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Coronavirus impact: Logistics firms face hurdles in transporting cargo

The most impacted have been truck drivers, who have had to bear the ire of the authorities and face stigma in their villages.

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Though the government has allowed movement of essential and non-essential goods during the 21-day nationwide lockdown imposed to control the spread of **coronavirus** disease (Covid-19), logistics players are facing a tough time transporting cargo.

The most impacted have been truck drivers, who have had to bear the ire of the authorities and face stigma in their villages.

Small businesses, too, have been affected.

"We had five **trucks** in transit when the lockdown was announced. By the time they reached their destination, they were stopped at the borders and weren't allowed to enter States because foodstuff like Apples were not considered essentials. As a result, that entire consignment ended up going to waste. We do cold chain movement, and these stoppages are impacting farmers, small business and fleet owners the most," said Gazal Kalra, co-founder of Gurugram-based logistics firm Rivigo.

While most drivers working for logistics firms are unwilling to make trips, those who are ready, face issues as basic as not finding food and water on the way. "For the drivers, there are no dhabas, no workshops open along the routes, even though the government has allowed eateries to remain open.

How will the people running these establishments reach highways? They all stay in neighbouring villages and there is no public transport. Besides, they don't have labour and raw material to prepare the food," said Sachin Haritash, CEO and founder at Chetak Group-backed logistics company Mavyn.

With warehouses of most firms being shut, or working in single shifts, drivers often find that there is no one to receive the goods at the destinations.

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- Lockdown has taken a toll on truck drivers, farmers and small fleet owners
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In some cases, the lack of clarity over which items are classified as essential and non-essential has resulted long lines at borders, and some drivers have abandoned vehicles.

"The drivers and employees face another kind of discrimination. They are told by the sarpanch in their village to not enter because they might be carriers of the virus. Some of our other operations staff have been told by their landlords that they won't be allowed to enter the house if they step out for work. The lack of respect and dignity for drivers is also evident in the way they get beaten up by the authorities sometimes," said Kalra.

According to a study conducted last year by the India Brand Equity Foundation, the market size of the **logistics sector** was expected to climb to \$215 billion by 2020, logging 10.5 per cent compound annual growth rate (CAGR) over 2017.

The Confederation of Indian Industry has also requested the government to ease the movement of **trucks** across district and state borders. "Currently, extensive documentation and three passes are required at the district level for every commercial journey. We are in talks with the district magistrates' offices, so that congestion at borders can be reduced," said K V Mahidhar, Executive Director at CII's — Institute of Logistics.

CII is also preparing a database of active logistics firms across the country. The list is being updated daily and the information is being made available to over 9,000 members, said a senior CII functionary. In a representation to the government, logistics firms have requested it to allow drivers to move out from their villages to reach their respective vehicles after getting certificates from local SHO or Sarpanch.

"The government should create a safe and fast corridor for movement of goods. Support for SMEs should be stepped up. Small fleet owners have lost demand so they can also be used to serve orders. The government should consider providing some security for truck drivers also," said Rivigo's Kalra.