

**Investing Lives and Earning Troubles:  
Coolies at the Attari-Wagah Check-Post of the Indo-Pak Border**

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**Abstract**

The present study is an attempt to examine the status of human rights of the workers working as the coolies at the Attari-Wagah Check-Post of the Indo-Pak Border in the Amritsar district of India's Punjab state. Conducted through Availability and Voluntary sampling techniques of the Non-Probability Sampling technique and while applying the quantitative method of research, the study primarily reveals the personal, socio-familial and economic aspects of the lives of the selected coolies. The study explicates that while working in an unorganized sector as workers, the coolies at the selected check-post lead the lives of deprivation and mistreatment and discontent. They are the victims of economic insufficiency, social marginalization and political neglect.

**Keywords:** Workers, Rights, Wages, Security, State

## Introduction

The concept of human life is not merely restricted to the state of being physically alive. It comprises of economic resourcefulness, social dignity, and political sanctuary as well. The notion of human life include all those physical, environmental, social and economic conditions that not only ensure the survival, existence and development but also guarantee the perpetual and undisturbed accessibility of the same (United Nations, 2014). Despite the constitutional acknowledgement and the legal safeguards, the economic conditions of human beings largely determine their actual access to human rights. Economic insufficiency results into multiple vulnerabilities in human life (Gilles, 2014). On the one side, it undermines the physical growth due to lesser access to required resources, and on the other side, it results into inferior social ranking of individuals in society. Moreover, economic scarcity of a group, that is numerically meager and as a cluster unorganised, further results in being neglected by the political institutions established for framing the welfare policies (Estivill, 2003).

The Individuals, who do not have anything except their physical labour to sell in the market for the purpose of earning livelihood always experience economic poverty, social inferiority and political neglect (Gross, 2003). The jeopardy of their sufferings further multiplies if they work in the unorganised sector. While working for long hours, whatever they earn is seldom sufficient to meet their minimal and unavoidable routine family expenditures (Fish, 2017). As in case of the unorganized sector, their wages and working hours are not formally and legally fixed, the workers working in this sector very frequently face economic exploitation by the employers (NCEUS, 2008). Moreover, there is no provision of the job security in the unorganised sector, the workers have neither confidence of adopting their economic activities as permanent occupation and nor they have any choice to pursue any other job or occupation (Agarwala, 2013). Illiteracy and demographic backwardness further restricts their options to change their jobs and fit into better occupations.

The workers indulged into pursuing the physical labour of loading and unloading various commodities that are imported and exported from the Attari-Wagah Check Post of the Indo-Pak Border in Amritsar district of India's Punjab state are the typical cases of and economic cluster of individuals working in an unorganised sector and therefore, experiencing economic scarcity and social stigma, besides being political overlooked. These workers, formally called as coolies,

are around one hundred in number. The present study systematically examines the personal, familial, economic, social and political profile of these workers. These workers are formally called as coolies. There is total lack of any precise study, conducted from the purpose of the academic research, mass media or the governmental survey to observe the problems and vulnerabilities being experienced by these coolies.

### **Methodological Approaches and Techniques**

The universe of the study comprises of the Attari-Wagah Check-Post of the Indo-Pak Border. The coolies working as coolies, who load and unload the goods and commodities exported and imported at the selected check-post, are selected as the units of analysis. While taking into consideration the quantitative method of research, the Availability Sampling and Voluntary Sampling techniques of non-probability sampling have been applied. A formal questionnaire, comprising of both open-ended and closed-ended questions, was prepared to obtain the related and relevant queries from the respondents. Reportedly, there were 107 coolies working (including fixed as well part-time daily-wage workers) at the Attari-Wagah Check Post at the time of the survey. Among total 107 coolies, 96 expressed their willingness to be respondents to the survey. Therefore, the statistical data of the study is based on 96 respondents. The responses received from the respondents are systematically described and analysed in the following part of the study.

### **Findings and Analysis**

#### **Age Variables**

To be acquainted with the personal-familial profile of the coolies, it was considered as relevant to enquire about their age patterns. The age patterns were classified in three categories, i.e. young (18 to 35 years), middle aged (36 to 50 years) and old aged (above 50 years). As per the selected data, 55.78 per cent coolies belonged to the young age group while 32.65 per cent were middle aged. Moreover, 11.56 old aged persons were also found as engaged in the hazardous occupation of loading and putting off the heavy stack.

<b>Table 1. Age Variables of the Coolies</b>
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Age	Percentage
Young (18 to 35 Years)	55.78
Middle Aged (36 to 50 Years)	32.65
Old Aged (Above 50 years)	11.56

The data reveals that approximately 56 per cent coolies were young belonging to the age group of 18 to 35 years. It is quite reasonable, as the occupation of coolies at the international border requires physical strength. With the deterioration of strength due to the increasing age, approximate 22 per cent coolies abandon the occupation and hence, only 33 per cent coolies belonging to the middle age group pursue this occupation. While ranging from the middle age to the old age, approximate 20 per cent persons abandon this occupation, obviously, due their physical incapacity to carry on this occupation. Noticeably, approximate, 12 per cent coolies were circumstantially compelled to pursue this hazardous occupation even during their old age, as they did not have any other option to pursue any other economic activity but to work as coolies.

### **Educational Profile**

Education plays a vital role in shaping the human personality. In present era of technology it is mandatory for the person to be educated. To be familiar with their education, it was considered as applicable to enquire about their rank of education. Their level of education was categorized into five stages, i.e. illiterate, up to primary, up to middle, up to matriculation and post matriculation. As per chosen data, 46.25 percent belong to illiterate and other 12.25 percent passed primary study. Further, 14.96 percent persons also attain up to middle class education. Furthermore, 20.41 percent persons touch the matriculation. Moreover, 6.13 percent persons achieved post matriculation in hand to mouth conditions.

<b>Table 2. Educational Profile</b>	
Degree of Education	Percentage
Illiterate	46.25
Up to Primary	12.25
Up to Middle	14.96

Up to Matriculation	20.41
Post Matriculation	6.13

It is evident from the data that approximate 46 percent coolies were found as uneducated due to poverty and lack economic resources. It is quite logical that parents of these coolies had not been in position to afford their educational expenses. There were 12 percent of respondents who attained education up to primary level. Later they abandoned the school and joined to work as labour. It might be due to bad performance, lack of adequate facilities, poverty etc. which deprived them of getting education even at primary level. Other 15 percent of coolies had completed the middle class education and 20 percent respondents claimed as having passed matriculation. It is interesting to note that only 06 percent respondents had reportedly achieved highest education among all coolies.

### **Nature of Dwelling**

Food, shelter and clothes are basic needs of human being to survive in life. Therefore, to dwell in better place is the primary claim of all humans. To be acquainted with the nature of the dwelling of the respondents, the residences were categorized into two type of houses i.e. owned house and rental house. As per the data, 98 percent coolies have their owned house and another remained 02 percent respondents are residing in the rental house.

<b>Table 3. Nature of Dwelling</b>	
<b>Ownership of the House</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Owned House	98
Rental House	02

It is quite visible that exactly 98 percent respondents have their own accommodations. Reasonably, these respondents have hereditarily indulged in this occupation. Largely, the coolies belong to the villages situated in the peripheral areas of the Attari-Wagah check post of the Indo-Pak border. Since generations, they have been living in these villages. Noticeably, 02 percent of coolies do not own houses due to poverty and large number of the family members. One

respondent who became physically injured and as a result handicapped while on work also resides in the rental house along with his family members.

As it has been revealed in the previous table that 98 percent of the coolies own their houses, among them, 85 percent have concrete houses and remaining 15 per cent reside in the adobe house.

<b>Table 4. Structure of the House</b>	
<b>Type of House</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Concrete House	85
Adobe House	15

As highlighted in the above table, 85 percent respondents have constructed the concrete houses. Reasonably, these coolies have physical strength to work in this hazardous occupation and their other family members pursue the same of parallel occupations. Thus, 15 percent coolies are still abiding in the adobe houses due to debt, large family, one earning hand etc.

### **Occupational Profile**

As far as the occupational profile of the coolies has been concerned, there are 73.5 percent coolies who are found indulged in this hazardous occupation through hereditary while 26.5 percent joined this occupation as the last resort or the most easily available occupation to fulfill their basic necessities.

<b>Table 5. Adoption of Occupation</b>	
<b>Nature</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Hereditary	73.5
Non-Hereditary	26.5

It is explicit from the table that exactly 74 percent coolies have chosen this profession as a hereditary based occupation and their parents had been pursuing the same job. To understand the reason of hereditarily following this profession, it is relevant to know that there is a provision of *Billa* (token) system. A specified token is allotted to the each coolie at the Attari-Wagah Check

Post. In case of the death of the coolie, his token is allotted to his son or the younger brother, as per the situation. In case of the 26 percent respondents who adopted this occupation due to compulsion as they could not find any other occupation or job available to them. These respondents mostly belong to young age and they have the physical capacity to bear the load of this job.

### **Nature of Wages**

To understand the occupational profile of coolies more thoroughly, it was considered as relevant to enquire about the nature of their wages, i.e. fixed or unfixed. As per the selected data, 21 per cent of the coolies were getting the fixed wages while 79 per cent were found as getting the unfixed wages.

<b>Table 6. Nature of Wages</b>	
<b>Wages</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Fixed Wages	21
Unfixed Wages	79

The data manifests that 21 percent respondents are work on fixed wages. Noticeably, only those coolies who have been following this occupation hereditarily and pursuing this job since several years have been getting fixed wages. Other 79 per cent respondents have been working merely as daily wage labour. They have not been getting daily wages as prescribed by the nodal governmental agencies.

### **Details of Income**

To acquire the exact or the most approximate data about the per day wages, the selected coolies were personally asked about their daily income during formal conversations with them. On the basis of the information obtained, the daily earnings of the coolies have been categorised into 03 earning clusters, i.e. earning group less than 300 per day, 300 to 500 per day and above 500 per day. The study depicts that 39.5 per cent of the respondents earned less than 300 rupees per day; while there were 48.5 coolies who earned 300 to 500 rupees per day. Noticeably, 12 per cent coolies earned more than 500 rupees per day.

<b>Table 7. Details of Income</b>	
<b>Average Daily Income</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Less than 300	39.5
300 to 500	48.5
More than 500	12

Data reveals that 12 percent of the respondents have daily income of more than 500. Owing to their young age and physical strength, they have much caliber work in challenging conditions. Noticeably, 49 per cent coolies earn daily income ranging from 300 to 500. Reasonably, these are those coolies who have been issued token by the Integrated Check Post Authority. Remaining 39 percent coolies who earn less than 300 per day are these who either belong to the old aged category or suffer due to any physical deficiencies like broken arms or legs, blockage of nerves or respiratory problems etc.

### **Working Hours**

As per the international framework as well as legal arrangements at the domestic level, working hours of all employees are fixed. The occupations where more physical strength and fatigue is involved, the working hours are always of short span with appropriate intervals of rest during working hours. Therefore, to examine the condition of the working hours of the coolies, their working hours were divided into three categories, i.e., less than eight hours, eight hours and above eight hours. As per the selected data 10.5 per cent each respondents reportedly found as working for less than eight hours and eight hours per day, while 79 per cent of the respondents were found as working for more than eight hours per day.

<b>Table 8. Per Day Working Hours</b>	
<b>Working Hours</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Less than Eight hours	10.5
Eight hours	10.5
Above Eight hours	79

The data corroborates that more than two-third of the coolies work for long hours, much more than the prescribed hours. Reasonably, majority among them belong either to young or the middle-aged groups. Therefore, they can physically afford to work for long hours. Moreover, due to extreme poverty at their level, they always wish to work more. Earnings are more priority for them in comparison to their health, rest and physical wellbeing. On the other side, those who work for eight or less than eight hours per day are majorly those who either belong to the old aged group or are physically challenged.

### **Accessibility of Meals Everyday**

Right to food is the basic human right. Especially, in case of those who are involved in physical activities that are hazardous and result into exhaustion, appropriate meals are required to them every day. Therefore, an attempt had been made to know the number of meals taken by the coolies every day. Accordingly, three categories are framed, i.e., one meal per day, two meals per day and three meals per day. In response to that, 58.5 per cent respondents had been identified as taking three meals day, while 21 percent respondents reportedly took two meals per day. Noticeably, 20.5 revealed that they used to take only one meal per day.

<b>Table 9. Accessibility of Meals</b>	
<b>Timing of Meals</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
One meal per day	20.5
Two meals per day	58.5
Three meals per day	21

It is prerequisite for the coolies from the perspective of their physical performance due to hard work of extreme nature every day. As per the medical advisory, they all should take three meals per day. However, 79 percent coolies are not able to afford three meals per day. Obviously, the extreme poverty among them restricts them to take three meals every day. Noticeably, 58 percent coolies take their second meal after 12-13 hours of the first meal. It is quite reasonable that these respondents are extremely enthusiastic towards work (due to poverty of course). More worryingly, there are 20 percent coolies who only one meal per day. Due to this factor, visible number of coolies were found as having weaker physical health and under-weight.

### Attitude about the Nature of Work

It is very difficult to realize the hazardousness of any physical work only while observing someone indulged into that physical work. Only those who are involved into such activities can feel the fatigue of the work. Therefore, to examine the degree of hazardousness of the work, the respondents were asked to respond whether they found their work as hazardous or not. In response to that, 96.5 per cent of the coolies revealed in a straightforward manner that they found their job as extremely hazardous while interestingly, there were 3.5 per cent respondents who considered their job as normal, similar to other jobs involving physical labour.

Table 10. Attitude about the Nature of Work	
Work Hazard	Percentage
Yes	96.5
No	3.5

It is alarming to note that vast majority (96 per cent) of the respondents recognized their job as extremely hazardous. As per the personal observations of the researcher, it is extremely difficult and equally risky to load and unload dozens of trucks ever day, and that too mainly carrying cement. In addition to this, the coolies do suffer from several ailments such as asthma, joint and muscle issues, skin diseases and seasonal viral etc.

### Risk of Injury while at Work

Another significant query was to examine the risks physical injuries while performing the same hazardous physical work every day. Hence, it was formally asked from the coolies if they had any history of accident or injury while at work. Noticeably, 36.5 respondents asserted that they had personal histories of injuries at workplace while 63.5 percent respondents admitted that they did not experience any injury or accident while at work.

Table 11. Risk of Injury while at Work	
Personal History of Injury at Workplace	Percentage

Yes	36.5
No	63.5

Worryingly, 36 percent coolies met with accidents for once or more while working. It shows the magnitude of the vulnerability of the coolies to the injuries at workplace. These coolies experienced unfortunate accidents that resulted into the fractures of legs, arms, fingers. Backache and issues with regard to the shifting of spinal cord were found as very common among coolies.

### **Access to the Medical Facilities**

Health facility is the primary imperative for human life. In case of persons who are employed into the jobs that are hazardous in nature involving the frequent risks of physical injuries, the immediate and affordable access to the medical facilities becomes the primary necessity. To examine the level of the access to the medical facilities to the coolies, those who had experienced injuries while at workplace were asked to share their experience with whether they got any access to the medical facilities whenever they met to injuries while working. Unfortunately, only 0.5 per cent of the respondents revealed that they got appropriate access to the medical facilities after being injured at the workplace.

<b>Table 12. Access to the Medical Facilities</b>	
<b>Medical Aid incase Injury at Workplace</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	0.5
No	99.5

It is evident from the above table that 99 percents respondents did not receive any medical facility or medical assistance while at the workplace in case of their injuries. There is no health centre, dispensary or first-aid bench for the coolies at their workplace. In case of any injury to the coolies while working, their co-workers rushed them to the nearby government or private hospitals. The respondents revealed to the researcher during conversation that arrangement of any vehicle for transporting the injured person to the hospital had always been a major challenge, as there was no provision of ambulance for the coolies. The coolies, who carry bicycles with

them as means of transport, found it difficult to rush the injured person to the hospital at the earliest. Moreover, bearing the cost of the bills of the private hospital further extends the level of the indebtedness among coolies.

### **Job Satisfaction**

It is an established principle that you cannot produce positive results in the job you do not like and an employee who feels dissatisfied from his work and the workplace starts developing the sentiments of negation towards his work. Considering this attribute as relevant for the study, the coolies were asked whether they were satisfied from their job or not. Sadly, only 43 per cent of the respondents revealed that they were satisfied and rest of 57 per cent expressed that they were dissatisfied from their work.

<b>Table 13. Economic Satisfaction</b>	
<b>Work Satisfaction</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	43
No	57

This is the most depressing part of the economic and mental aspects of the lives of the coolies at the Attari-Wagah Check Post at the Indo-Pak border that majority among them do not like their job and feel highly dissatisfied from their work. The dissatisfaction has multi-faceted reasons. Firstly, the coolies are compelled to work rigorously for long hours. Secondly, they do not get appropriate wages for the rigorous jobs they are pursuing. Thirdly, there is no job security for them. There are always risks of any accidents and injuries to the coolies. Fourthly, there is no provision of social security for them.

### **Other Sources of Income**

To obtain the information about the gross income of the coolies, including their income from the sources, other than their jobs as coolies at the Attari-Wagah Check Post, they were asked to reveal whether they have any other sources of income. In response to this query, only 4.5 percent respondents revealed that they had sources of income other than working as coolies, while 95.5

per cent of the coolies responded that their livelihood was totally depended on their work as coolies.

<b>Table 14. Modes of Income</b>	
<b>Other sources of Income</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	4.5
No	95.5

It is evident from the data that 95 per cent of the coolies on the income, they earn while working as coolies and they do not have any other source of income. In case of 05 percent coolies who revealed to have other sources of income as well, when enquired deeply, it was found that their family members, such as younger and unmarried brothers or sons had been running minor economic activities including tea stalls, working at the eateries or grocery shops etc.

### **Consumption of Intoxicants**

To examine the extent of the trends of the consumption of intoxicants among the coolies, they were asked to reveal if they consumed any intoxicants. Formally, 30 per cent of the coolies admitted that they had been consuming intoxicants regularly. Other 35 per cent disclosed that they had been consuming occasionally while remaining 35 per cent divulged that they never consumed any intoxicants.

<b>Table 16. Consumption of Intoxicants</b>	
<b>Degree of Consumption</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Regularly	30
Occasionally	35
Never	35

As per the data obtained from the respondents, approximately one-third of the coolies admitted of consuming intoxicants regularly while other one-third also accepted the consumption of intoxicants occasionally. The intoxicants consumed by the coolies largely include cigarette, clove cigarette, tobacco, alcohol, pharmaceutical intoxicants and *panparak* (new substance used

to keep in mouth for longer time to give soothing effect and this habit has been identified as the prelude for cancer). The remaining 35 per cent of the coolies who denied the consumption of any intoxicants comprised of individuals who were either formally baptized Sikhs or had realization about the negative consequences of the consumption of intoxicants. The coolies consuming intoxicants had justification that it was not feasible for them every day to indulge into the same hazardous physical activities for long hours. Therefore, the consumption of intoxicants was an unavoidable compulsion for them.

## **Conclusion**

The study exposes the economically deprived, socially marginalized and politically neglected state of the lives of coolies working at the Attari-Wagah Check Post at the Indo-Pak border. The findings reveal the dismay status of the workers involved in hazardous manual work in an unorganized sector where there is no formal guarantee of employment, total lack of the principle of fixed wages and absence of economic, social or job securities. Most of the workers belonging to the middle-aged or old aged groups, most of whom are illiterate or semi-literate face economic exploitation and psychological depression at their workplace that has been further resulting into the psychological trends of negation towards jobs, and eventually negation towards life. Due to illiteracy and extreme level of unemployment, their socio-economic circumstances compel them to pursue the hereditary based familial occupation of working as coolies at the international border.

Economically, most of them work as daily wage labourers and earning merely around rupees three hundred per day, and that too not every day. Their gross monthly income seldom exceeds rupees seven to eight thousand. While getting one or two meals, lacking nutritious ingredients, these coolies have no choice but to work for ten to twelve hours every day. While loading and unloading cement, glass, tyres, potatoes, tomatoes, onion, maize etc. here are very frequent chances of being injured and there is total lack of any medical assistance in case of injuries at the workplace. With meager income generated from their unorganized jobs and left with no other sources of income, their economic scarcity and lower social status compels them to indulge into the consumption of intoxicants.

Unfortunately, due to their smaller number, extreme illiteracy and marginal demography, these coolies have not yet organized themselves in form of any trade union or pressure group.

The leaders of political parties contesting from their or peripheral constituencies have always negated their electoral significance and therefore, they are explicit victims of the negligence of any positive state response. The nodal governmental agencies have not yet displayed any consistent response to improve their economic, social and physical lives. Above all, it will not be wrong to say that these coolies at the Attari-Wagah Check Post of the Indo-Pak border have been facing economic exploitation, social marginalization and political neglect since generations.

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