

# UNTOLD HARDSHIPS OF TRUCKERS WHO DELIVER SUPPLIES TO KASHMIR

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Life for all kinds of commuters along the 300 kilometers long Srinagar-Jammu highway has been much harder throughout this past winter that saw much more precipitation than earlier few winters.

We often hear about the plight of passengers who get stuck for days along the mountainous highway during bad weather, but rarely do we know what hundreds of truckers who bring supplies to the Kashmir valley go through. They are perhaps the hardest hit with frequent and long closure of the road, faced with loss of time, money and sometimes the very merchandise they transport.

Their personal suffering is untold. There are nearly no facilities for them along this treacherous road, often making survival more difficult than driving along the steep serpentine road along deep gorges.

For thousands of truckers and fuel tank drivers the highway is a daily struggle. Their numbers increase during the ‘fruit season’, when hundreds of trucks loaded with apples and other fresh fruits move out of Kashmir valley every day.

Also, long convoys carrying government forces personnel and military supplies compound problems for the truckers who now say that this highway is the “most loss-making route” for them.

An estimated 5000 vehicles cross the Banihal toll post on an average day and this past winter when vehicles were stuck for days together due to landslides, some 2000-3000 goods-laden trucks including 700 fuel tankers and trucks carrying cooking gas were also grounded along this vital lifeline.

Due to frequent road closures and inadequate highway development, the truck drivers are the ones who are on the receiving end most often. They get stranded for several days and at times have to strive for even basic necessities such as food or water.

There are no toilet facilities for them either, and many of them even complain of vulnerability to diseases due to the chilly weather, particularly while transporting livestock some of which sometimes perish before it reaches Kashmir. “I was driving a truck laden with livestock last January and was hoping to reach Srinagar in 24 hours from Gazipur mandi in Delhi. But unfortunately we got stuck for a week on the highway and I fell severely ill,” said Muhammad Ramzan, a trucker from Kulgam in south Kashmir.

He says the hardships along the highway discourage youngsters to join the trucking profession. Even the scanty roadside eateries along the highway take undue benefit of the situation and overcharge for food and water. Truck drivers have often rued that they run out of money paying sometimes three to four times for basic survival food. “I have paid Rs 20 to purchase a boiled egg. For days we have survived on water that we get melting snow on small LPG stoves we carry with us,” says Ramzan.

It is, however, the locals who come to their rescue offering them essentials, which has proved to be a warm and reassuring gesture.

“We were stranded on the Srinagar-Jammu highway for weeks this winter. Authorities in the region, instead of helping us, often harass us and even ask for bribes to allow us move ahead on the road. The situation there is very bad and it’s a nightmare for many truck drivers like myself,” says Adil Farooq, a 29-year-old truck driver from Anantnag district in south Kashmir. “This year was terrible. At times it even took us almost two weeks for supply of goods from Delhi to Srinagar when the weather was not good. We owe a lot of money to banks against the loans we have taken to purchase our vehicles, but we are in a cash-starved situation and this harsh winter made it all the more difficult.”

Farooq says many truckers have suffered huge losses and were not in a position to pay wages to cleaners and helpers now. During last winter, pushed to the wall after being stuck on the highway for days and sometimes weeks, several truck drivers held protest demonstrations on the highway, but truckers say their plea “has been falling on deaf ears” as administration did not pay heed to their miseries throughout the time of the highway blockade.

Plying on Jammu-Srinagar highway has never been an easy task for the truck drivers. For years movement of goods carriers has been the last priority for the administrations, truckers rue. Truck drivers have frequently been asked by traffic authorities to park their trucks on the roadside for many days. Sometimes, they are stuck there for around a week and are left with no option but to wait.

More seriously, as a result, goods either reach their destination much delayed or in the case of perishable goods, destroyed.

“We have requested the government to build two ration depots for truck drivers at Udampur and Qazigund respectively. From these depots the truck drivers will be able to buy essential edible items like rice, pulses, kerosene etc for their survival during a blockade,” said Muhammad Sidiq Ronga, president of the Goods Carrier Transporters Association. Ronga says, trucks should be granted permission for a slow movement as their parking not only disturbs the trucking business but also hinders the general traffic movement on the treacherous route.

“Also, the higher authorities from the traffic department should do a regular recce to have a realistic view on the conditions on the highway and to check on the smooth movements of the trucks and other vehicles on the route.” Atul Bhardwaj, a truck driver from Himachal Pradesh who regularly plies on the highway says vehicles forced stuck on the highway cause huge losses and inconvenience. He says although they now receive money from their owners for expenses on time but there are no services such as ATM kiosks and lodges along the highway.

“Payment from clients and owners was a major concern earlier but with digitisation, we have started receiving our payments on time and in a hassle-free manner, but the point is there is need for more services on the highway,” said Mehraj-u-din Ganai, general secretary All Kashmir Wholesale Mutton Dealers Association.

He says when a truck reaches Udampur in the afternoon it is not allowed to further proceed towards Srinagar “as preference is given to convoy movement”.

“Our trucks are asked to reach Udampur in the morning and even if we are just a few hours late, the trucks are made to wait for next 24 hours before they can leave for Srinagar.” Ganai says that last winter 40-50 truck loads of livestock stuck along highway inflicted mutton dealers losses of Rs 10-12 lakh every day as sheep succumbed to the extreme cold. Experts in freight services and goods carrier business say apart from government support, private sector can also foray into making trucking business along the highway more secure.

Sachin Haritash, Founder and CEO at Delhi-based online trucking platform “Mavyn” told Kashmir Ink over phone that the company was aiming to make it easy for the truck drivers and address their concerns.

He says his firm believes that technology can be a real game changer for the trucking business across the country.

“We know the problems that the truck drivers face on routes like Jammu-Srinagar highway and how the delay in shipments have been affecting shippers and traders alike,” Haritash said.

“As Mavyn tracks the truck’s movement through its app, we are smoothly able to detect the problem area and provide required support to the drivers.”

The company also provides on ground support to the drivers through its network of ground support staff.