

In an Indian Railways- Journey of a Train Driver: A Case Study

Rajesh Ranjan^{1*}, Rashmi Singh², Saumya Tripathi³

¹Faculty of Economics and Business Sciences, Universidad Panamericana, Augusto Rodin 498, Mexico City 03920, Mexico; rajeshranjannitie@gmail.com
²Bachelor of Business Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, Shoolini University, Himachal Pradesh, India.
³DGM, Airtel Africa PLC, India.

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Abstract. Rajmani Prasad, now 70 years old, began his journey with the Indian Railways in 1963 as a *Casual Labourer* and retired in June 2006 as a *Passenger Driver*, marking an inspiring career that spanned over 43 years. His story reflects the grit, dedication, and gradual rise through the ranks that define the life of many railwaymen in India. Initially recruited to supplement the regular workforce in tasks of a seasonal or temporary nature, Rajmani's early responsibilities involved demanding manual work under challenging conditions. Starting as an *Engine Cleaner*, he undertook the most basic yet essential duties, learning the technical intricacies of locomotives and laying the groundwork for his future roles. He later advanced to the position of *Second Fireman*, where he engaged in strenuous physical labor, including shoveling coal into the firebox to keep steam locomotives running—an experience that demanded both strength and endurance. His responsibilities extended to greeting the engines, preparing the fire, and ensuring that each locomotive was ready for service. Progressing further, Rajmani took on the critical role of *Shunter*, orchestrating the marshalling of goods and passenger trains within busy station yards. This involved attaching and detaching wagons and coaches, aligning train formations as per operational needs, and ensuring the smooth movement of rakes—a task requiring precision, alertness, and teamwork. Eventually, he ascended to the role of *Driver*, entrusted with operating both goods and passenger trains across vast distances. This final phase of his career was a testament to his accumulated knowledge, discipline, and unwavering commitment to duty. From working in the shadows of steam engines to steering modern locomotives, Rajmani's journey is emblematic of perseverance and the spirit of service. His decades-long contribution to Indian Railways remains a powerful narrative of transformation, resilience, and pride in one's work.

Table 1: Journey of Rajmani prasad from casual labour to passenger train driver.

Year	Position held	Key responsibilities
1961	Leave his village (Machhil) to meet his <i>mama</i> at Danapur	Rajmani Prasad was helping his <i>mama</i> (Mother's brother).
1963	Casual labour	Rajmani Prasad, as a casual labour was primarily engaged to supplement the regular staff in work of seasonal or sporadic nature, which arises in the day to day working of the railway system. This includes labour required for unloading and loading of materials, special repair and maintenance of tracks and other structures, patrolling of tracks, etc.
1965	Cleaner	Rajmani Prasad, as an engine cleaner, he was removing the ash from the ash pit, clean the loco preparation pit in the locomotive running shed and polish all the brass to ensure the locomotives look their best. <i>The 'engine cleaner' role was the first step to become a Steam Locomotive Driver for Indian railway.</i>
1969	Second fireman	Rajmani Prasad, as a second fireman needed hard physical labour, such as shoveling coal into the engine's firebox for the running of a steam engine. He was greeting the engines, arranging their fire and preparing the locomotive for the duties ahead.
1972	Fireman	As a fireman, he was responsible for maintaining the fire, regulating steam pressure and monitoring boiler and tender water levels.
1974	Removed from his service	He continuously fought from management of Indian railway for his removal from service.
1976	Reinstated to his position	He got justice, and reinstated to his position in mid of 1976 after two and half years of his removal.
1977	Shunter	Rajmani Prasad as a Shunter was performing tasks including; marshalling goods and passenger trains in station yard according to instructions received. Attaching or detaching coaches and wagons to and from trains etc.
1981	Goods driver	Rajmani Prasad was driving goods trains.
1986	Passenger train driver	Rajmani Prasad was driving passenger trains.
2006	Retired from the service	Residing with his family members at his native village.

Source: Through case study, by researcher, 2023.

1. THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Born into a humble farming family in the small village of Machhil, under the Makhdumpur Police Station in Jehanabad district of Bihar, Rajmani Prasad's early life was shaped by poverty, simplicity, and struggle. His father, Late Bhagirath Rai, was an illiterate farmer who toiled endlessly on their small patch of land to feed his growing family. Rajmani, the eldest of five brothers, was expected from a young age to share the responsibilities of the household and assist in the fields.

He managed to study up to class 6 in the local government school—an achievement in itself given the family's financial constraints and the lack of educational awareness in the rural setting of the 1950s. However, education had to take a backseat. At around the age of 16, he was married—an early responsibility shouldered by many in those times. Soon after, burdened by the

weight of responsibilities and a meager agricultural income, Rajmani had no choice but to abandon his studies completely and support his father full-time in farming.

But the income from agriculture was insufficient to sustain such a large family. With limited options and growing pressure, a young Rajmani made the life-altering decision to leave his village around 1961–1962. At just 17 years old, with little more than hope in his heart, he set out for Danapur near Patna to meet his *mama* (maternal uncle), who worked as a railway contractor. It was an uncertain but necessary step.

“My situation didn’t leave me with many choices,” Rajmani reflects. “It’s the most ordinary story you’ll ever hear. I had only completed my 6th class of schooling. Just like most other youths in poor families, I was simply looking for any employment opportunity—anything to fight the hardship we lived in.”

His arrival in Danapur marked the beginning of a new chapter. One of his cousin brothers, a railway driver, became a source of inspiration. Seeing the railway uniform and hearing stories of long-distance travel and technical skill, Rajmani was drawn to the idea of working for the Indian Railways. The profession offered not just financial stability but also dignity—a rare prospect for someone with his background. He knew it wouldn’t be easy, but he was ready to learn, to work hard, and to earn his place. And so began a journey that would span more than four decades, taking him from the dust of village farms to the driver’s seat of powerful locomotives.

One day my mama asked me; can you work as a ‘Casual Labour’ for Indian railway?

At that time ‘Casual Labour’ was a temporary employee in the Indian railway.

Being an extremely poor youth, Rajmani Prasad decided to work as a ‘Casual Labour’ for Indian railway and joined in 1963 at Danapur (formerly Eastern Railway) and worked to this capacity till 1965.

This was the chance to do something for his family and himself.

Casual Labours are primarily engaged to supplement the regular staff in work of seasonal or sporadic nature, which arises in the day to day working of the railway system. This includes labour required for unloading and loading of materials, special repair and maintenance of tracks and other structures, patrolling of tracks, etc.

2. RAJMANI PRASAD AS AN ENGINE CLEANER

But much to his dismay, after two years of rigorous work as a ‘Casual Labour’, in mid of 1965 Rajmani Prasad got a chance to become a ‘Engine Cleaner’ as a regular Indian railway employee.

But, at that time being an ‘Engine Cleaner’ was not an easy task. Cleaners must have the highest standard of medical fitness in medical ‘A’, because that time Cleaner was also considered as running staff of Indian railway. So, Rajmani Prasad went for rigorous medical examinations and found ‘A’ category and hence, joined as a Cleaner and worked to this capacity till 1969 and since then there was no looking back, ever since, Rajmani Prasad says.

“I was the first youth in my family who had worked for the Indian railway. Somebody had to take the first step and level the playing field. And I knew this was my chance to do something for my country, my family and myself”, Rajmani Prasad says.

2.1. Responsibilities of Engine Cleaners

Engine Cleaners were removing the ash from the ash pit, clean the loco preparation pit in the locomotive running shed and polish all the brass to ensure the locomotives look their best. They were assisting with the preparation of the locomotives by splitting wood for the next day’s light-up, cleaning the locomotives down prior to departure, and assisting the drivers and firemen with provisioning of supplies.

The purpose of *cleaning* fulfils three important requirements.

- *Firstly; it keeps the locomotives clean.*
- *Secondly; it allows cleaners time to learn about the railway and how the locomotive department operates.*
- *Thirdly; it gives the cleaners the opportunity to learn about the locomotives themselves, how they work and what is involved in their upkeep.*

The minimum age for cleaners was 16 years. Typically, cleaners will be in this grade for 2 to 4 years before progressing to the next level.

The engine cleaner role was the first step in the Indian railway to become a Steam Locomotive Driver.

(Source: Steam locomotive grades, 2023).

3. RAJMANI PRASAD AS A FIREMAN

After four years of rigorous work as a ‘Cleaner’, in mid of 1969 Rajmani Prasad got promoted to ‘Second Fireman’ and worked to this capacity till 1972. After this he promoted to ‘Fireman’ and worked to this capacity till 1977.

Job of fireman needed hard physical labor, such as shoveling coal into the engine’s firebox for the running of a steam engine. As a fireman, he was responsible for maintaining the fire, regulating steam pressure and monitoring boiler and tender water levels.

3.1. Responsibilities of Fireman

The job of the fireman was to manage the fire that enables the locomotive to operate, a task that requires a considerable level of skill which is not easily learnt.

The tasks of fireman were expected to perform include:

- Firing and operating steam locomotive boiler by stocking coal into it to maintain required steam pressure.
- Checking safety plugs of fire -box, moving parts of engine and supplying of water and coal before commencement of journey.
- Assisting engine driver in observing signals and other instructions etc.

(Source: Fireman, Locomotive Published on TUCareers, 2023)

3.2. Health and Safety Requirements and Risks

- The job is considered mildly hazardous or dangerous.

- Health risk includes exposure to fire, smoke, etc.
 - Occupational hazards may include burns, fatigue, respiratory problem, etc.
- (Source: Fireman, Locomotive Published on Tucareers, 2023)

3.3. Key Competencies

- Proficient in stoking coal judiciously into firebox of boiler to maintain constant fire for generating steam.
- Knowledge of keeping coal consumption within prescribed limits.
- Well-versed in oiling and cleaning engine parts, filling water tank enroute with water at water columns and maintaining required water level in boiler.
- Proficient in ensuring correct operation of Engine lubricator and raking of fire at waiting stations when engine takes water.
- Knowledge of storing prescribed quantity of coal, water etc., in engine and preparing it for journey by firing boiler to required steam pressure.

(Source: Fireman, Locomotive Published on Tucareers, 2023)

3.4. Personality Traits

- Good physical health.
- Good mental health.
- Accountable.
- Dexterity of hands.
- Disciplined.
- Patient etc.

(Source: Fireman, Locomotive Published on Tucareers, 2023).

Rajmani Prasad was an active member of Indian railway's employee union. Because of active participation in union activities, and continuous fight with the railway management regarding employee's issues, he was removed from his service in mid of 1974. He continuously fought from management of Indian railway for his removal from service. This period was very painful and stressfulness for the entire family members. Finally, he got justice, and reinstated to his position in mid of 1976 after two and half years of his removal and worked to this capacity till 1977.



Figure1: Fireman in loco cab.

Source: Baureihe52Heizer.jpg, 2023.

4. RAJMANI PRASAD AS A TRAIN DRIVER

The Fireman who performs their duties in a capable and professional manner with the right attitude is promoted after a period of time for loco driver.

After five years of rigorous work as a 'Fireman', in mid of 1977, Rajmani Prasad got promoted to 'Shunter' and worked to this capacity till 1981. After this he promoted to 'Goods Driver ('B' Category) and worked to this capacity till 1986.

Rajmani Prasad said, the initial years of service as a Goods Driver demand a lot of courage. Mostly goods lines run between the mining areas and industries to transport the ores/minerals. These lines run through areas that are not inhabited by human population and pass through several hills, forests and tunnels.

Many times, there is no signal given for Goods train to pass for some reason in the middle of a night, Rajmani Prasad has no other option but to wait for the green signal for longer period.

After five years of rigorous service as a 'Goods Driver', in mid of 1986 Rajmani Prasad got promoted to 'Passenger Train Driver' ('A' Category) and worked to this capacity till June, 2006 when he was retired from the service.

4.1. Courage in Adverse Situations

Rajmani Prasad drives while tackling risks like chain-pulling, rasta rokokos (a form of protest in India to stop trains or block roads), and people or animals crossing the track suddenly.

Incident 1:

Rajmani Prasad remembered one incidence, in 1985; I was driving the train ahead towards Patna. After crossing Jamalpur station, suddenly a lady came out of nowhere and sat on the track. I honked and gestured her frantically to move away while trying to apply brakes. But there was nothing I could do. The woman simply sat there and refused to budge; I learned that she wanted to commit suicide. I ran over her and for the next five days I could neither eat nor drink. I kept blaming myself for the incident. It took me some time to get over that incident but those are some instances when you feel that this job comes with a lot of responsibility and risks.

Incident 2:

Rajmani Prasad never forgotten one major hazard occurred in 1988; I was driving the passenger train ahead towards Patna. After crossing Mokama station and approaching to Gulzarbagh (near Patna), suddenly fire detected in this running train. And in a very short span of time, one of the passenger coaches becomes burning. Within minutes this coach totally burnt with all passengers around 1400 on board (including older, ladies and children) accommodated in this coach. Cause of this major deadly hazard was Belding gas cylinder carried by some worker who worked for the railway. However Indian railway was set an enquiry for this major hazard, but none of any culprits identified and hence no any arrest and punishment for this deadly tragedy. It took me around 15 days to get over that incident but those are some instances when you feel that this job comes with a lot of responsibility and risks.

5. RETIRED LIFE

After *thirty-six* years of longer journey from "Casual Labour to Cleaner; Cleaner to Second Fireman; Second Fireman to Fireman; Fireman to Shunter; Shunter to Goods Driver" and finally Goods Driver to Passenger Driver", worked to this capacity till June, 2006 when he was retired from the service of Indian railway.

From being a goods train driver to a driver for passenger trains riding through challenging terrain, Rajmani Prasad has come a long way! Overall, he is satisfied with his railway service.

However, his overall health is fairly good except minor health issues, but in 1978 he undergone for a stomach surgery. His wife is home maker and only son is unemployed leaving with him in native village Machhil.

6. COMMENTS REGARDING WORK LIFE BALANCE

"There is almost no work life balance for a railway driver. Night shifts for drivers are common, and rarely interaction with family. Usually when a driver takes a train from station- A (HQ) to station- B, he is allowed to rest for 8 hours in running room at station- B, and then sent back to take another train from station- B to station- A (HQ). This means a lot of time before he reaches station- A (HQ) and his home....!! He has least quality time with his kids and family, and managing a family would be very tough" (Rajmani Prasad, 2023).

This account reflects the broader challenges that loco-pilots face in maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Irregular and unpredictable duty hours, frequent night shifts, and extended periods away from home place immense psychological and emotional strain on these workers. Despite the critical role they play in the smooth functioning of the nation's transport infrastructure, their occupational routine often leads to social isolation, familial disconnect, and chronic fatigue. Over time, the cumulative impact of this lifestyle can contribute to stress, reduced job satisfaction, and even mental health concerns. The absence of scheduled weekly offs and the limited scope for social or recreational activities further worsen their quality of life. It is crucial for railway authorities to acknowledge these systemic issues and explore policy reforms, such as improved rostering, periodic home-station postings, and mental health support, to safeguard the well-being of loco-pilots and their families.

7. FINAL MESSAGE

"All you need is to take the first step. When you are passionate about something, don't hesitate. With your hard work, dedication, capability, and knowledge, you can achieve anything. First, build your own internal support; what you seek from the outside world is secondary. Don't ever quit without trying. Make sure your work brings happiness to you, your family and your country" (Rajmani Prasad, 2023).

This message serves as a powerful reminder that the journey to success and fulfillment begins from within. Self-belief is the cornerstone of progress—once you trust your own abilities and remain committed to your goals, external obstacles become stepping stones rather than roadblocks. Passion is not merely a feeling; it is a driving force that, when combined with perseverance, transforms dreams into reality. Challenges are inevitable, but giving up should never be an option. Every small effort contributes to a larger purpose, impacting not just personal growth, but also the well-being of loved ones and the progress of the nation. Let your work reflect your values, your integrity, and your desire to contribute meaningfully to society. In the end, success is not just about achievements—it's about leading a life of purpose, resilience, and positive influence.

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