Harbans Singh alias Pappu- a hard-core road safety warrior. He is the second-generation crane service provider on National Highway 48 and the go-to guy on safety issues on this stretch. His father was the most popular emergency helper for truckers, even before National Highways were developed. Since the Mistry incident, he has been in the limelight and is omnipresent on all media platforms: TV, print, and the web etc, where he shares his insights.

We have been working together since 2016 on the cause of road safety, especially on the Borivali-Surat stretch passing through Charoti. Together, we made several trips on this stretch and approached NHAI, seeking their intervention to rectify anomalies to avert accidents.

When we spoke about the challenges of road safety, I realised a few things about him that made him, him. His enthusiasm is infectious, and he does not mince words. This stretch is managed by IRB, one of the leading infra-builders. So, be it the District Collector or IRB staff, or NHAI, he is upfront and straightforward about his opinion. Maybe that's why he is respected by all. Reliable, practical yet championing a noble cause.

So after Badami and Harbans, it was now time to meet the third safety champion - Deepa Tanna from Dahanu. I have known her for a couple of years as an educationist and a versatile personality with a management repertoire.

Deepa and her team had conceived and successfully implemented an out-of-the-box idea called the Crash Reduction Project to reduce accidents in her hometown.

It was a unique project wherein she and her team procured worn-out automobile tyres, painted them aesthetically and stacked them at a T-junction near her educational institution to help avoid vehicle crashes.

It is indeed commendable that ever since she took on this novel approach, the accidents at this site have vanished, and this has been acknowledged by the district authorities. After the maiden success of this project, Deepa wants to apply the Crash Reduction strategy on the Charoti stretch as well.

She asks me and Harbans to meet at Mendhwan, an erstwhile accident site. We recount an unfortunate incident wherein a decade ago, an oil spill accident had claimed several lives.

There had been a chemical tank leak on the highway, so the Mendhwan villagers had rushed to mop up the spilling oil. And in that rush, many of them lost their lives. This was one incident that galvanised Harbans to take on road safety with immense passion.

“Have you heard of tyre daan?” Deepa asks us. I shrugged.

'Tyre daan' means 'donation of tyres.' Deepa explains, “So, under the 'Tyre Daan' scheme, we seek transporters and passenger car owners to give their old tyres to us instead of discarding them. We use these worn-out tyres to build crash barriers that help reduce road accidents and fatalities at accident-prone sites. Like we did at Dahanu, and at NH48. It has been pretty effective so far; hence we scaled up.” She seemed content with the results.

“It's like organ donation wherein you give up your vital organs after you have lived your life,” she adds, with an analogy to emphasise on the importance of 'tyre daan'. “That gesture helps give someone else a new lease of life. Similarly, we coax the relevant parties to give their tyres to us instead of throwing them away and help us save lives.”

What an incredible idea!

Considering that road safety is everyone's responsibility, the least we could do is willingly give away worn-out tyres to Deepa, and she will do the rest. She strategizes the collection points on the busiest NH48 stretch between Borivali and Surat to ease the logistics. Her mission is to go national for which she also plans to approach Corporates for this noble endeavour. She is indeed working 'tirelessly' to save lives in her own brave way.

I was overwhelmed after I met the three road-safety champions. I really wanted to spend more time with them, but I had another journey ahead, this time to Sabarmati to handle some on-ground issue.

Till then, I wish these heroes who are championing life-saving changes on the roads of our country, Godspeed.

Chapter 27

Drivers Always Find A Way Out

I was on my truck trip with Bharat Yadav, a skilled driver, who had to deliver cars to the Maruti Showroom in Kanpur.

We had parked the vehicle at a *dhaba* and spent the night in the driver's cabin. Bharat was on the upper deck behind the driver's seat, and I had settled on the lower deck. Though not entirely comfortable, I reminded myself that I was not travelling in a second-class air-conditioned Rajdhani Express, but in a Tata Prima tractor-trailer worth 45 lakhs, ferrying a sizeable value of brand new Maruti Suzuki cars.

We woke up to the sound of vehicles zooming by. The sun was visible on the eastern horizon. The traffic on the highway was still very thin. A few bullock carts jingled by, with their load of fresh sugarcane bundles. But truck drivers don't have it so 'sweet'.

The other drivers in the *dhaba* parking were waking up to begin their new day.

“*Chotu, ek chai.*” someone shouted.

“*Garam honi chahiye.*” was an additional command.

Be it a driver or a don, a little hot cup of chai has the power of setting the mornings right.

But Bharat Yadav seemed a bit too pre-occupied for his morning tea.

He asked me: “*Yeh aap ka pehla trip hai Kanpur ka?*”

“Yes.” I responded. I observed that he looked a little pensive.

“*Kya baat hai, Bharat?*”

“My delivery is inside Kanpur, at the Maruti dealer showroom. But I am unfamiliar with the city. I have no idea about the 'No Entry zones' and traffic restrictions, etc,” he reasoned.

I could understand his concerns. His vehicle was not an ordinary truck, but a giant 18.75-metre-long trailer carrying a colossal cargo of eight Maruti Wagon R cars or sedan-type passenger cars. The height of the trailer is 4 metres. These dimensional attributes posed a challenge to navigate through city routes.

Also, he had to worry about the power lines of city roads. He wasn't sure whether his tall vehicle could pass the muster without causing any trouble. Add to that, the problems of police challan for traffic snarls, which may cause disasters or disruption. What about the turnaround space for his 18.75-metre-long car carrier? Would he be able to manoeuvre it around the city roads to reach the dealer?

He was not a newbie driver. He had been in the profession of handling such vehicles since three years. But the city of Kanpur was an unknown territory for him, and that was the major cause for his concern.

What was he going to do? Suddenly, I watched him climb into the truck cabin, take out his Nokia mobile, search for some contact numbers, and dial a number.

“Lallu bhai?.... This is Bharat. I am in Kanpur outer. I need to deliver cars to Pandit Motors. *Haan*, Kalidas Marg, that's right.”

Whom was he speaking to?

Bharat then returned, with a big smile on his stubbled face. He said that he had found a guide.

I looked at him questioningly.

Long-haul truck drivers know the highways like the back of their hand. However, they are not savvy with the city roads, where they have to make deliveries. The traffic regulations for heavy vehicles inside cities are like a deadly minefield. No one wants to take risks. They need local help. So, they seek the guidance of 'Sherpas' to navigate through. Sherpas are like local guides who know the city roads and the regulations well. Like the Sherpas on the Silk Route who ensured safe passage of cargo and the carriers from the hazards of laws and corrupt policy makers.

“Sir ji, aaiye. Chai peete hain. Tab tak Lallu bhai bhi aa jayega!” (Sir, come, let's have tea. Lallu bhai will arrive meanwhile.)” said Bharat.

Over the next 45 minutes, we finished our sugary tea with a pack of Parle-G biscuits. Then Lallu bhai arrived. A bulky man in his mid-forties, he walked into the *dhaba* and greeted us. We then started our last mile journey into the city as he escorted us to the gates of Pandit Motors on Kalidas Marg in the city.

Lallu bhai sat next to me on the conductor's side, instructing Bharat how to get there.

It was my first encounter with the modern-day road Sherpa, but I learnt a lot about him. He was reeking of liquor, wore dirty pants and had a pair of bathroom chappals. His cheeks were unshaven, and he had droopy eyes. During the short ride, he told me that it was his full-time occupation to 'guide' truck drivers like Bharat

who were new to that area. Usually, he would make about a thousand rupees on the days he worked, which was about 15–20 days a month. He confessed that he did not work all days. Indeed, this is a good income for this human compass who is a vital cog in the transport ecosystem.

A few crumpled currency notes exchanged hands as Bharat paid the professional fees to Lallu bhai.

A few years later, I encountered another Sherpa on a trip from Chennai to Gurgaon. I was travelling with 8 Renault Kwids, on a 2X2 car carrier. This trip was a joint venture between Mahindra Logistics and IVC, Mumbai, who are transporters since more than fifty years.

At around three in the morning, we halted at the outskirts of Jaipur. Kush Singh, the senior driver from Bihar, dialled his Sherpa. We needed someone to guide us around the city for the delivery. It was dark with not a single sliver of light. The silence was all-pervading, barring the occasional pat-pat sound of the truck tyres kissing the tarmac at 50kmph on the highway. An hour passed. No sign of the Sherpa. Singh redialled in vain.

I have this peculiar habit. As soon as I wake up, I instantly need hot tea or coffee. But here, in the middle of nowhere, on the Rajasthan highway near Jaipur, I see no sign of any tea stall or *dhaba* to satiate my thirst for garam chai. What could I do?

Finally, Singh's mobile rings. It is the Sherpa. He is waiting for his assistant to ferry him on a bike to our location and he was still 15km away! He asks us to wait.

After a while, Handsome Muqaddam arrives in a milky white unbuttoned shirt and canvas shoes. He apologises for the delay, hops into the cabin and sits next to me. The cheap fragrance emanating from his clothes hits me. From the conversation between Singh and the sherpa, I understand that they have known each other for a long time.

This time, the sherpa's guidance was needed not for delivery but to cut the running time of the vehicle. So, he needed a shortcut to cross the city. Else Singh would have consumed more fuel and suffered a loss in his earnings. So, under his assistance, we drove almost an hour to reach the destination and paid him the *dakshina* of Rs.1,000.

“How about a round of tea aur namkeen?” offers Muqaddam. We oblige.

Later Singh explains that, if it weren't for the Sherpa, we would have burnt more fuel, because of the roundabout route. Indian truck drivers don't earn a monthly salary. They are compensated on a per kilometer basis. So, if they find an opportunity to make a little more money to support their family, they make the most of it. Understandable.

They have found an interesting way to do that. The leftover fuel at the end of the journey belongs to them so they sell it back to the fleet owner or anyone of their choice, at a discounted price.

In late 2021, I bumped into Sombhai Aslali in Surat, Gujarat, during one of my early morning walks. He was a Sherpa and was “passing time” on the highway, waiting for business. He hates technology, he says. Because the day drivers learn to use Google Maps, Aslali's business would be affected. The older man-made good money but tech can wreak havoc with that.

Truck drivers can navigate their way around any corner of the country. Or they find a way out of any glitch, literally. It is commendable how they take the onus of delivering the goods as committed under any circumstances, safely. Whether it is hiring a Sherpa, or spending additional money or time, they ensure timely deliveries.

They are the true Sherpas of the cargo.

Chapter 28

Take A 'brake' On Drivers' Day

17th September is celebrated as Drivers' Day to pay tribute to our desh chaalaks and give them a day off to unwind, take a 'brake' and simply be.

Usually, the day is replete with the routine of a speech, safety pledges, long lines to sign on the walls etc. But the celebration that happened at the maintenance workshop of Pallia Trans Logistics at Manesar, Haryana, was a bit different this time.

Vipul Nanda, a supervisor of the company, thought of doing something 'hatke' this time. He realised over the years that drivers hate lectures. If it is Drivers' Day, it should feel like a special occasion. It should be one with fun activities, joyful engagement, music, fanfare and the works. In short a 'masti ki paathshaala'. It should be about the drivers and not long dreary speeches.

So what could they do a different this time? A brainwave hit.

As we know, drivers are not too conscious of their appearance. This hampers their image and people behave differently towards them.

But what if we groomed them a bit? Maybe a nice haircut and a smart trim will make them look like a million bucks. The handsomeness will overhaul their persona and the corrupt highway bureaucrats and policewalabs will definitely offer a little more dignity than to an ungroomed driver.

Secondly, drivers are the brand ambassadors for the transport companies, in a way. They represent the culture and organisation. Just good uniforms but with unkempt hair and a bushy beard won't cut the ice.

So, the idea was to give them a makeover! A 'hero-maafik' hairstyle, a little shave and facial, a dash of perfume and voila. Our men resembled a battalion. Smart and shaandaar. "Achcha dikne mein burra kya hai?" In fact, Vipul cottoned onto this as his campaign slogan. After all, a better appearance improves one's self-esteem, which is already in short supply among truck drivers.

Post that they were in for little treat - a special screening of latest Hindi blockbuster Brahmastra in a multiplex, with popcorn and Coke. Followed by a delish dinner at a mall restaurant — and not at a highway dhaba for a change!

It is heartening to see that times and attitude towards the drivers are changing. Fleet owners are thinking out of the (gear) box, and not punishing the drivers with more boring lectures on safety.

Plus, they give out prizes or awards when the drivers are dressed in their best and not in their gray khaki uniform. If possible, they also join them for the salon makeover or dinner. In fact, Drivers' Day is a fabulous bond-building exercise which is sure to boost productivity. They are getting their due gradually.

Desh chal nahi raha, desh badal raha hai, in the truest sense. Aur apne desh ko chalaane wale bhi badal rahe hai.

Chapter 29

The Ethical Dilemma

Kamal Dogra is a long-time friend from the transport fraternity. As the Chairman of the Dogra Group, he was in a quandary when one of his company's drivers died in a road accident.

The incident happened while the driver was at work. As the owner of that trucking company, Dogra felt responsible for the accident. He wondered how he could compensate the family including the 2 children whom the trucker had left behind. After all, he had been a truck driver himself once upon a time before he progressed to own a transport company.

Legally, he does not have to do anything as the due process of law is taking its course to settle matters. The compensation case is underway, and the family may be awarded a lump sum.

Dogra's dilemma is that his legal team advises him to avoid entertaining any unnecessary claims, but his heart dictates otherwise. He is fighting an inner battle with his own conscience – an ethical dilemma.

Meanwhile, as a moral responsibility, Dogra agrees to underwrite the total educational expense of the family's two children until they reach 18. Besides that, he readily commits to put a fixed deposit in the kids' name to help them earn a regular source of income.

Above all, he commits to provide the widow with a job in his company as she holds an LMV (Light Motor Vehicle) license. Or he might help her get a full-time day job in Bengaluru, as she does not want to work night shifts.

Dogra has no idea how this proposal will be received. So, he requests me to be the moderating element as I would be paying a courtesy visit to the bereaved family. This was an emotional moment for me too. Not many people understand the plight of fatherless kids. I lost mine when I was 18 months. No amount of money can bring back a loved one. But it's a daily risk a truck driver's family face. The minimum a stakeholder can do is to train the driver on safety standards. The maximum one can do is empathise with the family and compensate them for the loss of their sole-earning member. The journey in-between depends on the truck driver's destiny as well. Let's make that easier for him.

As a society, it is imperative that we shoulder some responsibility for our desh chaalaks and their families too.

Chapter 30

A Letter To My Supply Chain Friend, Abhi

Dear Abhi,

It was wonderful speaking with you early this week.

I can understand your predicament that as a supply chain executive of a global port management company, you have trouble interacting with the truck drivers at JNPT(Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust). They are indeed a cagey and uncommunicative lot.

You asked me how one can get them to open up and talk freely. It is a valid query. I faced the same challenge 12 years ago when I began my journey with them. They are actually down-to-earth and humble from inside, but put up an arrogant facade. Maybe it's their defence mechanism to handle the arrogance of those above them.

But there is always a way to their hearts, their humble selves. This is all about connecting with their human self. Let me share a few insights which I picked up from my experience:

First of all, switch your dress code. I feel drivers distrust white-collared, suited-booted people. So, I adopted a new dress code. Rather an 'undress' code. I switched to a normal, creased pair of pants, T-shirts, or knickers. At times, I even wore a gamcha!

But that worked. I started to look like one of them, so they began to see me as one of their own! Apnapan.

Secondly, I LISTENED to them. No pontification, no judging. No paper & pencil surveyor approach. I quietly sat along with them at dhabas, parking yards, even at roadside or wherever they went. So, you will need to let go your ego and so-called educated/white collar behaviour. You need to be one of them. That's the best way to build bonhomie.

Once they start trusting you, they always open up about their problems. They will talk about challenges faced on the road. You and I can do nothing about it, but you can definitely LISTEN.

This approach makes them feel that there is someone paying heed to their grievances. Usually, they are an ignored lot. The fleet owners, supervisors don't really listen to their problems and sometimes reflect an air of superiority. As George Orwell said, "Some are more equal than others!". So, you try to be their equal, and not above.

Once the drivers' litany of complaints is over, they feel more relaxed. Because they have found a safety valve in you: they found an educated pair of ears to listen to them for a change. It's a big victory for them. Allow them that luxury.

Next, try to build a relationship with them, and treat them like a friend. No, become friends with them. Not simply for vested interests, but with genuine interest.

Converse with them. Don't take the MBA school Q&A approach. Instead, ask about his family members' welfare. It is not that tough. Imagine that you bumped into a long-lost childhood chum after several years. This is your test of winning their trust.

And how do you know you have passed that test?

If the driver offers you a cup of garam chai at that point in conversation, you're home. "Hey, chotu, do chai. Ek achchi doodhwali, medium cheeni chai saab ke liye aur doosri chai, meri waali!" he might say, a subtle hint that he has established a certain level of bond with you. The power of a cup of tea, I must say.

Once the chai ceremony is over, you might have spent at least 30 minutes with him, alone. He is now intimate enough with you, so he is ready to share his mobile number.

Abhi, I did not attend any elite management school. Nor have I learnt about HR at XLRI (Xavier School of Management) in Jamshedpur. But all these years of on-the-road school has taught me the core truths of basic human psychology. I learnt that all he needs is a confidante, someone who listens & not just talks back.

His bosses ignore him. His supervisors ignore him. But, you - despite the fact that you are a 'babu' working in a large MNC, you are sitting in front of him and you heard him. That makes him feel happy.

However, you cannot afford more time with him than this. Your bosses might even not like it. Bear them out. Over time, when the productivity gains increase, they might understand your approach.

But more than productivity gains, you have won a friend who will stay that way forever. Even if you leave your current employer to join another business enterprise, he will stay connected.

Before you bid good-bye, tell him, "Call me anytime you want to talk." Exchange numbers, store his number and make him store yours. He's bound to call you. He does not want to miss an educated friend like you.

And when that happens, open up with your other questions. He will open up with you too. Why, he might be ready to talk about his personal issues as well. Be his trustworthy friend.

That, Abhi, is the secret to building a relationship. That is the key to winning over anyone: be it a sweetheart you were wooing at some time in life, or a truck driver. Gaining confidence of the other person is critical, and genuinely caring for them is the key to your character.

I hope you have enough learnings now on how to start your new friendships with the truck driver.

Chalo then, I have a call in-waiting from a driver friend, whom I met six years ago. I will catch up with you soon.

Ciao.

P.S.: You asked me about CDRM (Center for Driver Relationship Management). This is what CDRM is all about. Pure understanding of human psychology. And it works in any organization, not just with truck drivers.

ALL OK PLEASE!

THE END

About The Author



Ramesh Kumar, an Economics graduate from the University of Madras, spent his entire career spanning 35 years in the world of publishing: print, TV and web focused on business/economics. He has worked in India and the Persian Gulf (2005-2009), helping launch print publications, TV (news & current affairs) stations & websites.

He began his career with Macmillan India and traversed through various publications such as Gentleman, GFQ, Technocrat, Business Computers, The Indian Post, The Independent, Free Press Journal, Mid-Day (Bombay), Observer of Business & Politics, Business India TV (TVI), Jain TV, Doordarshan etc.

Between 2005 and 2009, he was associated with United Media Services, Muscat, Oman as Group Editor of Oman Economic Review, Alam Aliktisaad Walamaal, Signature, Al Mara, OER Dossier, & moved as Strategic Editorial Advisor to OmanTribune, Muscat, Oman. He also advised INSURE magazine, published from Dubai Media City , UAE.

He was one of the three key founding-editors of Logistics Times. Now he is associated with the SAARC Centre for Transport Studies, a research outfit.

As Editor-India of Automotive Logistics Magazine and Finished Vehicle Logistics Magazine of London, UK, and regularly contributes to Logistics Insight Asia of Singapore.

He publishes SUPPLY CHAIN INDIA, a weekly e-Newsletter, capturing the mood and happenings in this domain and DRIVERS DUNIYA, India's FIRST driver-focused English Quarterly magazine.

10,000 Km on the Indian Highways was his maiden book, followed by Naked Banana, An affair with Indian Highways and Drivernama.

He lives in New Delhi, India with wife and daughter.

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They are the driving force behind the nation's economy, tirelessly ensuring that the wheels of economy keep moving. They are the unsung superheroes, the true desh-chaalaks—India's truck drivers. This book stands as a tribute to these remarkable individuals who lead rugged lives, navigating endless roads to deliver our food, essentials, and everything else to their rightful destinations. Within the confines of their truck cabins, they endure long hours, sleepless nights, and the challenges of the delivery process with unwavering determination. Mahindra Logistics considers it a privilege to be part of this project, recognizing the tireless efforts and immense significance of these road warriors.

As an organization, it is our responsibility to honour our truck drivers and provide them with the dignity they deserve. With deep gratitude, we acknowledge the vital role they play in delivering our very lives to us. "Desh Chaalak" is the culmination of extensive research, captivating storytelling, and impactful anecdotes by the writer and author - Ramesh Kumar. Drawing from his real-life experiences during road trips alongside truck drivers, his keen observations, and his vast network, this book takes shape. Mahindra Logistics takes great pride in joining in the journey of the desh-chaalak.

Together, let us celebrate the indomitable spirit and unwavering dedication of these truck drivers. May their stories inspire us, foster a greater appreciation for their sacrifices, and ignite a sense of gratitude for their invaluable contributions to our nation's progress.

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