

Travails and Coping of SLBs in the Electricity Distribution Sector in India

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Introduction

India faces the challenge of simultaneously achieving two tasks: increasing economic growths and reducing economic inequality. Both require a reliable, adequate, and quality supply of electricity. Unfortunately, despite decades-long reform and billions of dollars of investments, the electricity supply in most rural areas in India remains inadequate, unreliable, and of poor quality (Bhattacharyya, S.C., 2010; PEG, ESMI data). The cause of this is seen as rooted in poor performance of public distribution utilities (PDUs), especially in the last mile of the service delivery (Bhattacharyya, S.C., 2010; Chaurey, A. et al., 2004). PDU is responsible for providing all the last-mile connectivity services to the consumers, including metering-billing-collection from all the consumers, restoring the supply by fixing the faulty conditions, maintaining infrastructure, addressing consumer complaints, and giving new supply connections. Though there might be adequate planning for each of these tasks at a managerial level, a crucial part is its field implementation. Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) or wiremen, or PDU-SLB are at the forefront of performing all these tasks.

PDUs suffer from low levels of public as well as consumer trust and weak institutional structures. A large part of the blame is often passed to PDU's workforce, especially to frontline workers, who are seen as corrupt, lacking discipline, capacities, accountability, and motivation. This paper presents research aimed at understanding different dimensions of frontline worker's functioning of PDUs and their effect on policy implementation in the electricity sector.

Literature review: Elements of Street Level Bureaucracy Theory

The street-level bureaucracy theory (SLBT) is a theory from public policy that explains the key aspects of functioning and performance of frontline workers providing public services in direct contact with the citizens or beneficiaries of these services and, hence, representing the government to citizens. Also, SLBT seeks to explain the frontline workers' coping strategies that they resort to under stressful working conditions to manage their tasks while delivering these services (Lipsky, 2010).

SLBs act as a bridge for delivering the policies of the government to the people. Frontline workers, frontline practitioners, line workers, operators, or field officers, are used in the literature as synonymous with the term Street Level Bureaucrats (Vedung, 2015).

Working conditions

According to Michael Lipsky (2010), street-level bureaucrats work in the conditions where: (i) resources are inadequate relative to the tasks, (ii) demand increases to meet the supply, (iii) goals are ambiguous, vague, or conflicting, (iv) measurement of performance is difficult, (v) clients are captive. The SLBs have to work with inadequate resources in most situations. The inadequacy of resources can take different forms. There can be few SLBs for a large number of clients. Hence, the caseload is often more than manageable; thus, they provide inadequate time for clients. Sometimes, there is a lack of personal resources available to the SLB, such as training or experience, required to work in stressful conditions (Lipsky, 2010).

The reason for the inadequate resources could be an increase in the demand for public services. If additional resources are made available, demand will increase to consume those additional resources. For example, if ample meters are available, there will always be new consumers who require connections. The goals set before public services' are often vague, ambiguous, and challenging to achieve for many reasons. Conflicts in setting goals while designing the program remain unresolved. Sometimes agencies or organizations have goals for many years without critically evaluating and making changes (Erasmus, 2015). Hence, performance measurement is often challenging because performance targets might not be feasible. Further, it is also difficult to measure the performance of SLBs and the extent to which SLBs contributed to achieving their agency's goal as they are involved in complex interactions with the people. Sometimes, performance measurement demands too many variables to measure the performance of SLB based on the achievement of goals set before them.

Discretion

A brief literature review was carried out to understand how discretion was conceptualized over a period. Lipsky claims that discretion, i.e., freedom to deviate from the standard, is a critical aspect of SLB's work, as their work is dependent on human interaction, which requires human judgment according to the need of the situation to make an appropriate decision. He also describes work situation as a vital characteristic in the performance of SLB since interaction with citizens involving close contact may also be complicated and unpleasant.

Prottas (1979) defines discretion as a wide range of choices made within a set of parameters that are available for SLBs (Scott, 1997). Discretion involves the decision-making power while executing the work in the field. Corazzinni (2000) describes discretion as latitude between the organization's goals and clients' needs as interpreted by SLBs (Duner & Nordstrom, 2006).

Belabasa and Gerrits (2017) found that although rules bound the street-level bureaucrats' discretionary actions, their willingness to help clients transcends these boundaries under three conditions: (i) high motivation to work for beneficiaries: SLBs' feel that the clients are honest and sincere in compliance, (ii) extreme personal distress of client, and (iii) negative assessment of existing policies and policy instruments by SLB. The client's motivation to learn and follow the rules and the distressful condition they face will also drive the use of discretion made by SLBs (Belabasa & Gerrits, 2017).

One (Ryan M., 2017) PhD thesis discusses discretion has two types: Nomocracy and Telocracy. Nomocracy is an approach in which rules are respected and followed blindly by the SLBs. Telocracy, with its goal-focused perspective, is the other approach according to which rules are the ways to achieve the organizational goals. These approaches influence the attitude of SLBs towards their organizational rules, like procedures and eligibility criteria.

Coping strategies

Generally, the demand for public services increases over time, but the resources required to meet them are not enough. These resources may be in the form of time, material, and human resources. Therefore, SLBs evolve or choose a coping mechanism to meet the demand for their service in the given set of parameters whenever there is a significant gap between demand and supply of services. M. Lipsky mentioned some of the coping strategies implemented by SLBs, which are mentioned below. In a way, coping strategies imply sub-par delivery of services.

a) Limiting client's demand for services: SLBs try to reduce demand for their services from clients by applying strategies like reducing the dissemination of information about services, asking clients to wait for a long time, or making themselves unavailable to clients for a certain amount of time.

b) Creaming (Cherry-picking): SLBs focus on limited and selected clients for providing their services. Clients are selected to help achieve better performance output and goal achievements (Vedung, 2015).

c) Automating output: SLBs adopt SOP (Standards of Operation) while executing work. The SOP includes all the details of where to work, who will perform the work, and how to work. It

helps SLBs overcome their workloads by stereotyping their clients and services provided, thus increasing speedy recovery. (Vedung, 2015)

Attitude and approaches

The behavioural pattern of SLBs is affected by structural conditions of the broader environment they work in (Downs, 1967 cited in Gilson, L., 2015). The SLB's attitude towards work, citizens, and an organisation are affected by different factors. SLBs feel a mix of compassion, disgust, fear, and annoyance in their interactions with citizens. However, they are supposed to follow the bureaucratic ideal of impersonal detachment in decision-making (Lipsky, 1980). Maynard-Moody et al. (1990) mention that SLBs, while defining themselves and their work, narrate the relationship more than rules.

SLBs are often accused of being biased against a particular social group or are thought to be particularly cynical or unreliable in fulfilling obligations towards certain social groups. Popular wisdom often identifies the source of workers' attitude towards their work and citizen in prejudices acquired from their upbringing and social background (Lipsky, 1980). On the other hand, a category of SLBs innovate and experiment to deal with problems in policy delivery like 'social exclusion' (Gilson, 2015).

In one of the studies, the coping behaviour of SLBs is studied in the Danish regulatory and social settings to understand the above-mentioned coping strategies. The study concluded that SLBs' attitudes have significant consequences for their behaviour; such as (i) aversion towards clients due to the pessimistic approach and (ii) non-interventionist attitude, according to which clients are left to find their way and SLB would not intervene. Such attitudes are likely to increase effort for coping rather than delivery services as expected. The study also found that adequate staffing will reduce the coping behaviour of SLBs in the studied context.

Power dynamics

When different actors are involved in some activity, a relationship is established between those actors. There might be an imbalance in power in these relations, and one has control over behaviour and other actors' decisions regarding the activity. This tussle between the actors for power is called here power dynamics. Lipsky points out the skewed power relationship between citizens and SLB. Citizens using public services are captive or non-voluntary clients, as they do not get to choose the desired service or SLB and cannot seek alternative or SLB service if treated poorly or dissatisfied with service (Lipsky, 1980). Citizens often lack information, skills, and power to persuade (Maynard-Moody et al., 1990). SLBs have little to lose if they

fail to satisfy their citizens (Lipsky, 1980). If the performance evaluation of the front-line worker depends on citizen response, compliance, and feedback, it prevents the citizen from becoming powerless; still, the front-line worker tries to gain control over citizens (Lipsky, 1980).

The relationship between SLB and supervisor influences the provision of the services, as supervisory pressure to give attention to expenditure control and performance management, which they use to control the performance of SLBs (Evans, 2011). Work pressure developed on SLBs because of achieving the target in limited resources and expected to attain high standards set for performance evaluation. However, the supervisors retain considerable discretion on when to and whom to provide sanctions and give threats (Moody & Portillo, 2011) to gain management control and domination in practice.

Research Method

Background and Research questions

Working conditions of DU-SLBs in Maharashtra are marked by a lack of standardized operating procedures, training, and adequate equipment of appropriate quality. It also includes risk to life and limb due to defective or insufficient safety equipment, especially while working on high voltage lines. They also face acute pressures from aggressive consumers, local politicians, and the local mafia while working in the field. Simultaneously, there is the pressure to record a minimum performance level in scheduled tasks, which is further aggregated due to frequent demand to perform unscheduled tasks, including the recovery of unpaid bills from hostile consumers. Though their primary responsibility is to carry out technical tasks related to repair and maintenance of infrastructure and consumer complaints, they are always burdened with other tasks such as revenue recovery, surveys for new connections, cross-checking inaccurate meter readings given by the contracted agency, addressing bill related complaints in the field. They also have to monitor the services provided by outsourced agencies on the field. Such a severe burden of unscheduled tasks affects the overall quality of work done by them.

Intimate knowledge of consumer behaviour and a detailed understanding of physical infrastructure gives them discretionary powers. Literature also suggests that wireman, especially in rural India, get involved in malpractices and become part of employee theft (Sharma, T. et al., 2016). Wireman needs to know the area and infrastructure very well for tasks related to infrastructure maintenances or faults. Thus most experienced wireman in the

office gets the burden of more work. As experienced wireman has more knowledge of the field than their supervisors, wireman can influence managerial decisions.

To survive in these working conditions, DU-SLBs have adopted diverse coping strategies. The same work pressure might have different coping strategies in different areas or localities. To cope with the unavailability of material, they use the poor quality, locally, and readily available material for restoring the supply. To show the higher achievement in bill collection, they contribute from their pocket and pay for consumers' bills. If the utility does not have funds to buy the material like electrical wires, the wireman spends money from their pockets. To handle the work pressure, they postpone/prepone the tasks according to the immediate priorities. Sometimes, because of their personal bias/gains, they favour particular consumers/areas in providing faster services. Thus, the coping strategies adopted by DU-SLBs, in response to poor working conditions, affect the quality of service delivered to consumers.

Broader Societal Concern (BSC) for this study is coping strategies adopted by SLBs in the electricity distribution sector in response to poor working conditions, leading to unsatisfactory service delivery to consumers.

Focusing on the frontline workers or SLBs,

Main research question is 'How working conditions do shape coping strategies of SLBs of PDUs? How these coping strategies shaped implementation of electricity sector policies?'

Specific research questions

- What are the tasks and responsibilities given to PDU-SLBs?
- What are the stimulus for divergence from expected actions to delivered tasks?
 - What are the stressful work conditions of a wireman while delivering last-mile electricity services?
 - What is the power dynamics surrounding the wireman?
 - What kind of discretionary powers available and exercised by wireman while working in the field?
 - Any other stimulus for divergence?
- What are the intervening/catalysing factors which lead to coping strategies adopted by SLB?
 - What are the attitudes and approaches of PDU-SLB?
 - What kind of pressure wiremen face from higher officials or consumers while doing the assigned tasks?
 - Any other catalysing/intervening factors?

- What kind of coping strategies do they adopt for their day-to-day tasks?

Conceptual framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework derived from SLBT and applied to SLB of the electricity distribution sector. There is an overall design of policy/SOP which SLBs are expected to follow while implementing the policy. However, policy implementation to targeted citizens is affected by the intervening factors such as a variety of stressful work conditions, discretion in defining the work or carrying out the task, individual attitude or approach of SLBs, and the power relation of SLB with consumers or higher officials. The interactions of all these four factors force SLBs to adopt the coping strategies, which become the policy receivers' actual policy.

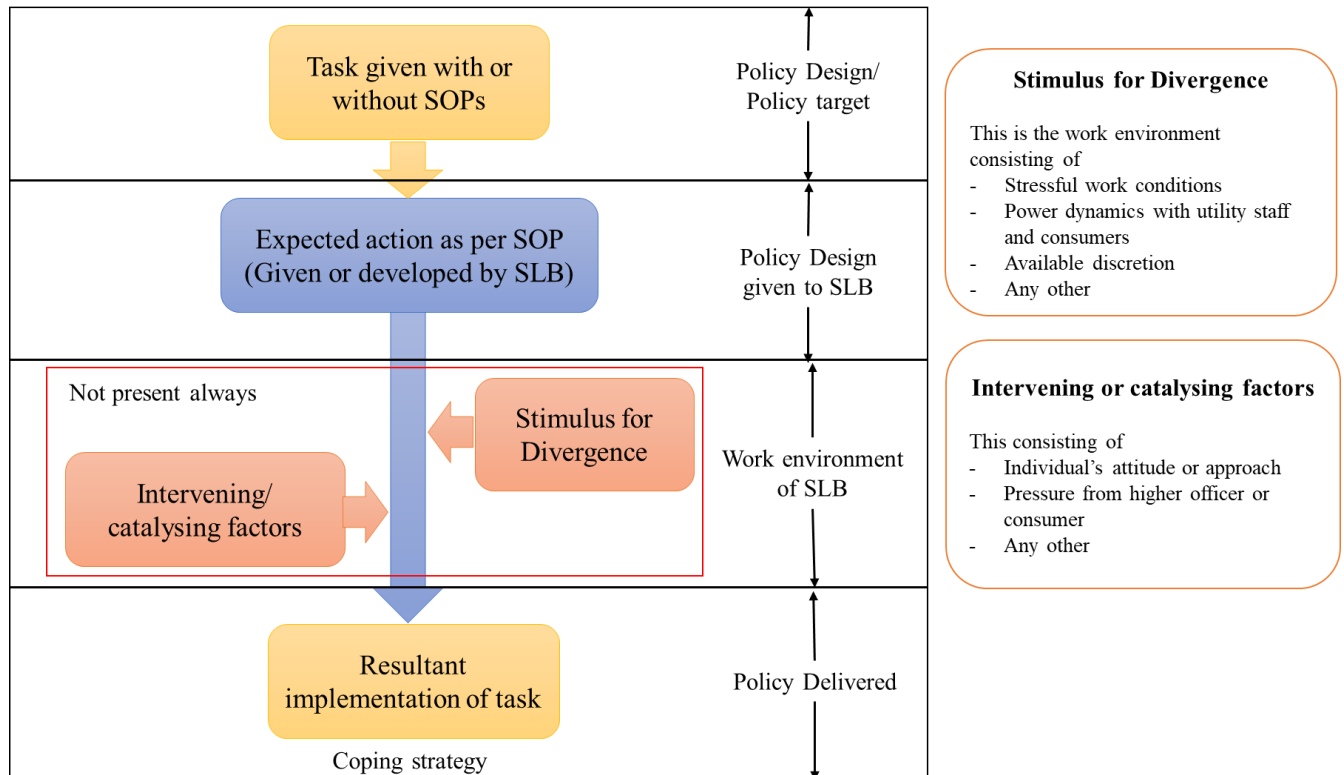


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Data collection methods

The research uses a qualitative-interpretive approach, focusing on the experiences of participants—SLBs of PDUs. The data collection methods employed included: semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, informal conversations, participant observation, and non-participant observation. The data were analysed using the thematic analysis technique and the NVivo software.

Field details and participants

After enacting the Electricity Act 2003, Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) was restructured in June 2005, and Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Co. Ltd. (Mahavitaran or MSEDCL) was formed as a separated organization. MSEDCL distributes electricity to consumers across the State except for Mumbai, with a consumer base of 27.9 million¹. Around 83 thousand employees are working with the company.

MSEDCL's offices at Zone, Circle, and Division level have engineers, accountants, and HR departments. The Section office is the last in the hierarchy and the only office with field staff (wiremen). Field staff directly engages with consumers and electricity infrastructure. Assistant Engineer has to deal with almost all types of field-level problems and communicate daily with consumers, line staff, contractors, agencies, and higher officials. The section office is the vital pillar of the MSEDCL.

For this study, fieldwork was carried out in 2 districts of the Maharashtra state. Both districts have a population in a range of 2 to 3 million. In district 1, different section and sub-division offices were visited and studied. In district 2, Section Office 1 had a consumer base of around 25000 and 17 staff members, including an Assistant Engineer (AE) and an office boy. Section Office 2 had a consumer base of 36000 with a staff of 23 people, including AE. All section office staff members were participants of the study through interviews or informal interactions. Participant's oral consent was taken at the start of the fieldwork.

Data analysis and evidence

Work responsibilities of PDU-SLB

Any service delivery sector faces complexity when it is implemented on the ground. There are a variety of factors that affect the quality or quantity of delivered service. The electricity distribution sector is a fairly technical field. Apart from consumer disputes, organizational challenges, and politics, there is electricity infrastructure that plays a vital role in delivering services. Wiremen work around electricity infrastructure and consumers daily. Therefore, it is essential to know their work responsibilities and work environment before applying SLBT to wiremen.

Wiremen of the PDU work in a shift; each shift is of eight hours. Usually, three to four wiremen (the exact number depends on the area under the section office and number of wiremen) work

¹ <https://www.mahadiscom.in/en/msedcl-profile/>

every shift. They are under the supervision of the Assistant Engineer (AE), who is in charge of the Section Office, and must follow instructions from AE. As wiremen have to deal with complex field emergency tasks, their daily work is generally not well organized, or even if they plan to work on a few tasks, it might not roll out in a planned way. From the field study, the following tasks were identified, which are usually performed by wiremen².

1. Recovering revenue or arrears from consumers: Wiremen perceive that their primary responsibility in the organization is to carry out technical work, but they spend a significant amount of time on non-technical tasks like revenue recovery. In their working parlance, this task is called the “disconnection drive,” as the task of revenue recovery demands that if a consumer is not paying or has arrears, then his/her connection has to be disconnected. A list of consumers who have not paid a large bill is created at the Section Office. This list is classified by the amount, such as more than INR 10000, more than INR 5000, and more than INR 2000. The AE hands over this list at the beginning of the day. A team of 2 wiremen works on one list. At least 2-3 teams are working in each section office. Revenue recovery usually happens every month; however, it is done dedicatedly in March.

Wiremen have to go to each consumer on the list and make sure that the consumer pays. If the consumer pays immediately or has paid already, the wireman collects payment details, transaction ID from consumers. However, if the consumer is not ready to pay immediately or the due amount is pending for more than two months, the wireman may carry out a disconnection. When the disconnected consumer pays his/her dues, the wireman must go back and connect the consumer’s meter to restore the supply.

2. Disconnecting consumer connections: Sometimes, consumers take temporary connections for construction work and request for disconnection when work is done. There are cases when a consumer is not staying at his/her house for a prolonged time. In such cases, consumers may request temporary disconnection of a meter. If consumers requests or the office orders, then the wireman do permanent or temporary disconnection³ of the consumer’s meter.

² We could not find the formal document for tasks or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the work done by the wireman.

³ Temporary disconnection is when the meter is disconnected from supply wires, while in permanent disconnection, they remove the meter from the consumer premises. After six months, that meter number is removed from consumer number from digital records.

3. Maintaining infrastructure and restoring power supply: Disruption in the power supply may occur due to technical breakdown or a fault, like a conductor snapping, cable burnt, jump-cut⁴. The urgent and essential task for a wireman is restoring the interrupted supply due to any fault. They have to follow a set of tasks, such as taking permission before shutting down the line, informing higher authorities about the shutdown, and using safety equipment while doing the work, communicating with a person on a pole about the work. As these involve dealing with high voltage lines, it requires a profound knowledge of the system and work experience. The number of wiremen required to attend to a fault depends on the type of fault. Ordinarily, for most such tasks, 3-4 wiremen have to work together. They have to maintain communication among themselves so that nothing goes wrong. One small mistake may pose a threat to someone's life. Thus, they have to be cautious. In the monsoon season, the frequency of faults is higher, and wiremen have to work extra hours to attend to the faults. Figure 2, 3, 4, and 5 show different tasks done by PDU-SLB.



Figure 2: Wireman doing preventive maintenance work



Figure 3: Wiremen changing the service wire on connection

⁴ Conductor snapping is when overhead electric wires get cut. Cable burning happens when underground electric cables burn due to high voltage or short circuits. 'Jump' is the connection from an overhead line to a transformer; when disconnected, it is called jump-cut.



Figure 4: Wireman checking the carbon at the wire connection



Figure 5: Wireman checking meter reading for consumer complaint

4. Addressing consumer-related complaints: Wiremen are expected to attend to consumer complaints such as fuse burning, checking meters, meter readings for bill-related complaints, supply restoration after any local fault.
5. Providing new service connections: Wireman conducts a technical survey at the consumer location for new service connections. After checking all technical requirements, they prepare a quotation of an indicative amount for the consumer, which includes service charges for the new connection and hands it over to the consumer.
6. Apart from these tasks, wiremen have to be ready for extra burden in extraordinary circumstances. These include community events like local fairs, festivals (like Diwali, Ganeshustav), and political campaigns when a power interruption is not tolerated.

Stressful Working Conditions of PDU-SLB

PDU-SLB works in a dynamic work environment where they always have to respond to field emergencies. Consumer complaints or faults may arise at any time and anywhere in the area of the section office. A crucial aspect of their job is that wireman has to remain flexible and change the priorities if an emergency arises. Very little planning and fixed scheduling of the tasks given to wiremen are possible or attempted. Suppose higher-level officials allocate some urgent work that is done on priority. Due to such a lack of a fixed schedule, there is no pattern or orderliness in their day-to-day schedule. Also, there is a lack of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for doing the field tasks. However, every office has its practice to do each

task. Such practices are not in written format, but they are developed over time in individual office/area settings. Sometimes field problems might be so new that the wireman has to be innovative while resolving them. In such cases, action taken by wiremen might not be pre-defined or prescribed. Also, there is no specific duration allotted to any task as a standard. The time required for any field-level task depends on the availability of human resources and materials available. Wiremen always experience inadequacy of the required appropriate quality material while working on the field. Wiremen also had complaints that there is not enough workforce available at the office. It was found that every section office had at least 2 or 3 wireman positions vacant even after having outsourced employees⁵. This unavailability of the workforce creates stress on existing employees.

During the revenue, recovery wiremen experience pressure from higher officials for ensuring a minimum level of performance. Revenue recovery days are usually hectic and stressful for the wireman. If targets are not met, a higher official from subdivision and division offices inquire personally. On the other hand, when wiremen approach consumers for bill recovery, very few consumers would immediately pay the bill. Many consumers argue with wiremen by citing some meter or bill-related complaints as excuses for not paying the bill. Consumers also start a verbal altercation. Every wireman cannot handle such a situation, so some of them try to avoid it. Wireman also has to answer higher officials if a consumer is not making the payment for a long time. Nevertheless, higher officials keep on pushing wiremen to work to ensure more recovery.

Electricity distribution infrastructure, especially in rural areas, is often old. In some instances, the utility cannot replace equipment such as broken poles due to the resource crunch. Infrastructure in such a state of disrepair poses risks for wiremen while performing the task. For example, if the insulation of transformer wiring is torn off, it may create a short circuit and might be risky for a wireman working on the pole at the same time. The possibility of having faults in poor quality infrastructure is higher⁶. Such infrastructure also affects the supply quality, and as after effect, there is a rise in consumers' complaints about supply quality problems.

Wiremen under one Section Office are dependent on each other for carrying out many tasks. They support each other if one has to go on leave or cannot do a specific task. They are friendly

⁵ Outsourced employees: Apart from having permanent staff, PDU has temporary contracted staff. Outsourced employees work with wiremen and help them to complete the tasks.

⁶ For example: If electric connections are not tight enough at the pole or feeder pillar, it might have leakage current through outside box. If wireman does not take proper care while working, it may cause accident.

with each other and easily ask for a favour from each other. If one wireman is corrupt and involved in any malpractice, other wiremen must face the consequences. For example, if the previous wireman has given suppressed meter reading to the consumer, the wireman will face difficulties while recovering bills. If one wireman has taken a bribe from a consumer, it affects all wiremen, and consumers might also expect similar behaviour from others. Such a situation might create tension among wiremen or between consumers and wiremen.

Wiremen serve as the link between consumers and higher authorities of PDU. Wiremen have to face both consumers and higher officials. If their supervisor gives an order, wiremen have to do the tasks even if the new task is not part of their responsibility or on their priority. Wiremen cannot refuse because they fear that it would reflect poorly on their CR (Confidential Report, which is considered at the time of their promotion). If he/she does not follow their supervisors' orders, there is a possibility that a supervisor might take some harsh punitive actions against them.

As wiremen work on electric lines, there is always a risk to their life. Sometimes the distribution line passes through the forested area. If there is some work on such lines, they face the risk of attack by wild animals. One wireman narrated the incident when his team heard a tiger roaring at night when checking the line fault. On many occasions, they have also found snakes on a pole or inside a feeder pillar. Such situations pose a risk to their life. Wiremen are supposed to wear safety equipment when they work. However, it was observed that they do not use anything apart from gloves. Sometimes gloves also are not comfortable while climbing a pole. Surprisingly, one of the employees said they get the safety gloves, but they do not get time to wear them, as consumer's pressure to restore the supply.

Coping strategies adopted by PDU-SLB

To work in such dynamic situations, wiremen have adopted some of the coping strategies. To meet the revenue recovery targets, wireman has to convince consumers to pay bills. On the other hand, consumers always try to avoid meeting the wireman. Thus wireman has adopted strategies like visiting consumers when he/she would probably have time to talk and money to pay. In villages, wiremen are now well acquainted with the income patterns of consumers. For example, migrated consumers return at the time of the Holi festival with their earnings. Also, they know the cropping pattern in the region and the probability of farmers having money during their harvest season. Thus, wiremen visit them during March or October-November, for revenue recovery so that consumers will have no hesitation to pay the dues.

Even though wiremen are supposed to disconnect the non-paying consumers, they do not cut the connection at the first such visit. Instead, if they find that the consumer is too poor to pay the bill, they try to collect at least a partial bill. Later, they would try to recover the balance amount in instalments from such consumers. However, in some extreme cases, if consumers do not pay even after 2-3 visits, they carry out disconnection.

Getting help from peers or consumers: Wiremen ask for help from their peers. It was observed that they had amicable relations among themselves. As a result, they readily asked for favour from each other and did not hesitate if others ask from them. For example, if a consumer's location is too far, they would ask a colleague staying nearby to help out for the task to be performed at the location.

Some participants said that they tried to develop good relations and rapport with few consumers to get the required help. On many occasions, wiremen lack supportive human resources for fieldwork in rural areas. On such occasions, consumers in the village help out wiremen to get the work done. According to some respondents, maintaining good relations with all the consumers has proven to be the most effective coping strategy. They cannot afford to engage in extended altercations with any consumer. One wireman said, 'We have to work at odd hours and any place. If some consumer does anything to us (harms us), no one will even get to know. So we have to behave calmly.' Many times, consumers try to threaten them to use their political clout. However, the wireman has to take a considerate view of behaviour of the consumer and respond accordingly.

Wireman's work cannot stop for long due to unavailability of the material as supply interruption for a long time builds pressure from consumers. They try to adopt other possible options for required material and complete the work⁷. They check with the consumer whether they had some material that could be useful for their work. For example, the cover of the feeder pillar gets stolen quite often. However, the utility cannot afford to put the new metal covers every time in place of stolen ones. Moreover, Wireman cannot put the lock on the cover because carrying every feeder pillar's key at the time work will not be feasible. Thus, they found out other types of sheets that look like metal but are made up of plastic material, as shown in the figure 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Sometimes, wiremen have to make expenditures from their pockets to get the material. Usually, in villages, it takes weeks to purchase or receive the material. Moreover, in villages, wiremen

⁷ For example, sometimes they have to use a wooden rod instead of an iron rod for pin insulators on the tower. Once, the pole collapsed, and the farmer gave two wooden sticks as a replacement for the pole.

are in good relations with consumers. Thus, it becomes difficult for wiremen to face consumers when supply is interrupted for long hours due to a lack of material availability. Therefore, they wiremen from their pocket to address such situations, arrange the material from their personal contacts, and do the work as early as possible.



Figure 6: Open feeder pillar box 1



Figure 7: Open feeder pillar box 2



Figure 8: Sheet used to close feeder pillar



Figure 9: Markings for easy understanding of fuse side of feeder pillar

Incidences of discretion exercised by PDU-SLB

During a disconnection drive, wiremen have the discretion to decide whether to disconnect or wait for the consumer to pay. From the experience of working in the same area over the years,

they know which consumers are habitual defaulters. They disconnect such consumers. In contrast, there could be a few consumers who genuinely forgot to pay the bill. Wireman has to take a call regarding action against such consumers. He might decide it considering the interaction with the consumer. Then, he makes his judgment of the consumer's ability to pay and his/her willingness to pay the bill.

Wiremen do not have a fixed schedule of work every day. As a result, sometimes they are on the field for the whole day, and sometimes they spend an entire day in the office. If they feel the need, wiremen plan the maintenance work on such days. Wireman decides the exact timing of attending a consumer complaint. The decision depends upon the type and level of urgency of the complaint. For example, if a complaint is for some officer's relative/acquaintance, wiremen have to rush. If supply is cut-off for a colony where many consumers are affected, he/she has to reach there immediately and start the work. Complaints of commercial consumers are also attended without wasting much time, as power supply interruption of commercial consumers is loss of revenue for PDU. On the other hand, consumers who are disconnected due to non-payment of the bill have to wait longer for reconnection. Even though a team of wiremen is sitting idle in an office, they would not immediately go for reconnection. When I asked more about this, they replied,

'If disconnection is done, that means wireman has gone to this consumer at least 2-3 times, and still, the consumer did not pay. Now, we also have to make him wait. So, next time he will know that reconnection takes more time, and to avoid that, he will pay the bill on time.'

While working in the field, the quality of work is entirely in the hands of the wireman. Whether a wiremen try to find out a complete or long-term solution or makes tentative arrangements that would work for a time, he tells us about his attitude towards work. Some give excuses and do not complete the work, while some try their best to satisfy the consumer by doing good quality work.

Incidences of application of attitudes and approaches of PDU-SLB

The attitude of PDU-SLB regarding their work depends on various factors such as their experience, knowledge of the system, ambitions from themselves, position within the organization, and work environment around them. Some SLBs who have worked for a longer time in PDU might get easily irritated by consumer complaints. After working for many years and listening to similar complaints repeatedly, they sometimes become short-tempered,

ignorant, or arrogant. On the other hand, a newly joined employee might be enthusiastic while working. As young wiremen might have better knowledge of advanced technology, they can work faster and effectively.

The decision-making of wiremen is often influenced by their professional norms, knowledge about the rules, expertise, and knowledge of local situations. For example, if a wireman belongs from the same community where he/she is working, it knows community dynamics and political influence. Such knowledge usually helps the wireman at the time of revenue recovery. If needed, wiremen can make appropriate contacts to put pressure on non-paying consumers. SLBs, while working on the field, have a choice between working to achieve PDU goals or fulfil the needs of citizens by using available discretion to manipulate rules to the client's benefit. PDU-SLB is observed to be acting as a citizen's agent here, which means they try to favour consumers for better services. For example, during revenue recovery, AE might order a wireman to disconnect a specific consumer, but if the wireman trusts the consumer, he will pay; the wireman will not disconnect that consumer. Sometimes wireman lies to AE by saying disconnection is done if a consumer has promised to pay within a day or two.

Power Dynamics surrounding PDU-SLB

PDU-SLB and consumers: Most of the times, consumer and wireman relation is friendly. As consumers always need some help from wiremen, they try to maintain good relations with wiremen. However, there might be few consumers who try to create trouble for wiremen. In such cases as well, wiremen always have powerful position than consumers. Sometimes, politically powerful consumers create pressure on wiremen for their benefit. In such instances, the wireman takes a call considering risks associated with his/her choice.

PDU-SLB and supervisors: Sometimes, there is a disagreement between the supervisor (AE) and the wiremen. However, AE's decision is always the final one, even though it increases wiremen's work. The supervisor is also accountable to his/her higher authorities; thus, their priorities change according to their higher authorities. However, wiremen have to respond to emergencies created in the field. For example, wiremen might feel some maintenance work has to be done immediately, but the supervisor might order him to prepare a single line diagram because the higher officer ordered it. This creates displeasure and disappointment on both sides, wiremen, and supervisors. Wiremen feel helpless in such situations, as he does not have any authority.

Conclusions

The paper described anarchic working conditions of these SLBs that are, marked by absence of standardized operating procedures (SOPs), lack of training, unscheduled additional tasks, high risks to life, aggressive consumers, and neopatrimonialism of local politicians, corrupt private contractors, and local mafia. It documents and analyses diverse coping strategies adopted by these SLBs, including: innovative use of locally and easily available material to tide over scarcity of material, own financial contribution to pay consumers' bills or for laying additional wires, rearrangement of task priority, deception with consumers, and cherry picking of consumers.

The paper also traces influence of different factors, such as power dynamics, discretion, and individual attitudes of these SLBs on their coping strategies. It described multifaceted and complex power relationships of SLBs with consumers, local politicians, and supervisors. Further, intimate knowledge of consumer's behaviour, detailed understanding of physical infrastructure, and flexibility exercised by superiors provide significant discretion to SLBs, which is often converted into blatant rule-violation by SLBs in absence of effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

Finally, the paper presents some theoretical reflections by comparing these empirical findings with observations and lessons presented in the SLB literature from developed countries, covering aspects like individual and professional characteristics of SLBs, coping strategies of SLBs, and availability and use of discretion.

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