

Navigating Adversity and Coping: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Lived Experience of Truck Drivers in India

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Abstract—Background: The trucking industry is considered the backbone of the Indian economy, although the research on long-haul drivers' lived experiences remains under-researched. This study explores the lived experiences of truck drivers in India who drive across the country without considering their personal needs and stay away from family and relatives for long periods. The study attempts to navigate the adversity and coping of a unique population of truck drivers. **Methods:** Three long-haul truck drivers were recruited through purposive sampling from three states of India: Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth telephonic interviews. **Qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis** was used. **Findings:** Major findings include the unique environment, questions of dignity, accidents, stereotypical treatment, constant responsibility, and emotional, psychological, food, and language barriers related to the challenges they face as long-haul truck drivers. Truck drivers adapt to their adversity by using smartphones, calling family members, connecting through social media, seeking community support, abusing substances, and accepting their situation. A truck driver takes pride in saving lives on the highway by delivering essential materials and medicines on time. **Conclusion:** This research highlights the unique adversities and coping strategies of truck drivers in India. **Implications:** The study implies developing mental health support for truck drivers and reducing physical exhaustion.

Index Terms—Truck Drivers, Adversity of Truck Drivers, Coping of Truck Drivers

I. INTRODUCTION

The transport industry is considered the backbone of the Indian economy. Truck drivers play a vital role in transporting freight across India. A national survey

conducted on truck drivers by the Save Life Foundation reported that 53% of respondents are dissatisfied with their profession, and 84% of truck drivers stated that they would not recommend truck driving to their family members and relatives. Hence, it is anticipated that there will be a shortage of truck drivers in the upcoming years. Research reported that Professional long-haul truck drivers suffer numerous physical health issues, poor mental health, and social challenges (Jalila Jbilou et al., 2024) and occupational stressors, including disrespectful treatment from the general population, Social isolation, Constant time pressures, and road environment hazards such as weather changes, road conditions, fear of violence, and Traffic. (Shattell et al., 2010) A systematic review shows that the long-haul truck driver profession is associated with multiple risk factors related to the work environment and lifestyle practices. (Smoking, Irregular sleep, Diet, and Exercise) (Crizzle et al., 2017; Angeles et al., 2014). Similarly, they work in excesses physical and psychological workload, extreme time pressure, irregular daily schedule, disturbed sleep patterns, sleep less than 7 hours during work nights(Sieber et al., 2014), work irregular days of the week, and work irregular total daily hours. These work-related stressors elicit risk of health and sleep-related problems and the chance of accidents.(Apostolopoulos et al., 2014; Lemke et al., 2015). Research states that lack of sleep leads to drowsiness and fatigue, and it is considered a major cause of truck crashes (Chen et al., 2016). Sleepiness is an important factor in safety outcomes. A study found that while sleepy, sleep quality is better associated with driving than sleep duration. (Lemke et al., 2016) Along with sleep issues, truckers also face

psychological and emotional challenges. A cross-sectional study found that they face significant mental health issues like chronic sleep disturbances, loneliness, anxiety, depression, and other emotional challenges. (Shattell et al., 2012) Apostolopoulos et al. (2016) reported that truck drivers are overstressed and experience loneliness due to work-related pressure and a lack of support systems. Similarly, another study found that long-haul truck drivers experience more occupational stressors, which might increase the risk of depression symptoms. (Crizzle et al., 2020) A systematic review of studies on food, physical activity, and smoking patterns suggested that they have a poor diet, sedentary practices, a lack of physical activity and a high prevalence of smoking. (Houghtaling et al., 2022; Sieber et al., 2014) A health comparison study between truckers and the general population reported that truck drivers were older, had excess work hours, had low incomes, were less educated, drove when fatigued, smoked and ate unhealthily, and were more likely to be widowed, divorced, and separated in comparison to the general population. (Crizzle et al., 2023) Truckers are the backbone of the Indian economy. However, few qualitative studies have examined truck drivers' mental health.

II. AIM

The present study is a qualitative investigation aimed at exploring the lived experiences of Truck Drivers who stay away from family for extended periods and drive alone on the road without considering their personal needs. The study aims to explore in depth the lived experience and navigate the adversities and coping of long-haul drivers in India.

III. MATERIALS AND METHOD

III. I. Methodology

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is adopted to explore participants' lived experiences,

understand how they make sense of their personal and social worlds, and the meanings they attach to them. The Primary focus of IPA study is the meanings that particular experiences, events, objects, and States hold for participants. The IPA Researcher tries to access the participant's personal world through the researcher's interpretation activity. Hence, IPA involves a two-stage interpretation process or a double hermeneutic. Stage one, the participants experience an incident, and try to make sense of their world. In the second stage, the researcher tries to make sense of the participants' subjective world.

III. II. PARTICIPANTS

A total of three truck drivers from Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra were selected for the study through a purposive sampling Technique with the help of local truck drivers' conductors and food delivery owners. Only long-haul truck drivers, Indian, above 18 years, and having a driving licence were included in the study. The objectives of the study were explained to participants before interviews. The mean age of respondents was 37 years. The table illustrates the demographic details of participants.

III. III. SETTING AND DATA COLLECTION

The data were collected through individual in-depth telephonic semi-structured interviews. The Interview schedule was scheduled according to the convenience of participants. It started with building rapport with participants, taking verbal consent from participants for the interview and recording calls, followed by demographic details. Each interview lasted around 47 minutes to 80 minutes. To avoid a language barrier, three interviews were scheduled in participants' languages and concluded with feedback. A meal was provided to two participants as an incentive; one participant refused to take it.

Table 1: Demographic and Occupational characteristics of Truck drivers

No.	Age	Education	Experience	Salary per month	Km per day	Short/long Haul	State
1	30	5th Std	12	Owner	650-700	Long Haul	Gujarat

2	39	8th Std	17	15000/- plus food and expenditure	530-560	Long Haul	Rajsthan
3	42	Illiterate	25	12000/- plus food and expenditure	450-600	Long Haul	Maharastra

III. IV. INSTRUMENTS

The first author constructed the semi-structured interview questions according to the guidelines of IPA. It starts with Rapport formation, asking for general views to specific questions; open-ended questions open up their thoughts; neutral questions and feelings rather than closed questions, leading questions, and jargon. These assumptions make participants comfortable and familiar with the language. The semi-structured interview allows for following participants' interests and concerns, which might not be included in the schedule. The researcher asked certain questions to interpret their world by probing what they meant by: Could you please share your experience? How does it feel?

The interview questions were designed to understand truck drivers' life experiences, their adversities, and coping strategies while being on the road without the support of family and relatives. These are a few questions that were asked to participants to understand their world. Could you please tell me your experience of driving at night? Could you tell me how you feel about staying away from family? Could you please tell me what other people think about you? Originally, questions were constructed in English and translated into Hindi, Gujarati, and Rajasthani.

III. V. DATA ANALYSIS

Recorded interview data were noted in Hindi, Gujarati, and Rajasthani, then transcribed verbatim in English by the first author for data analysis through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in accordance with the guidelines provided by Smith and Osborn (2003). The transcripts were reread many times to become familiar with the data. The data were imported into the atlas.ti software, and codes were given as per the meanings derived from the Narration. These codes were grouped into themes as per the emerging theme drives from the codes. The first author developed the themes and analyzed each verbal transcript separately to understand the in-depth of the participants' experiences. Three of the transcripts were

analyzed separately. At the end, participants' lived experiences and the author's interpretation were synthesized according to the IPA approach

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Navigating Adversity

Truck Drivers experiences numerous adversities, includes continues pressure to load off material, Irregular sleep, sitting on the engine with less space, dealing with uncertainty, Weather conditions, Accidents, traffic jams, Unable to find a restroom on highways.

Environmental and Physical

Weather conditions are directly related to specific seasons and difficulties. The participants mentioned that everybody faces difficulties during the monsoon. However, their struggle is unique. They explained that they have to protect the cargo of the truck with a plastic sheet without caring for themselves. Sometimes, due to heavy rain, they get stuck on the highway for several days. This creates a scarcity of food and water. Despite the heavy rain, the owner demands that the material be delivered on time by taking other routes. They also go through different physical adversities as per the seasons. One participant shared that they drive in wet clothes for extended periods to deliver the material on time. During summer, they have to drive on scorching roads and sit on a hot engine situated beneath the cabin of the truck, which makes them uncomfortable to drive. They get relief only by running the fans. During the winter, cold temperatures outside cause the formation of dew inside the cabin window, which makes the cabin even colder. In addition, Truckers face difficulty driving on the slippery slopes of Uttarkhand and Himachal Pradesh, as well as in the heavy snowfall of Kashmir. The participants also mentioned that they have to drive continuously for long periods of time leads to back pain.

Participant mentioned:

"You know, in the rainy season, Rain comes inside the cabin, we get wet, although I have to drive"

Another Participant mentioned: *"I can't see clearly; I just see gray all around, and sometimes the wiper also does not work properly, making it difficult to drive."*

Stereotypes, Ill treatment and the question of dignity Responses reported pervasive stereotypes about them, the unflattering public image, and ill treatment from the general population. Narration revealed that drives internalize how the general population sees them and defend their own dignity against the general public. This ongoing adversity creates existential exhaustion. One participant shared that they carry one core rupee worth of material, but as they sit on the truck, their value diminishes, and people do not give them respect. Another struggling participant mentioned that RTO, Police, and Car drivers harass them by charging money even if they have done nothing wrong and have all the required documents with them.

One participant shared:

"When someone asks my son What does your father do? And he replies, my father is a driver. ' They start thinking he is a bad guy, sleazy, nasty, doesn't bathe for many days, and stays on the road; he does whatever he wants."

Another Participant mentioned

"When a family comes into the hotel, they treat them well..give water, and waiters ask for orders. But in our case, they don't bring water when we go, and serve us whatever is available, even though I had ordered a different food."

Another participant mentioned an incident of the night *"You know what happened that day, when people in a car asked for money at night, I denied, they followed me for 2 hours, then I hid the truck in the parking of the hotel and hid myself in the grass."*

One participant shared a sense of ignorance in this way *"You know, the life of a truck driver is like a dog, nobody cares for us. When I see accidents on the road, I feel that I would die like this, no one comes for help till i die."*

Sleep, Accidents, and Constant Responsibility

You often hear about car and truck accidents in the news. Narratives provide a deep insight into accidents on the highway. Truckers take fewer hours of sleep, which is irregular and inadequate sleep. Sometimes, they drive without rest, which creates fatigue, both physical and mental. At the same time, they have constant pressure from the owner to deliver the cargo, that leading to accidents. One participant mentioned that neither the owner nor cargo recipients bother

about the cargo but drivers have a constant sense of responsibility towards the cargo in the truck. If goods are stolen from truckers, owners may withhold their salaries for months and send them to jail.

One participant described :

I met with an accident three times, and there were no major injuries except one time, when a major injury occurred. That day, I came back from the Kashmir trip at 3 am, and I had to go to Gujarat at 4 am along with two brothers. They sat with me in the cabin. I was feeling sleepy, and we were in an accident early in the morning. You know, I didn't get injured, but both brothers got fractures in their legs.

Other Participations recollected:

I went for a movie late at night, and the owner called me early in the morning to go to Tamil Nadu. I was in a sleepy state and met with an accident.

Another participant mentioned:

You know, I can't sleep properly. One day, I sleep at night, and someone steals diesel from the truck. It was my good luck that I had money with me, and then I walked for more than 5 km and bought diesel to drive the truck.

Language Barrier

The participants shared another adversity related to language. When they go to southern states and West Bengal. They feel speechless and unable to convey what they want. One participant recalled:

"I drive trucks all over India, but I especially face difficulty communicating in South India. I remember that I had given 100 rupees to the vegetable vendor to buy 500g of potatoes. He gave me 100 rupees ' worth of potatoes. I tried to convey it through gestures, but could not make it out."

Food

Participants reported significant concern regarding diet. They prefer spicy food. Apart from Rajasthan and Gujarat, they do not find such taste and flavours. Consequently, they prefer to cook for themselves and carry raw material with them. Sometimes, hotels serve leftover afternoon food at night, which often leads to food poisoning among truckers. Being alone and sick in such a situation makes him aware of how uncertain their life is.

One participant reported:

"If I have to go to Rajasthan and Gujarat, I have food from the hotel. If I have to go outside of these states, I carry raw materials for cooking to avoid eating rice,

fish, and non-veg. I feel that it's like grass without masala. I cook for myself."

Emotional and Psychological

Another concern participants expressed was that truckers stay away from family and relatives for an extended period of time and have to interact with strangers. Previously, they used to drive along with two or three people, which gave a sense of familiarity in an unknown place. However, the owner does not provide enough salary. Hence, the co-driver and conductor are no longer joining them. While interacting with strangers, they don't feel connected. Sometimes they think about quitting the job, but not being equipped with alternative skills raises questions of livelihood. Participant recollected:

"While driving, I feel lonely. Often, feel what kind of job I have; I earn for my family, but I could not meet them for 5-6 months."

Another participant shared:

"I interact with many people, but do not feel connected."

Participants want to quit the job, but they do not have alternative skills to enter into another profession, which makes it hard to choose a profession other than driving.

One participant mentioned:

"Sometimes, I just want to leave this job, but I can't. I'm habituated to driving, and do not have an alternative skill to enter into another profession...."

"Living without family is eventually a habit for us. Now, I do not bother about how far I am."

Participant reported that missing important events and funerals evokes a deep sense of guilt and a feeling of emotional numbness. While choosing to deliver material at the cost of missing the opportunity to see the face of a family member for the last time.

One participant reported:

"I was going to Assam, I had covered almost half of the distance, and received a call that my cousin had passed away. I had delivered material and came back home four days later. From that moment onwards, I feel guilty about not being present in the funeral of family members."

Navigating Coping

A common theme emerges while doing narrative analysis: connecting with family members through calls and social media. All participants mentioned that

they do video calls and watch the status updates on social media make them connected with family members and relatives. One participant mentioned that He calls drivers who are coming on the same route, and meets them and has a conversation with them.

Participant mentioned:

"I do video calls on the day of festivals and the birth dates of family members."

Another coping theme emerging is substance abuse to avoid loneliness, sleepiness, and physical fatigue. One participant reported that truck drivers suggested to him that he could take opium, marijuana, and drugs to drive safely and to remain awake at night, and he tried only once. Another participant shared that when they are waiting for the truck to be unloaded, they drink alcohol to wake up at 4 am.

Participant recollected:

"I have to drive. If the owner says to deliver the material at that time, we have to deliver it, even if we do not get time for rest. If it is night, I smoke 20-plus cigarettes to stay awake and drive, and sometimes wash my face and drink tea."

Another participant shared:

"It is our choice to drink alcohol or not. I have been driving for 12 years, but never tried alcohol, but I take 20 plus Mava masala while driving at night."

Drivers have pressure to deliver the material on time, so they drive continuously, which creates physical and mental fatigue as well as stiffness in the body and back pain. Truckers take medicines from the medical store without consulting doctors. One participant described: *"Due to continuously driving, when I get pain in my body, I find a medical store and get medicine to get relief."*

One participant accepts their life as it is and shows they are ready to cope with uncertainty.

All participants mentioned that the cabin is everything for them at stranger place. They perceive the cabin as a home.

One participant shared

"We sit, sleep, cook, and eat in the cabin. The cabin is everything for us"

Community support

Participants reported mutual sharing of resources among truckers in terms of truckers never saying 'no' to water when other trucks asked for water. Sometimes they also share food if they have extra. At the time of a traffic jam, they help each other. Participant

mentioned that if they do not have enough money, other trucks help them. It provides a sense of brotherhood and the feeling of not being alone in another state.

One participant recalled:

"My truck was not starting at that time; other truckers helped me take it to the garage."

Sense of pride and Wealthy explorer

Participants also feel a deep sense of pride when they assist accident victims on the highway by calling for help. Similarly, they feel a sense of pride when delivering essential goods, such as medicines and raw materials for medicines, on time. Participants' narratives revealed the hidden moral responsibility of truckers. One participant shared

"A family had met with an accident at highway. I still remember the face of that crying girl. Their car was upside down with the help of a truck, and I managed to take them out. I feel honoured after saving their life."

Another participant shared

"I know the importance of medicine. People are waiting for urgent medicine and are being delivered at that time. I feel a sense of pride."

Even though they reported that their lives are less important than those of a street dog. At the same time, they feel like wealthy explorers of India. Another participant mentioned

"People spend thousands of rupees to travel over all India, but I have explored all of India without paying a single paisa and even getting money from it."

V. DISCUSSION

The present study aims to explore the lived experience of truck drivers who stay away from family and relatives in-depth by applying the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach. The findings of the study navigated the adversities and coping of participants. Environmental factors, questions of dignity, accidents, stereotypical treatment, constant responsibility, emotional, psychological, food and language barriers are emerging as themes of adversity. Whereas, social media, community support, substance use and accepting the uncertainty are emerging themes of coping. Additionally, a sense of pride, fulfillment and 'wealthy explorer' also emerges from the narration, related to seeing personal growth in

adversity. Environmental adversities include driving in extreme temperatures, wet clothes for a long period, and sleeping in a cold cabin. Stereotypes include 'sleazy', 'nasty', and 'Dirty' and along with ill treatment from the general population. Save Life Foundation reported that around two-thirds of truck drivers paid bribes to traffic or highway police in India, and 41 % stated that the traffic did not state reasons for taking the bribe. Participants reported that being harassed by police and RTO officers who charged money despite being provided all required documents. Sleep and food are primary needs of any living being. Inadequate and irregular sleep leads to mental and physical fatigue, which serves as a cause accidents. Social-cultural adversities include a language barrier and food. The language barrier isolates them in the crowd. Truckers cope with adversities through community support (sharing resources), substance abuse (to drive at night), calling and connecting with family and relatives through social media, and accepting uncertainty. Despite these adversities, participants expressed a deep sense of pride through assisting victims, delivering essential medicines on time, and perceiving themselves as 'wealthy explorer' of India's diverse landscape.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study provides an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of truck drivers in India. Along with adversities and coping. The findings revealed that their adversities include not only those related to the environment, but also how society views and treats them. Sleep deprivation, scarcity of food and water, and chronic loneliness are related to primary needs neglect among truckers. They are not merely passive victim of their adversities but try to cope with them in their own way by seeking support from other truckers, using substances, connecting with family, and accepting uncertainty. Surviving in such circumstances illustrates a profound resilience among truckers. Feeling a sense of pride and wealth as an explorer suggests they derive meaning from life by supplying the essential goods. Ultimately, Policy intervention requires addressing truckers' adversities, such as protecting their dignity and mandating policies for their physical and mental well-being.

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DISCLOSURE

Grammarly is used for checking English grammar.

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(Periodicalstyle)

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