

Licensing and Livelihood: Railway *Coolies*

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As most of us would recall of our train journeys, it is a familiar figure clad in red that sees us off and receives us after a long and tiring journey. They are the ones on whose head and shoulders rest our bag and baggage, while we endlessly walk from one platform to another. Following us up and down the cross-platform bridges with tens of kilos of weight on their heads, it is certainly not an easy day for the licensed railway porter.

This breed of workers literally thrives on our load, making a living out of hard physical labour. While their red shirts add spice to the buzz of activity at railway stations, life sadly is not as colourful for this class of workers. Although they have been serving the train passenger ever since the inception of the Indian Railway, licensed porters even today are not Railway employees. They are merely authorised by the Railways to provide porter services within the station premises, against a monthly license fee and are bound by certain terms and conditions. One would expect at least a little more recognition of the profession, given the fact that a porter's license is granted by the President of India! And while the Railways do not put a tab on their earning potential, it does fix an official rate for their services.

The Railway's primary objective while creating this class of workers was to ensure that luggage transportation facilities are available to all train passengers at all times and at reasonable rates. To achieve this objective, the Railways decided to authorise a certain number of people to provide *coolie** services at various stations, and to revise this number periodically in accordance with growing passenger traffic over time.

While most of us would share the perception that getting into an entry level profession like this would be a cakewalk, reality turns out to be a different picture altogether. Given the regulation *raj** that our government follows, everything from the number of new licensees to the selection procedure is decided by the Railway authorities. And though it might come as a surprise, even this one requires political connections and some little palm greasing!

This study was initially aimed at understanding the procedure followed for licensing of railway porters by the Delhi Division of Northern Railway. However, as we went along we discovered a variety of interesting issues which were both startling and thought provoking and which revolve around our very own *coolie chacha!**

These issues, to name a few, include the perpetuity characteristic of a porter's license; the huge premium commanded by a porter's license; the strange rules regarding transfer of licenses and the illegal practices that fall out from these loose laws.

We attempt to showcase and make the reader aware of these issues, which are largely unintended consequences of our current systems and policies and need to be tackled urgently.

The good, bad and ugly of being a *coolie*

As is already mentioned above, the licensed railway porter is not an employee of the Indian Railway. He is licensed by the Railways to earn a livelihood by offering his services to railway passengers for transport of their luggage. He is required to follow certain rules and

* The Hindi words *coolie*, *raj* and *chacha* translate to porter, regime and uncle respectively in English.

regulations, failing which his license can be suspended or cancelled. Licensed porters are also not governed by the labour laws of the country or any other act.

Although the Railways are in no way obliged to provide monetary or other benefits to licensed porters, they are offered some facilities purely as a goodwill gesture. In fact, the strong unionisation of porters in the past few years has helped them obtain these privileges from the Railways.

Licensed porters do not enjoy facilities like pension, gratuity and insurance. The only social security they have is the provision to pass on their license to a near relative who promises to bear their expenses once they are unable to work. Also, they are not entitled to any compensation by the Railways in case of injury, disablement or death while performing their duty at their place of work. Licensed porters do not have the provision of taking voluntary retirement and passing on the license to their breadwinner while they are still fit.

The benefits that accrue to a porter follow:¹

1. Complimentary travel pass for self in second/ sleeper class from station of work to any station in India, and back (granted annually)
2. One set of Privilege Ticket Order (PTO) in second/ sleeper class for self and spouse from station of work to any station in India, and back (granted annually). A PTO enables the porter to travel at one-third of the normal fare.
3. Medical facilities for out-door treatment of self, spouse and dependent children at Railway hospitals, in case such exist at his station
4. To have their children admitted in Railway schools wherever these exist, subject to availability of seats in these institutions, preference being given to wards of Railway employees
5. Two sets of summer uniform or one summer, one winter uniform (alternate)
6. Casual leave in a year as may be allowed by the Station Master
7. Free use of Railway's light trolleys and hand barrows for carriage of luggage
8. Free use of waiting halls, latrines, canteens provided at stations and in some cases, a rest house (aka *coolie* shelter)

Ever since the porters' unions have strengthened and become more influential, they have constantly been portraying a sorry picture of the porter community, thus demanding more and more privileges for their *coolie* brothers.

Some of their most recently met demands include the extension of medical facilities to the porter's family members in 1995 and provision of the PTO in 1998. However, there are a few demands put forward by various porter unions, which are still unfulfilled. Some of these are inclusion of indoor treatment at Railway hospitals under medical facilities to porters, provision of voluntary retirement after 20 years of service i.e. authority to transfer license while being fit and inclusion of porters under Workmen's Compensation Act.

Though licensed porters do not enjoy any housing facilities provided by the Railways, there is a provision for a *Coolie* Rest House or *Coolie* Shelter at most big stations. However, this shelter has the capacity to accommodate only a handful of the large porter strength at these stations. While this set of porters make the rest house their home, others group up and

¹ As listed in "Terms and Conditions of Working of Licensed Porters Directly Licensed by the Railway"

rent cheap accommodation where they chip in and stay together. The *Coolie* Shelters also in most cases are shabby and cluttered with their beds and their clothesline in the same premises!

On the flip side, the good part about being a licensed porter is that you are your own boss. This group of men are the fortunate few who can enjoy the luxury of taking an afternoon nap while at work! One is free to choose his hours of work and can put in anything ranging from two hours to sixteen hours a day. How much time a porter puts in broadly depends on his capacity to work and his urge to earn more. Putting in eight hours of sincere work each day, a licensed porter can earn a handsome 10-15 thousand rupees per month. In most cases, however, these porters sit idle and effectively work for only about two to three hours each day.

I still love the profession—how do I enter?

Like we already warned you, obtaining a porter's license is as knotty as most other government licenses! Quite unaware of this fact when we started off, one of us actually dressed up in rags and reached the station, all set to apply for a license and experience the process first-hand! While we presumed it would be a short and simple procedure, we soon learnt how painstakingly complicated and time consuming the process was. We describe the process in detail for your enlightenment.

First, it is not very often that the Railways come out with openings for licensed porters. Although it is required that the demand for porters at various stations be assessed on a regular basis, the system in practice is quite ad-hoc. The average time span between fresh recruitments for the Delhi Division is 3-4 years, with the last batch of new entrants recruited in 1998. The process for recruitment of porters was initiated again in December 2002, but is still underway and unfinished.

Arriving at Vacancies

The prime factor that governs the demand for porter services is the passenger traffic at a given station. Since the number of long-distance trains (originating, terminating and passing through a station) has a very high correlation with passenger traffic at that station, it is used as the best indicator for porter demand.

It is true that the *Rajdhani Express* would carry more porter-requiring passengers and hence produces more demand than the *Magadh Express*, which is bound for economically backward states. In addition, the quantum of wheeled suitcases and other easily portable luggage affects the demand for porter services. However, the Railways do not go into much detail during their analysis and are concerned only with the number of trains.

In case a review takes place, all station managers are required to assess the situation at their respective stations and submit a report stating their requirements.

The Divisional Railway Manager (DRM) is the competent authority with regard to recruitment of licensed porters. After a proposal for additional requirement of licensed porters is approved by the DRM, the following process is initiated:

1. **Publishing openings:** The Commercial Department, Delhi Division, Northern Railway publishes openings by way of a "Vacancy" advertisement in leading national dailies

giving details of the number of vacancies at various stations, eligibility criterion, required documents and the application deadline.

Interestingly, the latest opening published in December 2002 in the *Times of India* appeared on Page 14, the sports page and the advertisement measured a mere 28 sq. cm. in size, which is about one-fortieth the size of a newspaper page! A high level of ambiguity is also evident in the advertisement (notice: other documents)

2. **Receiving applications:** The Railways receive responses to the vacancies published from aspiring coolies through registered post. An estimate of the vacancies to applicant ratio is 1:100.²

Given the level of ambiguity in the 2002 advertisement, the Railways received a wide variety of documents accompanying the applicants' bio-data. These documents ranged from ration cards to college degrees to SC/ST certificates. Even though there is no requirement for any educational qualifications, majority of applicants had completed their school education. That these educated youth apply for a porter's license reflects the magnitude of unemployment that has gripped our nation.

3. **Scrutiny of applications:** The received applications are scrutinised by the Commercial Department and arranged in alphabetical order. All applicants who have been able to provide the required documents along with their application are then sent interview letters.

The interview letter mentions the date and venue of the interview. Besides, it gives a list of the documents that the interviewee has to produce on the day of the interview. These are:

- a) Valid proof of Date of Birth
- b) Certificate showing verification of character and antecedents from the police station where applicant resides
- c) Three copies of applicant's recent passport size photograph
- d) Interview letter issued by Railways

Another point to note is that the interviewee has to bear all expenses from his place of residence to New Delhi. The Railways do not provide any Travel Allowance.

4. **Screening:** The Screening Committee screens all eligible applicants over a couple of months' time span. The Screening Committee appointed by the Railways consists of three members. These are:

- a) **Railway Officer:** He/ She is usually a gazetted officer of Northern Railway and can be the Divisional Commercial Manager (DCM), Divisional Traffic Manager (DTM) or Assistant Commercial Manager (ACM). This officer is nominated from within the Railways by the DRM.
- b) **Employment Officer:** He/ She is a senior scale officer nominated by the District Employment Officer.

² Source: Brij Pal, Office Superintendent (Catering), Delhi Division.

- c) Education Officer: He/ She is nominated by the Education Department and is usually the principal of a government school.

The DRM is the approving authority for the Screening Committee.

The interview process focuses on physique and medical fitness of the applicant. The primary concern of the committee is to ensure that those selected for the job have adequate load-carrying capacity. In order to assess this, all applicants are required to lift up and carry sand filled sacks weighing about forty kilos, which is the average weight that passengers normally carry. It is ensured that they can lift these weights at one go and without too much effort or difficulty.

5. **Final list:** Names of those selected for the job are submitted to the DRM. A list of selected candidates is put up at the DRM's office. The DRM's office then issues appointment letters and the porter is made to sign an agreement.

On appointment, a licensed porter is provided the following-

- a) Badge with license number inscribed.
- b) Two pairs of uniforms for the summer and winter seasons respectively.

Licensed porters are required to pay an amount of Rs 10 as one time security deposit (refundable) and a monthly license fee depending on the kind of station they operate on.

For A-class stations, with over 150 porters:	Rs 10 per month.
For B-class stations, with 50-150 porters:	Rs 5 per month.

The legacy that is the golden arm-badge!

Since licensed railway porters are not entitled to any kind of old-age pension or retirement benefits, the Railways have made a provision for them to live comfortably through their grey years by permitting them to transfer their license to an inheritor, against the promise that he will take care of their financial and other requirements in their last years.

According to the Railway Board policy, a licensed porter's badge may be transferred to his son or if he has no son or his son is not alive, to his near relative in the event of his death or when he becomes old, infirm or very sick and is not able to carry out his duties properly. Near relatives here include the porter's brother, his brother's son (nephew) and his wife's brother (*sala*).

The transfer of badges takes place at the station itself where gazetted officers such as the Station Managers, Station Masters or Area Officers are the competent authority to accept such transfers.

The following documents are required to be produced in case of a transfer:³

1. Medical certificate by Railway doctor, certifying the retiring porter (applicant) as medically unfit for work
2. Fitness certificate of transferee, issued by a Railway doctor
3. Affidavit indicating that the applicant is the sole earning member of his family thus proving their dependence on him; and that the transferee is his nearest relative

³ As per Policy Letter issued by Railway Board in 1995

4. Affidavit indicating that the transferee will bear the expenses of the applicant post-retirement, or of the widow of the deceased licensed porter
5. No Objection Certificate for transfer of badge from both transferee and transferor (or his widow, in case of death)
6. Police verification report of transferee
7. Proof of residential address from *sarpanch*. *

The transferee should not have worked as a licensed porter for Indian Railway in the past. Also, it has to be established that the transferee does not have any other source of income and is in dire need for work. The competent authority is supposed to personally scrutinise each case and to further verify in case of doubtful cases. In case of a bogus affidavit, the badge should be cancelled and an FIR⁴ registered.

Carrying load causes impotence!

While the system of transfer of licenses was initiated with a noble cause, it did not take too long for people to start misusing it. Being a long-term investment with flexible work and fair returns, a porter's license was soon in demand attracting a high premium. Touts and agents would get bogus affidavits prepared and people paid huge sums of money to obtain these licenses second-hand. Moreover, these premiums have been increasing over time at a rapid rate, giving rise to a possibility for arbitrage.

Premium on a porter's license (in Indian Rupees)

Railway Station	1994	2003
Nizamuddin	60,000	4,00,000
New Delhi	1,00,000	3,00,000
Old Delhi	80,000	1,80,000

(Source: Head *Coolie*, New Delhi Railway Station)

The obvious question is: why would a poor man pay up so much, that too for a porter's job? This very same question left us perplexed and wondering for a good period of time. After some running around and speaking to a substantial number of people (including loads of porters!), we reached the conclusion that a porter's situation is not as pathetic as it seems on the face. Agreed that they put in a lot of hard physical labour, but they do have a fairly high earning potential. Though the figures stated below are their average earnings, licensed porters can earn substantially more by putting in a few extra hours of work.

A porter's average income (in Indian Rupees)⁵

Railway Station	Daily Income	Monthly Income	Yearly Income
Nizamuddin	250	7500	90,000
New Delhi	220	6600	79,200
Old Delhi	100	3000	36,000

Second, a porter's job comes with the flexibility of choosing his own work hours and the amount of work he desires to put in. It leaves them with a lot of freedom and very few restrictions as compared to other low-level paid jobs.

* *Sarpanch* translates to Village Head in English

⁴ Stands for First Information Report, which is lodged at the police station to report a crime

⁵ As revealed by substantial number of porters at the three railway stations

Third, since a porter's license can be passed on from one generation to the next, it becomes a long-term secure investment where one can recover his money over a period of time.

Due to extensive misuse of the transfer facility, it was withdrawn for a few years before 1988, until late Rajiv Gandhi ordered for its restoration. Ever since, the misuse has been re-initiated hand in hand with the policy, giving rise to a racket of fake transfers.

The modus operandi for these fake transfers is fairly simple to understand. In most cases, a fake medical certificate establishing illness of the license holder and a bogus affidavit certifying the transferee and transferor's relationship is obtained by way of bribe. In parallel, any officer in charge of verification is also paid under the table, to ensure that things go by smoothly. Since the relationship of a brother-in-law is the easiest to fake and most difficult to verify, in most bogus cases the transferee is the *sala*.

Transfers to various relatives at New Delhi Railway Station⁶

Year	Transfer of license to				Salas as % of total transfers
	Son	Brother	Nephew	Sala	
1999	7	Nil	1	12	60%
2001	6	2	1	24	72%

Since transfer of license to a near relative can take place only in case one has no son, the high percentage of transfers to the porter's brother-in-law can safely lead us to conclude that carrying load on the head makes one impotent! Even more astounding have been the cases where *bachelors* (Numbers 1028 and 1317 at Delhi) have transferred their license for money, producing bogus affidavits declaring the transferee as their brother-in-law.

Most porters claim that the agents for such malpractices are some *coolie* union leaders who charge a huge chunk as commission. One of the most prominent names that come up is of Harsi Patel, a union leader at the New Delhi station. It is strange to note that while some union leaders are the flag-bearers in such practices, others still are strongly against it and complain regularly in this regard to the authorities. The National Federation of Railway Porters, Vendors and Bearers has been continuously writing letters to the DRM's Office in this regard, informing them of this 'bogus affidavit' racket. One of their pleas was to ban transfer of license to a brother-in-law, since most fake cases happened through that route.

After repeated complaints, an enquiry was set up in 2001 to look into the matter. The Assistant Commercial Manager (General) was deputed to personally visit few villages and *verify the genuineness of the verifying authorities* (sounds strange, but that is how bad the state of affairs is!) Three cases were picked up at random, were found genuine and were consequently cleared.

Arranging themselves to get work!

It is interesting to note how porters arrange themselves with regard to division of business. For departing passengers (who are bound for another city and require luggage to be ported from the station entrance to their respective platform) the licensed porters follow a queue system and get customers turn by turn.

The case of serving passengers arriving from other stations is slightly more peculiar. Whenever a train from out-station is about to arrive at a particular platform, licensed porters start to assemble there some minutes before its arrival. Along the platform there are

⁶ Figures from Northern Railway's data on transfer cases.

demarcations that divide the entire platform into a number of parts (called *hadh*) and each of these parts extends up to about 50 meters (approximately the length of a train bogie). There is a mutual understanding that in each *hadh* will be followed a first-come-first serve system. Within each of these areas, a maximum of 4-5 porters assemble initially. On arrival of the train, they approach passengers and get customers according in the same order as they assembled. Unless the first porter leaves a passenger by his own will, the others do not come and undercut him with regard to the charges.

While this system is to the advantage of the licensed porter community, it often goes against the railway passengers who are not left with too many alternatives. Go one step further, and we recognise that this arrangement is a direct fallout of the porters' cartel which has come into existence due to the licensing system of porters. Since the existing porters face no threat of external competition (as entry into the business is regulated), they have unionised and arranged themselves to gain maximum benefit as a group.

The business of rate-fixing and overcharging

While initiating the system of licensed porters, a main concern of the Railways was that these porter services should be available at reasonable prices, being affordable to the average traveller. Since a market-determined rate was a highly unreliable option for our planners and policy makers, a rate regime determined by the Railways was imposed on the licensed porters. This rate, called the official rate for porter services is required to be reviewed every two years. The rate is not uniform for all stations though it might be the same for a group of stations under a particular division of the Indian Railway. For instance, all stations under the Delhi Division follow a uniform rate, which has been revised rather infrequently and by tit-bit amounts.

Porter charges for stations under Delhi Division (in Indian Rupees)⁷

Year	Up to 40 kilos (head load)	Up to 200 kilos (trolley)	Over 200 kilos (trolley)
1989	3.50	7.00	11.50
1995	7.00	12.00	20.00
1998	9.00	15.00	25.00

The Railways does its best to keep passengers informed about the official rates for porter services. There are repeated announcements and appeals on the public address system to follow the official rate and complain in case of overcharging. However, majority of people shell out an amount that they arrive at after haggling, which in most cases exceeds the official rate fixed. This amount is mutually agreed upon by the passenger and the porter and so is essentially market determined.

The current rate for head load, at Rs 9 per 40 kilos, is without question insufficient for survival given today's ever-increasing price levels. And most authorities admit to this fact. However, when asked as to why the official rate remains so low pat comes the reply, "Given an official rate of Rs 9, the porters normally charge Rs 30–35. Had the official rate been Rs 30, they would be charging Rs 100!"

Though this argument seems reasonable at the face of it, a deeper thought would give us the correct answer. The rate of Rs 30 that most passengers pay today is more like a

⁷ Data obtained from the following Northern Railway letters:
GM/Commercial Letter No.43AC/O/P.Charges/95 dated: 28.04.98
DRM NDLS Letter No.23-AC/406/7 dated 31.01.89

market-determined rate, determined largely by the forces of demand and supply. Given this fact, no matter how much the official rate is pegged at, it is the market rate that will prevail.

We therefore argue that this system of fixing rates for porter services does not make sense and must be scrapped. The official rates exist only in the rulebooks and nowhere on ground. The current initiative to hike the rate for head load from Rs 9 to Rs 15 is again a futile exercise and will not cease the problem of overcharging. Its implementation is clearly a waste of time and resources.

Numbers, for a clearer picture⁸

	Old Delhi	New Delhi	Nizammudin
Long Distance Trains ⁹	100	170	95
Platforms	18	12	5
Sanctioned Licensed Porters	1034	1478	281
Working Licensed Porters	1001	1453	281
Licensed Porter Inspectors	1	1	1
Licensed Porter Supervisors	12	4	Nil
Average Daily Income (in INR)	100	220	250

Of misconduct, supervision and suspension

As per Clause 8 of "Terms and conditions of working of licensed porters directly licensed by the Railway," the license of a porter may be suspended for a period not exceeding 15 days at a time or may be cancelled by the Station Manager/ Station Master for any misconduct, namely:

1. Catching or alighting a train in motion
2. Cornering of train seats
3. Discourteous behaviour towards passengers and/ or causing damage to their luggage
4. Charging a rate in excess of the official rate for porter services fixed by the Railway administration
5. Rough handling of Railway luggage
6. Disobedience of lawful orders of authorities like Platform Inspector/ Supervisor.
7. Unauthorised absence from work
8. Conviction in a court of law for any offence
9. Any other misconduct causing annoyance or harassment to passengers

To make sure that these instructions are strictly followed and are not violated, a policing mechanism has been set in place. The following is the list of officials who have been appointed by the Railways to deal with licensed railway porters, in decreasing order of seniority:

1. Licensed Porter Inspector (LPI)
2. Assistant Licensed Porter Inspector (ALPI)
3. Licensed Porter Supervisor (LPS)
4. Licensed Porter *Jamadar* (LPJ)

⁸ All figures correspond to July 2003.

⁹ Estimate, as given by A S Negi, Public Relations Officer, Northern Railway.

While the LPI remains at the top of the hierarchy, the other three categories have more or less merged today and are required to perform almost the same functions. All these officers are either Class III or Class IV salaried employees of the Indian Railway and enjoy all benefits that accrue to Railway employees, including post-retirement benefits.

It is interesting to note that the lowest rung officers i.e. the LPJs are selected from amongst the licensed porters, by a committee of two officers. These LPJs can then further seek promotion and move up the ladder as they become more and more experienced.

While most Licensed Porter *Jamadars* (LPJs) claim that their main job is to ensure that no passenger is overcharged, they are quite aware of the fact that almost nobody pays the official rate. They agree that the official rate for porter services is a measly amount and is not enough for a decent living. Hence, the LPJ normally interferes only when the passenger lodges a complaint of overcharging. As long as the passenger is paying an amount higher than the official rate by his own will, the LPJ is okay by it. However, some people claim that it is because the *Jamadars* share the booty equally with porters, and not on sympathetic grounds, that they do not interfere. Another reason for the ineffectiveness of *Jamadars* is that they themselves being *ex-coolies*, do not command much respect from the licensed porters.

Given the fall in the number of LPJs year after year with current LPJs retiring and no new recruitment, it is humanly impossible to keep a check on the *coolies*. For instance, the New Delhi Railway Station is now left with only 4 LPJs to keep a check on the 1,478 porters who operate here. That leaves us with 1 supervisor per 370 *coolies*! Even worse is the case of Nizammudin station, where the LPJ species is altogether extinct. In fact, the Licensed Porter Inspector (LPI) controls the 281-strong porter population single-handedly.

Overall, this whole system of licensing and state control over porter services needs to be re-assessed. Since one drawback leads to another, the problem at hand is even more critical and complex. We attempt to highlight the urgency of the situation, so as rouse the authorities from their state of hibernation and initiate the process of change.

Help came in the following guises:

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Chaurasia	Licensed Porter Inspector (LPI), Old Delhi Railway Station
Arun Shukla	Senior Station Manager, Old Delhi Railway Station
J L Kapur	Ex-Officer, Central Railway
Cheeku Chacha	Head <i>Coolie</i> , Old Delhi Railway Station
Arun Kumar	National Working President, Northern Railways Licensed Porters Hawkers Vendors Union
K C Misra	Principal Office Secretary, National Federation of Indian Railwaymen (NIFR)
Supreet Singh	Assistance Booth, Old Delhi Railway Station
Brij Pal	Office Superintendent (Catering), Delhi Division, Northern Railway

References

- ❖ Official Letter titled "GM/Commercial Letter No.43AC/O/P.Charges/95 Dated: 28.04.98"
- ❖ Official Letter titled "DRM NDLS Letter No.23-AC/406/7 Dated 31.01.89"
- ❖ "Terms and Conditions of Working of Licensed Porters Directly Licensed by the Railway" obtained from Commercial Department, Delhi Division, Northern Railway.
- ❖ Vacancy advertisement (Number 3583/2002) issued by Northern Railway.

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