

Licensing of the Railway Porters: Burden of the Badge

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Contrary to popular misconception, the porters who have been serving train passengers ever since the inception of the Indian Railway are not employees of the Indian Railway. They are merely authorised by the Railways to provide porter services within the station premises. While the Railways does not put a tab on their earning potential, it does fix an official rate for their services.

The Railways' primary objective while creating this class of workers was to ensure that luggage transportation facilities are available to the 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.

If you thought becoming a porter was a simple thing, you can think again. Given the regulation *raj** that our government follows, everything from the number of new licenses to the selection procedure is decided by the Railway authorities. And even this one requires political connections and 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 other interesting issues like the permanent validity 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 are an unintended consequence of these rules and regulations.

We attempt to showcase and make the reader aware of these issues, which need to be tackled urgently.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of Being a *Coolie*

As already clarified, 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 regulations, failing which his license can be suspended or cancelled. Licensed porters are also not governed by the Labour Laws 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 close 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 the place of work. Licensed porters do not have the provision of taking voluntary retirement and passing on the license while they are still fit.

The benefits that accrue to a porter are as follows:¹

1. Complementary 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. Facilities for medical treatment of self, spouse and dependent children at a Railway hospital, in case such exists 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 and 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.

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

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

8. Free use of waiting halls, latrines, canteens provided at stations and in some cases, rest houses (aka *coolie* shelters).

Ever since the porters' unions have strengthened and become more influential, they have constantly been demanding more and more privileges. 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 large stations. However, these shelters have the capacity to accommodate only a few of the large porter strength at the station. While this set of porters make the rest house their home, others rent cheap accommodation where they chip in and stay together. Mostly, *Coolie* Shelters are shabby and cluttered with beds and clotheslines in the same premises.

On the other hand, the good part about being a licensed porter is that you are your own boss. These 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 16 hours a day. The duration of time a porter puts in broadly depends on his capacity to work and his urge to earn more. Putting in eight hours of work each day, a licensed porter can earn about Rs. 7,500 per month.

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, yours truly actually dressed up appropriately 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 lengthy the process was. We describe the process in detail for your enlightenment.

First and foremost, 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 was still underway and unfinished at the time of research in May 2003.

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 produce 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 regarding the 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:

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 square centimeters in size, which is about one-fortieth the size of a newspaper page! A high level of ambiguity regarding the documentation required is also evident in the advertisement.

Receiving applications: The Railways receive applications 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, a majority of applicants had completed their school education.

Scrutiny of applications: The applications are scrutinised by the Commercial Department. 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

Screening: The Screening Committee is appointed by the Railways. It screens all eligible applicants over a time span of two months. The Committee comprises of three members. They 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 Office.
- 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 medical fitness and physique 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 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 in one go and without too much effort or difficulty.

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 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

² Source: Official of the Delhi Division.

The Golden Arm-Badge!

Since licensed 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 allowing 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.

The transfer of badges takes place at the station itself. A gazetted officer such as the Station Manager, Station Master or Area Officer is the competent authority to accept such transfers.

The following documents are required 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.
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 Railways 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 the doubtful cases. In case of a bogus affidavit, the badge is cancelled and an FIR⁴ registered.

Transfer of licenses!

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-schedule 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.

Premium on a porter's license (in 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)

Why would a poor man pay so much for a porter's job? 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 extra hours of work.

A porter's average income (in Rupees)⁵

Railway Station	Daily Income	Monthly Income	Yearly Income
Nizamuddin	250	7,500	90,000
New Delhi	220	6,600	79,200
Old Delhi	100	3,000	36,000

³ As per Policy Letter issued by Railway Board in 1995

* *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

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-paid jobs.

Third, since a porter's license can be passed on from one generation to the next, it becomes a long-term secure investment whereby 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 the late Rajiv Gandhi ordered its restoration. Ever since, the apparent misuse has continued with the policy, giving rise to a racket of fake transfers.

The modus operandi for these fake transfers is fairly simple. 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. Concurrently, any officer in charge of verification is also bribed to ensure that documents move 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 brother-in-law (*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%

There have been 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 malpractice are some porter union leaders who charge a high commission. It is strange that while some union leaders are the flag-bearers in such practices, others 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, informing them of this 'bogus affidavit' racket. One of their pleas was to ban transfer of license to brother-in-laws, since most fake cases happen through that method. After repeated complaints, an inquiry was set up in 2001 to look into the matter. The Assistant Commercial Manager was deputed to personally visit few villages and *verify the genuineness of the verifying authorities!* Three cases 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 different. Porters begin to assemble at the station a few minutes before the arrival of the train. Along the platform there are 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 common understanding that a first-come-first serve system will be followed in each *hadh*. Within each of these areas, a maximum of 4-5 porters assemble initially. On arrival of the train, they approach passengers and get customers in the same order as they assembled. Unless the first porter leaves a passenger of 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 porter community, it often goes against the railway passengers who are not left with too many alternatives. 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

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

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, has 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 Railways. For instance, all stations under the Delhi Division follow a uniform rate, which has been revised rather infrequently and by amounts having no relevance with increase in prices.

Porter charges for stations under Delhi Division (in 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, a majority of the people shell out the amount they arrive at after haggling, which usually exceeds the official rate. 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 do 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!"

Since the rate is demand and supply driven, we feel, this system of fixing rates for porter services does not make sense and must be scrapped. The official rates exist only in the rulebooks. 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	1,034	1,478	281
Working Licensed Porters	1,001	1,453	281
Licensed Porter Inspectors	1	1	1
Licensed Porter Supervisors	12	4	Nil
Average Daily Income (in Rupees)	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, like:

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 orders of authorities like Platform Inspector/Supervisor
7. Unauthorised absence from work.

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

⁸ All figures correspond to July 2003.

⁹ Estimate as given by Public Relations Officer of Northern Railway.

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 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)

While the LPI remains at the top of the hierarchy, the other three categories have more or less merged 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 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 of 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 there. 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 to rouse the authorities from their state of hibernation and initiate the process of change.

Reforms

The process of licensing seeks to ensure that the luggage transportation services are available to the passengers and to establish a modicum of guarantee of the luggage security for a passenger in case of a loss.

The reforms here can be two sided. One, which aims at changing the manner the porters supply their services and the other, which aims at changing the system of their employment.

Deregulate the licensing system for entry and institute a registration process

The licensing system should be removed and a registration system should be put in its place. The authorities can start off by contracting the porter-work to any number of interested entities. The private entities can do a better job of verifying the applicant's origin and credentials. This is how most security firms deal with in providing security personnel for residences. As in the case of security bureaus, a porter bureau would ensure efficient and dependable services. To further ensure efficiency the condition that an insurance company gives a certificate to the porter/ union that any loss by a particular porter would be compensated for by the insurance firm to the passenger. This would make the entire procedure more credible. Alternatively, the porters' union can stand for by the loss. There could be any number of porter unions at work. There only has to be a display of the porter's number and affiliation on his self.

With entry unrestricted, porters' fares would fall to optimal levels, there would be no premiums of huge sums of money to be paid for the job and livelihood options would open up for many more.

Privatisation of railway management and its beneficial effect on porters and other professions on the station premises

On the other hand reforms need to be brought about in the railway management itself. The platforms and the networks if privatised would ensure benefits for both the passengers and the porters. In such a scenario, when two private players will interact, the negotiations will be based on only one principle: higher gains. And higher gains can accrue only through better service. Thus, it would be in the interest of both the porter bureaus and the railway owners/ agencies to have contracts that are price efficient and service efficient. Also, competition in such a case would drive prices downwards till they reach a stable and optimal level.

In a system where the railway networks and stations are entirely privatised with competitive mechanisms in place, porters and passengers would undoubtedly benefit. A railway station if privatised, stands to benefit passengers and livelihoods through the provision of diverse services including porter services. There would be provisions for different kinds of hawkers and goods with a mechanism of regulation of food stepping in due to the incentives for credibility of the service-provider.

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.