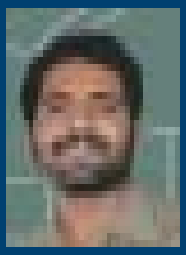

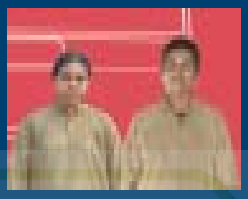

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The indomitable, yet unsung, road warriors...

Ashok Leyland

ANNUAL REPORT 2004-05

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LIFE SAVERS [10]

THE GUTS TO FACE THE GUNS [08]

TEMPLE, NOT A DRIVING SCHOOL [12]

THE 7.32 KMPL MAN [06]

TSUNAMI HEROES [14]

THE CHALLENGERS [04]

THE HIGHWAY TRUCK DRIVER [02]

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If the roads are the arteries that keep the national economy healthy and running...

They are the crucial blood cells that deliver vitality.

They are trusted with the transportation of 70 percent of goods and 80 percent of passengers.

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They brave the elements, the roads ...and the unexpected elements on the roads.

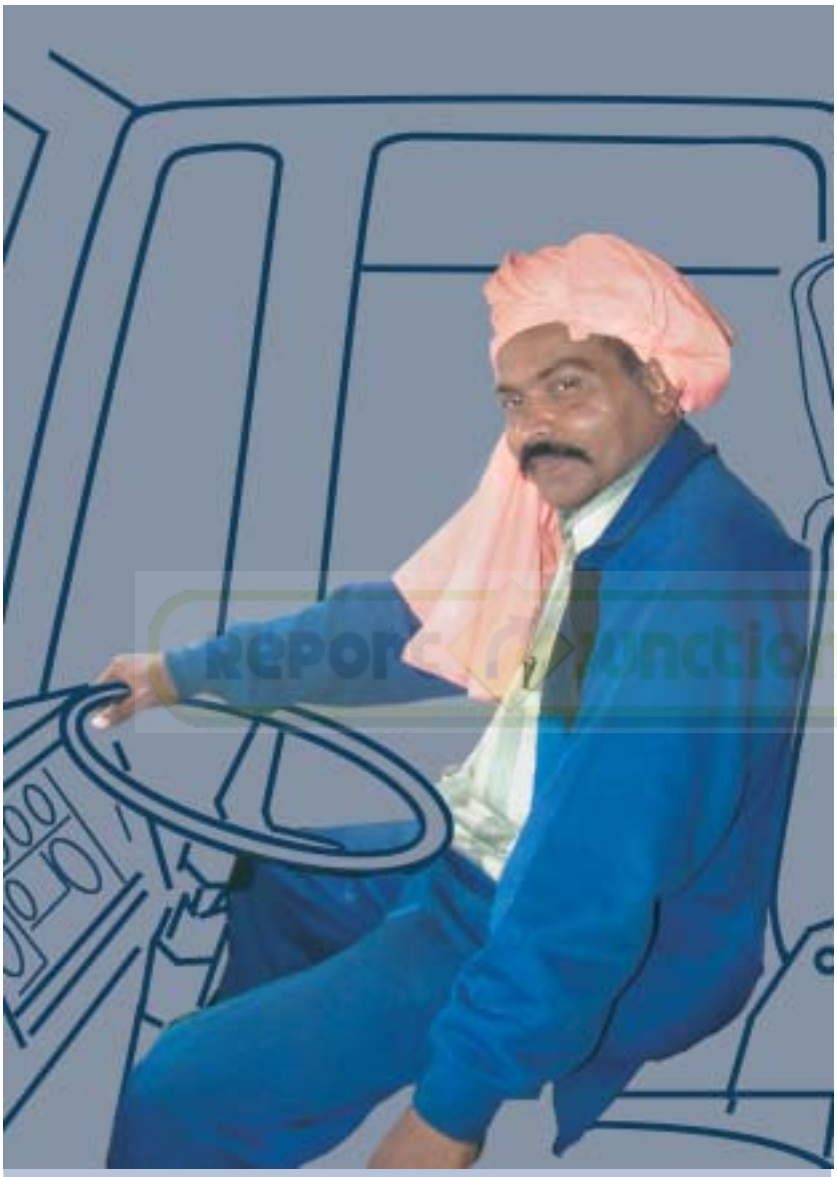
They battle uncertainties and factors beyond their control.

They are the indomitable, yet unsung, road warriors.

A TRIBUTE TO INDIA'S DRIVING FORCE...

The Highway Truck Driver

Indifferent roads, seasonal floods and terrorists test his tenacity



Kuldeep Singh's life is a series of fortnightly cycles. The psychological centre and the geometric locus of his fortnightly revolutions are both the same, an Ashok Leyland 2214, a multi axle truck owned by GIR Motors.

He adjusts the creases of his headgear looking into his rear view mirror, lights a bunch of incense sticks stuck in front of a makeshift altar, bows with folded hands and falls into silent prayer. Only his lips move. Frozen in prayer are also two teenagers, seated behind him on the sleeper berth. They open their eyes not much after he does his.

Kuldeep Singh touches the base of the altar with his right hand and draws a reverential arch to touch his forehead. Then he turns the ignition key and his truck purrs to life.

The four of them set out on a journey from Delhi's border with Uttar Pradesh and will hopefully return, barring the unexpected, in under a fortnight.

Kuldeep Singh's life is a series of fortnightly cycles. The psychological centre and the geometric locus of his fortnightly revolutions are both the same: HR 38J 5217, an Ashok Leyland 2214, a multi axle truck owned by GIR Motors. Loaded with white goods, the truck is headed for Guwahati and will cover 2,000 kms, touching five states. It will be ten days to a fortnight before Kuldeep Singh will get to see his family in Sonepat, Haryana – longer if the return load of coal or tea is meant for Jaipur or Ahmedabad. On his way, he will pass roads and highways of varying quality, join vehicle queues at interstate check posts, stop at regular halting points, covering an average 450 kms per day, driving 20 hours – most of it himself. On safe and easy stretches his second driver Anil Kumar will take the wheels and Kuldeep will get into the upper sleeper berth. Barely out of his teens, Pauna is technically the *khalasi* (conductor), the bottom rung in the hierarchy of three, responsible for vehicle cleaning and odd jobs given to him. One day, like pupa transforming into a butterfly, he will also transition to

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One day, like pupa transforming into a butterfly, they will also transition to drivers. That is also the stage to dream of becoming a vehicle owner... In an industry where small operators outnumber large fleet operators by a wide margin, most of today's vehicle owners are yesterday's drivers. That is the cycle of life in road transport.

driver. That is also the stage to dream of becoming a vehicle owner. Why not? In an industry where small operators outnumber large fleet operators by a wide margin, most of today's vehicle owners are yesterday's drivers. That is the cycle of life in road transport.

Over some parts of the way, potholes turn the road into a test track. Bad roads not only retard speed but also allow terrorists and bandit gangs to attack trucks and slash tyres to bring them to a halt. Trucks have grill cover for side glasses, to fend off stones pelted (and nets to keep mosquitoes out). Trucks seek strength in unity and move in convoys on dangerous stretches – in daylight and not after sunset. The same goes for the jungles in West Bengal where elephants and other wild animals are often cited.

Test of tenacity

Kuldeep is happy with the large cabin, which accommodates four overhead shelves earmarked for documents, keys, provisions and a cassette player. He prefers *bhajans* but does not deny the two youngsters their favourite film songs. The tool kit, jack and personal baggage go under the lower berth seat. Like any other long haul driver, Kuldeep stocks flour and emergency provisions as also vessels. They are part of the survival kit. And a must in the rainy season when stranded trucks line the sides of flooded roads that turn muddy, slushy and then into temporary streams. The truckers can only expect what goes under the name of tea, served by village children out to make a quick buck. And not even that, if stranded away from habitation. Such times, the cabin doubles up as their kitchen. They roll *chapattis* on the seat and have them hot straight from the hotplate, with salt for taste. Such days are a relentless test of the trucker's famed tenacity.

Calling up home is part of Kuldeep's daily routine. The expenses – between Rs 10 and Rs 20–"are less than what some spend on drinks. My family is assured of my well-being", explains Kuldeep. Once home (never without some sweets or biscuits), children parade their needs, knowing well their father will be less close-fisted than their mother. Often Kuldeep gets barely 24 hours with the family, between trips. Even then Kuldeep will find time to make it to his *guruji* at Mahudipur in Uttar Pradesh. A believer and a teetotaller, Kuldeep sticks to vegetarian – that too, the stricter Jain food. "A believer in God cannot be angry or unhappy", says Kuldeep, conscious that he does not fit the stereotype of the Indian truck driver.

Kuldeep has earned the trust of his employers. "I got ten drivers employed with the company, on my guarantee", says Kuldeep. If any of them quits leaving behind dues, Kuldeep is obliged to pay up. With this responsibility comes the moral authority of a mentor. With his experience of 15 years in the Central Reserve Police Force, and the reputation that goes with it, he is taken seriously. While on his trips, Kuldeep is also the moral policeman, authorized to pull up any driver seen halting his truck at a suspicious point. He can relieve the erring driver of his truck key. Mixing threat with persuasion, Kuldeep has so far weaned at least four colleagues out of the drinking habit.

In the last two-and-a-half years of driving the 2214, Kuldeep never had any vehicle breakdown. His ITI training as a fitter and his familiarity with vehicle maintenance are an insurance. "On road support is no more a problem", he says. "Lots of parts and service outlets have come up in the last one year". Add to it the 24-hour help line and "the instant response from the mobile service team stationed at Barauni, in Bihar."

Changing fortunes

As Maj M S Banyal, the fleet manager of GIR Motors, explains, a senior driver, if frugal and efficient, can earn up to Rs 8,000 a month. His company offers a graded efficiency incentive for making the trip in fewer days. Since the company pays its drivers a rounded off lump sum, they can always squeeze some savings out of food and fuel expenses. With freight rates static if not down and fuel prices moving only upwards, the net monthly revenue from a truck is often not sufficient to pay an EMI of Rs 23,000 (thankfully at a historic low, with a soft interest regime). There is also the sub-conscious worry about the fate of his 35 trucks. The phone call he dreads most is the one that informs him of a truck looted by miscreants at a distant location. It is only the beginning of trouble, starting with the process of getting a First Information Report recorded. Not that he is a pessimist. On the contrary, he believes the fortunes of all in the trade including the driver can only get better with the rapid improvement in the road network which is already translating to less transit time, better fuel-efficiency and safety.

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The Challengers

One more male bastion is under attack

Family and relatives accept Shyja and Mini working as drivers. For Mini, it means lessening her father's burden. "This way I don't have to bow my head or bribe anybody," says Mini. For Shyja, her job means supplementary income.

She was the only girl in the entire Mathilakam village in interior Kerala to go around on a cycle. But then, Mini was always a tomboy right from childhood. Third in a family of four girls, she was her father's 'assistant' in his provision store before it went bust, maintained her milch cow to supplement his meagre income – all this while in school. "My parents have never felt the lack of a son", says Mini and her mother agrees. Stopping studies with the eighth standard, Mini moved to a car workshop run by a relative and learned car driving. "Cars became my obsession. When any car passed by, I said to myself, 'I will drive one soon'", she remembers. She got her driving licence, then tutored in a driving school for six years and got herself a heavy vehicle driving licence.

All private bus operators she approached for a job found it humorous if not preposterous. Finally she convinced the mother of a bus operator to give her a chance by calling on her daily and finally by paying Rs 3,000 for trusting her with the vehicle despite her zero experience. Her first bus drive was on its regular 31 km route ending at the famous temple town of Guruvayoor. But for the unaccustomed extra height and the vehicle dimension, she did it easily and in fact with a sense of deja vu. "For long I had visualised this and felt I have done this before". Knowing the road, its every bend and ditch, having been a tourist taxi driver, helped.

Then, within months there was an advertisement from a new bus company, looking for lady drivers. Mini got selected. That was in 1998.

Mini's colleague since then has been Shyja. Shyja's romance with vehicles began after she got married to Vasudevan, a bus driver, in 1987. She learned driving behind the wheels of a tempo that Vasudevan switched to. Her application was for a ticket examiner's

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"We wanted to demolish the myth once for all by picking the most male-dominated sector."

- Ms Fathima Abdul Khadar, President (left).

↓ THRISSUR

"People were surprised as if the steering wheel will not obey women."

- Ms Anna S Lonappan, Past President (right).

job but her driving skills impressed the selection panel and she became a bus driver. Initially, her greatest scare was driving past vehicles coming in the opposite direction, on narrow roads. Soon she was performing this minor miracle a hundred times a day, a miracle that demands instinctive, split second timing and, above all, synchronised manoeuvering based on mind-reading and telepathy. A couple of minor scrapes and she was free from fear.

For all their spunk and self-confidence, both of them acknowledge that they owe their pioneering status largely to Vanita Transport Cooperative Society. Based in Thrissur, this cooperative is the product of two socio economic experiments in Kerala: participative governance through panchayatraj (grassroots level people's parliament) and gender equality through women's reservation. With a funding of Rs 2.3 million and notional share capital contributed by over 200 shareholders, the cooperative started operations with two Ashok Leyland Cheetah buses. The all-women governing body is a true rainbow of all political parties. But as its President, Ms Fathima Abdul Khadar clarifies amidst approving nods around, "we leave our politics outside before entering this building".

Demolishing a myth

The guiding objective (and obsession) of the founding group was to prove equality of the sexes. "We wanted to demolish the myth once for all by picking the most male-dominated sector", explains Ms. Khadar. Such an organizational DNA dictated that all operations would be conducted by women. Sure enough the drivers, conductors, cleaners are all women – thirteen of them, in all.

A pioneer's path is never easy. "People were surprised, as if the steering wheel will not obey women", remembers Anna S. Lonappan, Past President. Skeptics watched gleefully, expecting the enterprise to fail anytime. When that did not happen and as Vanita's services became popular, they came under competition's pressures. The staff is by now used to an occasional challenge by a male driver and will not be provoked into competitive speeding. They are unanimous that passengers prefer Vanita's buses. Their safety record is far superior. In these five years, there was a lone accident. Mini winces while recalling it, not in dread but at the disappointment of having spoilt her clean record – like a black stain on a white sari, like a false note by a perfectionist musician. Luckily, there were no serious injuries but Mini cannot get over her regret. In her mind, it is an indelible black mark.

Even with their self-control, there are times when the policy of non-aggressive assertiveness is tested. Pre-emption of designated parking lot is one provocation. The more serious provocation is when other buses do not keep their schedules. The 125 km route that Mini and Shyja cover, has around 60 stops. All buses have their timetables for starting and crossing these stops, laid down by the transport authorities, to maintain uniform intervals between buses, for the benefit of commuters. By intentionally running late, a bus can "rob" passengers from the following bus. This is serious provocation because a significant portion of employees' daily remuneration is in the form of a share of that day's revenue collection. Tit-for-tat is the only practical solution.

Thankfully, family and relatives accept Shyja and Mini working as drivers – progressive social attitudes in India's first fully literate state helps. For Shyja, her job means supplementary income though it means getting up at half past three ("I have my mental alarm") and reaching home past sunset. For Mini, it means lessening her father's burden. "What other job can get me Rs 5,000 per month? This way I don't have to bow my head or bribe anybody. I am happy to take care of my family with my own hard work", says Mini.

A bold challenge

What Vanita has taken on is a bold challenge. Crucial for its success is the availability of lady drivers. They know it very well and have been conducting driver training courses for women. However, trainees are reluctant to take the wheels of heavy vehicles. Why are they reluctant despite successful, inspiring role models like Shyja and Mini? "They have to overcome their fear", explains Shyja. A simple truth of life, well said.

Undeterred, the women of Vanita have big plans: enter the minibus sector, and in the long run, start an automobile workshop and spare parts business. While Shyja's dreams are woven around her son, Mini's immediate obsession is to clear the family's debts. Then, one day, she hopes to start a bus service touching remote villages that are currently not well connected. "When I see the trouble these villagers go through, I think it makes sense. And I have a bit of mechanical knowledge. I think I can manage."

A new dream is taking shape, of a new enterprise. That is one more entrepreneur in the making. Good luck!

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The 7.32 kmpl Man

This driver from Palani has a message for the country

Arumugam is precise and gentle with the controls including the accelerator. The trick is in reaching fourth gear at the earliest, which he does without any apparent haste. He listens to the engine sound – the vital heartbeat of the vehicle. Behind the wheels as otherwise, Arumugam is composed and relaxed.

M Arumugam carries his six foot frame with an unhurried confidence, just like he drives TN 57 N 0640, a 1995 Viking bus attached to the Palani depot of Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation, Dindigul Region.

Dear to him is his bus logbook, always in his shirt pocket. It shows the daily distance covered, fuel consumed and the KMPL (km per litre). Yesterday's average is only 6.83 – traffic was interrupted by the local festival procession at the famous Murugan temple that attracts pilgrims round the year. Otherwise, Arumugam extracts upto 7.32 kms from a litre of diesel.

7.32 kmpl! It is like doing the 100 metre sprint in 9 seconds.

Self-effacing almost to a fault, Arumugam does not claim any special formula for this achievement; instead gives all credit to the regular training he had received and the constant motivation of K Chandrasekaran, his General Manager. Cued by the high fuel-efficiency records of other STUs, Chandrasekaran got his men to believe that they could match it. With Ashok Leyland engineers demonstrating the fuel saving potential, the customer organization realized that it was up to them to slash the fuel bill which constitutes 80% of operating cost. With ticket fares frozen, that was the only way to improve organizational viability.

Arumugam extracts upto 7.32 kms from a litre of diesel.

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"I make sure that every driver complaint is tackled overnight and the driver is satisfied when he drives out in the morning."

- S Subramaniam, Asst Branch Manager. (Left)

"A 0.01 kmpl improvement translates to a monthly saving of Rs 17,000 for my depot."

- Danushkodi Ramalingam, Branch Manager.

Arumugam, who joined service as a 26-year-old in 1999, had received his share of negative reports for low fuel average. Unhappy with the situation, he decided he will not give a chance to his supervisors to complain. Soon he was touching 6 kmpl. Outperforming the seniors was a thrill. So were the awards at Republic day and Independence day functions. As news spread, came visitors from other Transport Corporations, to see the phenomenon. Arumugam set himself on an improvement drive, by religiously following the training tips.

Precise and gentle

Arumugam is precise and gentle with the controls including the accelerator. "If you press the accelerator hard, only smoke results". The trick is in reaching fourth gear at the earliest, which he does without any apparent haste. He listens to the engine sound – the vital heartbeat of the vehicle. Behind the wheels as otherwise, Arumugam is composed and relaxed. "I don't get tense", he volunteers. He does not stop to advise an errant auto driver. ("It is a waste of time and diesel".) He is so familiar with his regular route, Arumugam's driving actions are almost pre-programmed – he can anticipate the stretch ahead. The unexpected is tackled unhurriedly through excellent hand-eye coordination. Most emergencies are tackled by blowing the horn. Braking is the last resort, rarely done. Even at the crowded bus stand, Arumugam parks his bus in a bay with computer-like precision, with fewer movements than anyone else.

An epitome of equanimity and contentment, Arumugam shuns all avoidable consumption (even tea and coffee). At home, if the electricity bill exceeds the normal mark of Rs 165, the family "cuts out some unnecessary television serial". He is austere without being dogmatic or self-righteous. He has realistic hopes for his only brother who is doing final year BE.

"A vehicle is like a dog", Arumugam explains. "When a dog barks, you don't deal with it harshly. You pat it, it becomes your pet dog. Then you can make it do any trick. It is the same thing with vehicles".

But how does that explain him extracting an extra kmpl on an occasional substitute bus? Arumugam deflects the implied credit by thanking S Subramaniam, Asst Branch Manager, for keeping the vehicles in peak condition. "I make sure every driver complaint is tackled overnight and the driver is satisfied when he drives out in the morning", says Subramaniam. The preventive maintenance routine has daily checking of clutch play and tyre pressure; brake checking and silencer cleaning every week and injector cleaning every six months.

Potent Pointer

Like a studious, diligent student starting off as the target of taunts and then becoming a role model, Arumugam's example has inspired his colleagues. Today, six of them record over 6 kmpl and another 113 are above 5 kmpl. The below 5 kmpl group, currently 45, is shrinking through counselling and training. As Danushkodi Ramalingam, the Branch Manager, points out, a mere 0.01 kmpl improvement in his fleet translates to a monthly saving of Rs 17,000 for his depot. Rs 2,00,000 a year!

That is for just 95 buses. Now extrapolate that for a country with a bus population of over 700,000 and an import bill constantly ballooning with growing consumption.

But then, the trouble is, good driving is like righteous living or good health – it is not for want of knowhow that man falls short.

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The Guts to Face the Guns

Morale, pride and faith drive the army driver

Naik T D Yadav and Naik B Jayesh

Stuck far away from civilization, all that a stranded driver can do is to shut out as much of the murderously hostile outside and survive in the cabin till rescue or at least better weather arrives.

There is hardly a way to distinguish a driver in the armed forces. The fact is, by training and attitude, an army driver is a soldier who also knows driving. He goes through the same initial military training including drills and weapon training so that he can protect the vehicle he is entrusted with. Once allotted the driver's trade, it would take five years of practice in phases, inside the camp, on the road, on highways, on small mountains and then a test for hill driving certificate – to become a co-driver. The army wants each driver – each a link in the transport chain – to be hundred percent reliable. "High among a Commanding Officer's KRAs are zero accidents and on-schedule supplies as planned", explains the commanding officer of a large battalion manning nodal points in supply logistics and the largest user of Ashok Leyland Stallions. That is why the army takes training very seriously. Every effort is also made to give their men a stress-free environment.

Permanent home

An army driver's normal day starts early, with PT at 6.00 in the morning. Weapon training, driving and maintenance training, games, movies – the day is fully drawn out for him. While on duty on the road, night halt is only at pre-planned establishments, called Regulating Centres in their parlance. Temporary guests, they join the routine at these Regulating Centres but the Stallion cabin is their living space. "A driver never leaves his vehicle. It is his permanent home", explains Naik B Jayesh, who joined the army in 1993 at the minimum age of 18.

The longing to get back is intrinsic to these mobile men. This need to return to familiar space is met at three levels. First of these is the vehicle itself. At the next level comes his

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