



# A welcome move?

That our perishable management system hardly has anything to write home about is no secret to anybody. And while poor storage system is a serious bottleneck here, the sub-standard transit methodologies are equally responsible. There are examples from some developed markets which have adopted mechanism to ensure that reefer vehicles are given preference while on move. The objective behind this approach is – perishables should be reaching to their destination in the shortest possible time. But for over 30,000 reefer vehicles plying on Indian roads (and this number is growing consistently every year), there is no such special privilege. They continue to be victim of the usual transit hazards on highways (infrastructural, system made and even criminal intent) as the regular trucks. The only difference being the losses in the case of reefer trucks resulting from delays are more serious in nature since they carry time sensitive products. Needless to say, this trend also contributes to those colossal perishable losses we as a nation have to incur year after year.

To do away with the delays issue in reefer vehicle transit in the country, the National Centre for Cold-chain Development (NCCD) has now stumbled upon a unique idea of kickstarting a dedicated helpline service for reefer truck drivers. Our cover feature in this edition focuses on this proposed initiative wherein Chief Advisor of NCCD, Pawanexh Kohli has shared the details. The project is both unique and ambitious in the sense that it entails to involve local officials of 625 plus districts in the country. Going by my own preliminary interpretation in terms of attaining its objective, a helpline of this nature would clearly be a long-haul story rather than creating an instant magical wand kind of effect. The primary nature of the modus operandi would be to consistently collect complaint data over a period of time, identify the prominent trouble zones for reefer movement in the country and constantly remind the local officials to take action. Almost in a gentle rap on the knuckle manner.

The point now is: can we really call this initiative (likely to become a reality in January next year) a welcome move? Most of the cold chain sector representatives we spoke to find it a good-intentioned move in principle. But then there are scores of examples to prove that honourable intentions alone can't guarantee faultless execution. The bigger concern, of course, is how the local official machinery actually respond to those constant reminders from Delhi. Leaf through the cover feature to look at various strands of a promising initiative which is clearly not shorn of its share of ifs and buts even as NCCD is busy clearing the decks for its implementation.

ACAAI – the apex body of the air cargo fraternity - would be holding its 40th annual convention in the Pink city later this month and in a candid chat with us (another highlight of this edition), the president of the association Bharat Thakkar underlines the primary agenda which would be taken up this time.

Waiting for your response

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In a unique initiative of its kind (and probably also the first anywhere in the world), the National Centre for Cold-chain Development (NCCD) has decided to kickstart a dedicated 24x7 helpline service for over 30,000 vehicles that carry temperature sensitive cargo on Indian roads. The service would entail taking local authorities of 630 districts in the country in the co-



# *In the offing: 24x7 Helpline for Reefer Vehicles*

ordination loop for actual action on the ground. **Pawanexh Kohli**, Chief Advisor, NCCD provides the details in an exclusive conversation with **Logistics Times...**



Pawanexh Kohli  
Chief Advisor, NCCD

**F**irst thing first. Oddities notwithstanding, the entire reefer trucking sector in the country is simply huge with about 8000 to 9000 refrigerated vehicles and 25000 insulated vehicles. On a general basis, there is a very large volume of freight vehicles plying on Indian roads – something which seems to be on an ever growing trajectory and as a consequence there are very large players handling different kinds of cargo. The nature of cargo varies but what remains uniform is the nature of the problem – inordinate in-transit delays owing to various reasons including infrastructural bottlenecks and cumbersome regulatory procedures. Stakeholders in the transportation business are always searching for solutions.

### The Transit Scenario

As NCCD, our focus is on the cold chain and we have now kickstarted the idea of an unique helpline service for reefer vehicles. But first the

background. Unlike other forms of cargo, if the perishable cargo is stopped and delayed in the transit, it is subject to a higher risk due to its short shelf life. This risk translates into physical loss and as a nation we need to care about this wastage. We all know that India has one of the highest wastage of perishables every year. And our primary agenda is to reduce the losses. The food losses in the country can't just be ensured by creating adequate cold chain capacity, which on a cumulative basis actually requires storage, transport and other forms of physical infrastructure. There are also other important processes involved but the greatest risk level is when the goods are in-transit mode on the roads and reach the consumers. We also understand that the major advantage of cold-chain is to extend saleable life cycle, which in effect buys time to reach consumers. This effort is wasted if we cannot reduce time spent on roads, blockages and bottlenecks on the roads. We need to ensure that the cargo

spends the shortest possible time in reaching to the markets and consumers.

It is no secret to anybody that the most difficult process to manage in logistics is the inventory in transit. If there is any delay or hassle, the goods may lose its value in quality, quantity or subsequent storability. When moving perishables-items like ice creams, butter, pharmaceuticals, meat, fruits and vegetables, etc. - any delay onroad especially if there is a large time lapse because of some malafide intent, the cost could be dearly. I have been told that vehicles are often stopped on the roads by criminal gangs, hoodlums, or even unnecessarily by the RTO personnel to extract some gratuity. And gratuity is more forthcoming from a perishable cargo carrier. If you stop a reefer vehicle and switch-off the cooling system, the driver is pressurised because product in his care will rot. In that kind of situation, the best option available is to buy your way through. We do not believe

all the checks on the road are cumbersome. Some of them are genuine. But the issue is: even the genuine checks can cause delay in perishable transit and the point is how to streamline them. Can we make sure that the most sensitive link in the chain, which is transport of perishables, can be hastened, quickened, put on the fast-track? We can't ensure their faster movement on roads than what the condition of any stretch would permit but we can surely work in the direction of expediting their movement by devising solution to do away with the hassles which can be streamlined.

It is to address this key issue of expediting reefer vehicle movement that we have mooted the idea of starting a 24x7 call-in-centre for reefer drivers, to record and process their troubles. There will be a toll-free number where they can immediately call when faced with a troubling situation. Just to illustrate the general scenario in roads for reefer vehicles, a carrier might be carrying chicken all the way from South India to Kolkatta passing through seven different states. And in each state, they keep stopping for checks on a cargo which is already on challan, all the paperwork has been initiated and the recipient is responsible for receiving at his end. Now you just imagine, such a vehicle is stopped 15 to 30 times all through the route. So a trip which may take five days gets elongated to 10 days. Remember, when these vehicles are stopped, they join those serpentine queues alongwith other regular trucks with no preference shown to them. They normally remain stuck there for hours. Delays become cumulative -each delay for perishable cargo is a higher



risk because the longer you are relying on the cooling system of the vehicle, greater are the chances of the failure of the machine and of course there is the unnecessary loss of usable shelf life!

Also remember, this same trip is completed on car in in two and a half to three days.

Any fast track movement if facilitated will reduce and aid the cold-chain at multi-fold levels. It will lead to the greening of the cold-chain by reducing fuel used both in cooling and transport, it will minimize risk of food waste occurrence, it will ensure that the shelf life extension is not depleted in held-up inventory but actually used at consumer shelves. Furthermore, it will reduce the cost of cold-chain and will bring more stakeholders into the fold.

### Basic features of the helpline

The mechanism of our helpline service would be like this: a toll free number would be provided (it will be aggressively advertised) and every time there is a bottleneck enroute, the driver can call us directly. Most of the calls, of course, would be related to unwarranted stoppages and on road harassment. The subjective definition of these stoppages would necessarily need to be provided by the caller. Calls can also be initiated by the cargo owner, the transport owner though we expect the onsite drivers will be the primary initiators. Our agenda would be to record enroute bottlenecks- and use the information to facilitate easing of both process related and regulatory concerns. We will have a list of questions

for the complainant wherein the caller will obviously be asked to identity himself, the vehicle, the owner of the truck and or cargo, size of the vehicle, nature of the cargo, the location from where he is calling and the precise nature of the problem. These things will get documented at the call center. And within minutes of receiving the call,

the data will be transcribed into an SMS and an e-mail which will be sent to four-five identified government departments and people of authority governing that specific region. The Principal Secretary (Transport) of that particular state or the State Transport Commissioner, Director General of Police (DGP), NHAI Chairman 's

office and some other local officials will also receive information. We are preparing the list of authorities on a pan-Indian basis who govern issues that we perceive bottlenecks for reefer movement. We will notify them and keep on updating the feedback which we receive. Now the issue is what would be the time lapse between recording a complaint and alerting concerned authorities? We are already in the process of identifying an implementation partner from within the NCCD member database and we will have to see what kind of system capabilities can be put in place. But I don't foresee the call centre's response time would be more than 5-10 minutes after receiving a call.

## OPINION

# It could be a tall order



Sanjay Agarwal  
Chairman  
Devbhoomi Cold Chain

Reefer trucks are like sacred cows for our industry. By their very being, they undertake the carriage of highly sensitive perishable cargo. I believe any step in a helpful direction to industry, is a good step. Of course, the proof of the pie remains in the eating. There are many instances of good intentioned initiatives becoming nightmares in themselves. For that to not

happen here, a very strong and purposeful monitoring of the processes at NCCD end would need to be developed. All the governmental harassment that this system seeks to check are really good-intentioned provisions gone awry. Thus it can't be ruled out that this system may suffer from apathy or carelessness to the reported woes by truckers.

As far as problems faced by truckers from criminals or hoodlums, I think a simple panic button should be provided, which will transmit the panic signal, and with GPS will give the NCCD precise location of truck, and then it should be the responsibility of NCCD to notify local police authorities and record a follow-up and conclusion, this should be usable in an insurance claim. This is because it would not be possible in such situations for the trucker to give detailed information to the NCCD operator about the owner of the truck, size of the vehicle, nature of the cargo, the location from where he is calling and the precise nature of the problem, etc.

Regarding state boundary crossings, NCCD could play a great role in facilitating reefer truck movement by certifying the delicate nature of cargo carried and recommending priority clearance. It could even be a one-window clearance for all state boundary crossings.

If the idea that "reefer trucks are sacred cows" can be conveyed to all and sundry, then this initiative of NCCD would be deemed a success. But admittedly that is a tall order.

## A redressal call center

NCCD is not spread across the country and is merely a domain specific think tank for the government. Yet as the umbrella agency for various cold chain stakeholders, it is the nodal center for communication for them. Hence it is important to understand, NCCD is not proposing an independent action center but the mechanism for a redressal center. How will we redress? By immediately alerting the authorities once we have a complaint registered. Now it would be upto the local authorities on how they act to deal with the issue on the ground. So we respect and depend on local authorities to take action. In actual terms, these calls will normally be made after facing a bottleneck or post any unfortunate harassment. So any resolution is unlikely to be instantaneous. The information that is received and passed on to state authorities will also be collated – state wise and

district wise- and with the help of stakeholders we will devise targetted policy interventions to actually streamline and mitigate concerns in specific areas and regions. Many state level authorities are apprised of the importance of cold-chain and are ready to support changes to ensure fast track movement of perishable goods.

Now the question is: are we going to have a direct interface with the local authorities? The answer is yes and no. That is why we have devised a mechanism wherein senior officials would be alerted and they can further ask their subordinates to take the required action. We would then directly interact with relevant authorities on a regular basis to assess the impact and implications of the flow of information and to advise on possible corrective measures. This information will also be regularly published online. We believe over a period of time this information will lead to the changes required in the regulatory pattern via-a-vis reefer transit. Where are the hassles? Can we simulate interstate movement on roads as on rail, specially for perishables? Can the genuine regulatory checks be streamlined and can the unofficial stoppages be ended? In addition to the daily recording of the complaints, we will also prepare and share monthly reports with the state governments. For that we would expect a certain quantum of data to be built up which may take a few months initially. Though we will be advertising this service aggressively, it will probably be a while before all concerned parties get aware about it. The volumes will be a function of the awareness level. Once we have a base data

## OPINION

# Treat drivers as customers

In my opinion, a truly effective helpline is one that caters to the customer's requirements and models itself based on that. In this case, we are talking about the drivers as customers. So, in order for the helpline to be effective, let us first understand the driver. In the logistics industry, the drivers carry tonnes of valuable cargo almost every single day through all kinds of road and weather conditions. Yet, inspite of all these hurdles, it is this group of people who make sure that we never have to go without our favourite brand of soap or cereal.



**Bela Gajjar**  
Head - Customer Relations  
Mahindra Logistics

So, all that said, how does one cater to this group of people? While we can look at all the 'state of the art' technology, it is the front liners that can make or break this. The front liners have to be knowledgeable, of course but more than that, they need to be adaptable to the needs of the customer (in this case, the driver). There has to be a willingness to listen and understand the kind of concerns and queries that may be brought out by the drivers.

No matter how big or small the concern may be, it is real to the driver and hence requires a resolution just the way we would do for our other customers. Resolution timelines need to be in place depending on the kind of concern and it has to be followed through completely. This is not something that can be done in isolation and without the support of a cross functional team who shares the same goal.

The benefit of having a help line service of this sort is also multi-fold. Not only does it give the drivers a sense of belonging, it also shows that someone cares about them and the problems they face. This of course has a direct reflection on the quality of service the driver delivers to our end customers. Ultimately this permits us an insight into the challenges faced on the road, it also gives us the opportunity to make suitable changes to ensure seamless delivery of goods. This is particularly true for the perishable goods where timely delivery is of paramount importance. So, simply put, creating and managing a dedicated helpline for drivers involves:

- ▶ Easy Access
- ▶ Timely response
- ▶ Support team
- ▶ Analysis to mitigate recurring concerns

pertaining to the pattern and trend in reefer movements in different pockets of the country, we will start sharing it regularly with the central ministries, state

governments. I think, going ahead the concerned central ministries may recommend action items to the state governments.

This is a pan-India public service which is being provided and at first we will setup this toll free call-in-centre as a small operation. Depending on the volume of calls received, we will accordingly scale up the

operations. Presently, we do not have much idea what could be the call volume. The call-in-center is planned to be free and open to the entire range of 30,000 plus reefer fleet plying in India. To call-in, the vehicle

must be operating for perishable cargo and the complaint must be related to transit delays. As the reefer fleet operators find some value from this service, we expect the volume of calls to increase. At that stage to handle large traffic, if required we may request the user companies to come forward and share in the cost. We will decide on this once we know the call volume patterns. If scale becomes big and if we have to deploy 50 people to man this call center, then we would expect some support from the industry. NCCD after all is all about forging partnerships and collaboration with private parties to pave way for the structural growth of the cold chain sector.

If required, we will then discuss with companies the future option of pre-registering for a nominal fee of maybe Rs 100-300 per vehicle once a year. This will also streamline the process for them. Suppose a company has got a fleet of 50 trucks and we have the registration number of all these vehicles in our data base, if the call comes from one of them it will be quickly registered since they already exist in our records. If they are registered with us and happen to have a GPS-enabled fleet (in the future all government support to this sector via subsidy assistance would make it mandatory for reefer vehicles to have a GPS system), then the position too can be accurately ascertained. No time would be wasted there. A major risk area which reefer operators and cargo owners often face is linked to the refrigeration failure. We may explore to even record machine failures and pass on technical complaints to equipment service providers all over the country to fast track emergency repairs.

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## Advantage Logistics

The logistics industry involved in cold-transport benefits from this initiative by having a single point option to officially record their in-transit complaints. This would help to narrow down which specific stretches on the highways the harassment is prevalent, which regions require attention for regulatory amendments, etc. All of this would translate into cost savings to service providers. The policy makers will benefit as recipients of structured base line data, specific to perishable trade and its bottlenecks, and can bring to focus required amendments. The nation would take a step closer towards hassle free movement of perishable items.

## Industry & Stakeholder Partnership

Right now, this is entirely an idea or a concept mooted by NCCD and it has already received approval to implement this reformist step. We are now scouting for implementation partners. We are talking with some private firms with the capability to implement it. One foresees and hopes that organisations with progressive leadership and strategic mindsets would step forward to partner in this initiative.

Some private players have already responded with extreme enthusiasm. But personally, I am frequently disappointed with the industry. They expound positively to many initiatives which we propose. Yet when it comes to joining hands as partners, they often display dithering signs. NCCD was set up by the government at the behest of this industry, as an urgent need from this sector, yet very few have stepped up to truly consort with NCCD. Sadly,

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matters of their own interest are shelved by them, with only unilateral demands put forth. This could very well be due to current business environment, yet unless the industry takes the bull by its horn, they will not be able to fulfill their long term goals. Industry players need to move beyond their immediate sufferance and work towards mitigating its recurring occurrence. NCCD will continue to function to promote integrated cold-chain systems in the country. The industry need not only take advantage from the side lines but should also sincerely and actively participate.

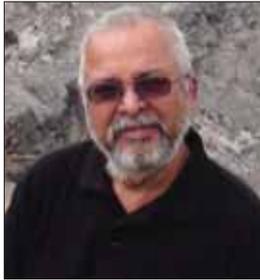
Well, this redressal mechanism is about recording their sufferance and devising solutions thereof. One is not aware if such a service exists in any other country. In our view, this may be the first of its kind initiative in the world. In the context of conditions in the Indian marketplace, this would be very unique because we have various inter-state regulations, norms, policies, state RTO policy, etc. We want to at least bring them in an alignment to facilitate smooth reefer movement. If you consider Europe, the reefer

vehicles are stopped only at international border check points and provided priority at that. Here in India, they are not only stopped at state borders but also at multiple points within the state. No priority checking is offered. This is despite our having inter-state transport permits which are regulated yet there are stoppages and checks to monitor that. There could be a central monitoring mechanism developed to counter that. Once everyone registers with us, their inter-state movements or permits can be on records, reefer vehicles can be given special permits, checks maybe limited only to origin and destination points, free toll access provided, etc. So this could very well become the precursor to becoming a nodal platform for all reefer transportation in our sub-continent.

As I said earlier, right now we are scouting for an implementation partner and we hope to finalise an implementation plan in coming weeks. The agenda is to launch the Reefer Vehicle Redressal Centre (RVRC) around the beginning of the next year.

*(As told to Ritwik Sinha)*

# Why only 300 Km/day? Why not more...



Ramesh Kumar\*

At the time of Independence (read Circa 1947) when the Indian road sector had nothing to boast off in terms of kilometers, heavy commercial vehicles used to cover not more than 250 km in a day. Over the past 11 Five Year Plans, this critical parameter has inched by an additional 50 odd km. Pathetic, indeed.

Out of curiosity, I trawl into the archives of Government of India – more specifically the budget speeches of the Finance Ministers of yore. What do I find? The word, “transport” appears for the first time in the 1947-48 budget speech of Shanmugam Chetty (page 5, para 8). What did India’s first Finance

talk about something that does not exist?

Why only 300 km a day today – 66 years after Independence? Why not more? Is it possible? Or isn’t? If yes, what is preventing this higher goal? Is it peculiar to India or other countries as well? Questions galore. Bear in mind that we are not talking about carriers covering this distance in a running time of 24 hour cycle. Then what? We are talking about the vehicle moving on road for not more than 10 hours in any 24-hour cycle. What? Yes, it is true, Indian commercial vehicles do not – repeat, DO NOT – move on highways beyond 10 hours on any given day. Listen to McKinsey’s report

**Why only 300 km a day today – 66 years after Independence? Why not more? Is it possible? Or isn’t? If yes, what is preventing this higher goal?**

Minister tell the nation?

“In recent months, the production of coal has shown some improvement. but so far as the consuming public is concerned, this has been more than neutralized by difficulties in transport resulting in large accumulation of coal at the pit heads. Transport and other difficulties explain the drop in production to some extent, but this is also partly due to labour unrest and strikes.’

No mention of ‘highways’ at all. How can the Hon’ble Minister

on Building India: Transforming the nation’s logistics infrastructure by 2020:

In addition to mode costs, transit times across modes in India are longer and vary widely compared to developed countries. This can be partially attributed to low average speeds. For example, the average speed of a truck is 35 km per hour on India’s highways as compared to over 75 km per hour in the US. Similarly, the average speed of freight trains is 25 km per hour in India while it is close

to 45 km per hour in the US. Low average speeds are accentuated by a variety of factors: uncertainty in waiting times at toll stations, freeze in truck traffic during the day, high turnaround times at ports, low priority accorded to freight trains on Indian railways, low-quality track infrastructure and outmoded trucks susceptible to frequent breakdowns, resulting in long transit times. These challenges significantly increase the management complexity for users of India's logistics network.

If you don't trust McKinsey, then hear this out from the Working Group set up six years ago in the run up to the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2011), stewarded by doyens of the road transport industry. A semi-governmental version on the challenges and specifically answering this perpetual "why only 300 km a day?" query:

Barrier free movement of passenger and freight by road across the country is vital for promoting efficient economic development and growth. A goods vehicle in India is answerable to all the checkpoints and traverses under conditions which are not ideal, leading to lower speeds and low utilization of rolling stock. This makes seamless flow of freight traffic across the India difficult.

A typical truck operator has to normally face seven different agencies for either obtaining clearances for carrying goods or paying certain charges at the check post. These agencies are mainly: 1. Sales Tax 2. Regional Transport Officer (RTO) 3. Excise 4. Forest 5. Regulated Market Committee 6. Civil Supplies (for check on the movement of essential commodities, black marketing, weights and measures, food adulteration) and 7. Geology and

## What is lacking perhaps is courage and conviction of the biggest industrial lobbies – CII, FICCI, Assocham to tackle this issue head on.

Mining. These checks are generally conducted by respective agencies at separate points, resulting in more than one detention. Detention of vehicles causes lower speed, loss of time, high fuel consumption and idling of vehicles, leading to under-utilization of transport capacity and adversely affecting their operational viability.

Besides, it imposes economy wide costs which are not easy to assess. Better roads and faster speeds may be offset by Inter State Check Posts (ISCPs). The system in vogue hinders rather than facilitates smooth flow of freight and passenger movement across the country and has thwarted the formation of single common market."

3PLs and fleet owners have come to accept this and given the condition of Indian highways – some patches are excellent and some are absolutely worst – a minimum of 300 km per day is accepted. This norm is applicable for all single driver-driven vehicles on long distance.

No wonder, the average speed of heavy commercial vehicles on Indian highways have not kept pace with the passage of time since the Independence in 1947. Sophisticated vehicles with higher speed levels have arrived already, but their on road performance has not improved – for no fault of theirs.

It is not as if we will be never be able to cover 750-1000 km/day as the foreign fleets do. India Inc, the ultimate users of HCV vehicles for

movement of raw materials from various places to manufacturing site and again pushing finished products to nooks and corners of vast India, can lobby hard with the government to stop the 'harassment on highways'. Let us not lose sight of the fact that the biggest business conglomerates operating out of multilocations across India in different states and therefore can pressurize respective state governments to 'rectify' this major malady. Transport is a state subject and therefore it is within the states' ambit to do something concrete and positive for the industry if they wish. Will they, on their own? Doubtful. Will they, if employment generators (read India Inc) demand? Certainly. What is lacking perhaps is courage and conviction of the biggest industrial lobbies – CII, FICCI, Assocham to tackle this issue head on.

Halting Highway High-handedness will be win-win for all: industry will have quicker and efficient supply of raw materials and finished products; higher turnaround for motor maliks. Higher revenue through increased fuel sale; higher user fee at toll gates. Higher growth. Shifting the goal post to 500 km/day in the immediate future is for the asking. But nobody is asking. If the RTO/TI challenges and interstate border challenges can be streamlined and tackled, India will indeed be a super economic power. The biggest question is: do we aspire for it?

\* The writer is the author of *10,000 KM on Indian Highways, Naked Banana!* and *An Affair With Indian Highways*. He is also the Founder-Chairman of *KRK Foundation*, working for improving the living and working conditions of truck drivers and their families living in remote villages of India.



National Centre for Cold Chain Development



A Nodal Government of India agency for Integrated Cold-chain Development



NCCD contributes to policy making, develops standards & protocols, partners pilot projects and skill up-gradation activities.



**Public Participation – Membership opened**  
For Details, send email to [Contact-NCCD@gov.in](mailto:Contact-NCCD@gov.in)



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