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9B18M030

V-Xpress: Driving Next-Level Growth by Building Competencies

Amarpreet Ghura and Abhishek wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Ashok Shah, chairman of V-Trans Group (V-Group), entered his office in Mumbai on the morning of September 30, 2015, with a smile on his face. The previous evening, V-Xpress, a division of V-Group, had won the “Best Express Cargo Service Provider of the Year” award at the 9thExpress Logistics and Supply Chain Conclave 2015.[[1]](#footnote-1) One of the main reasons V-Xpress had won the award was its commitment to zero shortage and timely delivery for its customers, which the company had developed as a protocol for handling express cargo. Ashok called for a meeting with O.P. Harshwal, chief executive officer (CEO) of the V-Xpress division. He wanted to share with Harshwal management’s aspiration of entering into the e-commerce delivery space and servicing e-commerce clients with zero shortage and timely delivery, and to ask him to work out a way to enter the e-commerce delivery space.

ORIGIN OF V-GROUP

Kunverji Khimji Shah, father of Ashok, arrived in Bombay (as Mumbai was called before 1995) in 1932 at the age of nine, and worked at local transport companies to earn his livelihood. By 1952, Kunverji had started his own transport company, Kunverji K. Shah and Co., which operated in Bombay. Kunverji re-named the company Vijay[[2]](#footnote-2) Transport Company (VTC) in 1958 to give the firm a more professional sounding name. VTC expanded operations to the adjacent state of Gujarat by setting up branches in Ahmedabad, Baroda, Bhuj, Rajkot, and Jamnagar. VTC’s customer-centric approach was able to attract top corporate houses, such as Godrej & Boyce, Bata Shoes, Asian Paints, Asbestos Cement Industries Ltd., British Paints, Colgate-Palmolive Company, Zandu Pharmaceutical Works Limited, and Johnson & Johnson, which commissioned VTC to carry their merchandise to Gujarat. Ashok, Kunverji’s eldest son born in 1950, joined the company in 1969 as a second-generation entrepreneur.

Ashok introduced record maintenance of the company’s fleet tires, including the start and end dates of the tires’ use, the kilometre usage of the tires, and the wear and tear of the tires over different routes. This information helped him to develop insight into the behaviour of tires and their longevity on different routes. The record keeping impressed the owners of truck and tire manufacturing companies to such an extent that Raunaq Singh of Apollo Tires and Vivek Bharat Ram of DCM Toyota Ltd. met with Ashok to obtain information on their company-made tires and trucks. In 1978, Kunverji decided to hand over the reins of the entire business to Ashok, and to dedicate his time to social and community services. When Ashok took over, the company had 14 offices and 24 trucks. From 1980 onwards, Ashok added more branches, covering the entire Golden Corridor (Gujarat Industrial Estate), and the company emerged as the undisputed prime transporter on that route. In the 1980s, VTC computerized its operations and converted itself to a private limited company.

GROWING the VTC BUSINESS

By 1995, VTC had built a sound business in the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, and in Western India. This success led to demand from its existing clients to deliver goods to South India. Ashok did not want to ignore the demands of the existing clients. In 1996, he identified a company with a strong presence in South India. VTC ventured into that part of the country with a delivery arrangement after signing a memorandum of understanding with Prakash Parcel Service Ltd.

Over the years, as VTC expanded its operations and strove to be a pan-India player, there was a rethinking of the company’s visual identity (see Exhibit 1). In 2001, VTC hired Arvind Lodaya, a branding consultant who had previously worked as a creative director for Artistree (a specialist unit of Ogilvy & Mather), to implement a corporate identity change for VTC. The corporate identity change exercise took about six months, during which time Lodaya interacted with existing customers, lost customers, VTC staff members, and other VTC stakeholders. Lodaya’s report to VTC stated that the name Vijay Transport Company made the company sound like a local player, and recommended changing it. In December 2002, as VTC ventured into North India by opening its first branch in Jhandewali, Delhi, Ashok changed the 44-year-old company name to V-Trans Group to signal professionalism. Over the years, V-Trans Group became more commonly known as V-Group.

BIRTH OF V-XPRESS

With a boom in the organized retail sector, express delivery was gaining prominence in India in the early years of the 21st century. V-Group identified the trend and decided to introduce a new business vertical separately, within the infrastructure and operational facilities of V-Group. Thus, three separate business divisions were organized under the V-Group umbrella—V-Trans, catering to hard freight surface transport; V-Xpress, catering to time bound door-to-door parcel service; and V-Logis, catering to warehousing and inventory management service.

Between early 2002 and late 2007, V-Xpress was successful but could not solidify its presence as a separate strategic business unit. The V-Group board hired a consultant to recommend the way forward for V-Xpress. That consultant’s report attributed the poor performance of V-Xpress to V-Group’s core makeup. The consultant noted that V-Xpress was using the infrastructure and operational facilities of V-Group, and was run by the same staff at V-Group who ran V-Trans operations. These staff members were accustomed to sending out a vehicle only after it was full, whereas the express business should have been ensuring a time-bound, door-to-door service wherein the fleet was released at the scheduled time irrespective of its load capacity. The consultant suggested that building the culture of time-bound service at V-Xpress required a professional—someone outside of the family. As the express delivery industry was rapidly growing, V-Group’s board of directors decided to bring professional focus to V-Xpress, and as the consultant had suggested, gave control of the V-Xpress division to a professional outside of the family. The board thus appointed Harshwal as CEO of V-Xpress on August 1, 2007.

PROFESSIONALIZING V-XPRESS

Harshwal, who was a chartered accountant, company secretary, and law graduate, believed in growing business through quality deliverables rather than through promotional branding. After joining V-Xpress as CEO, he opened a new, separate corporate office in Belapur, New Mumbai, to carry out V-Xpress’s business. In October 2007, V-Xpress began setting up operational transport hubs and branches,[[3]](#footnote-3) and under Harshwal its standard operating processes evolved (see Exhibit 2). In 2008, the company obtained International Standards Organization certification[[4]](#footnote-4) to strengthen the systems and processes of the V-Xpress division.

During this period, several companies entered the express delivery business, including Relogistics (Reliance Group), Gammon India, Deccan Cargo and Express Logistics (Deccan Airline Group), Aditi Express Cargo India Pvt. Ltd., First Flight Couriers Ltd., Promto (SER Group), ASL Pvt. Ltd., FSC Express Logistics (Future Group), Kingfisher Xpress, DTDC Express Ltd., RCPL Logistics Pvt. Ltd., and EXL India (a division of Jaipur Golden Transport Company Pvt. Ltd.). Operational failures such as shortages, damages, and delays in delivery were common with all operators. The global financial sector meltdown in September 2008 affected India at a time when the country’s economy was already in the midst of a cyclical slowdown.[[5]](#footnote-5) By the end of 2009, many express logistic companies, with the exception of a few giants such as Gati and Safexpress Pvt. Ltd. (Safexpress), had closed their businesses due to losses. V-Xpress experienced a slowdown, but its management team decided to continue the business, further investing in creating more capabilities for building core competency. Harshwal sought to gain a deeper understanding of the express business to create a competitive advantage, and so began focusing on understanding the needs of express logistics customers.

Through discussions with V-Xpress clients, Harshwal realized that customers expected goods to reach the destination safely, without shortages, on time, and with transparency in transactions throughout the movement of the goods. He also learned that leading players such as Gati and Safexpress focused on timely delivery—Gati was providing timely deliveries to 19,000 pin codes[[6]](#footnote-6) and covered 667 out of 671 districts in India with over 5,000 vehicles;[[7]](#footnote-7) Safexpress was providing timely deliveries and covering 610 destinations with 4,500 containerized vehicles.[[8]](#footnote-8) Harshwal considered that timely delivery could help V-Xpress become the top player in this market.

ACHIEVING TIMELY DELIVERY

To achieve its mission of the timely delivery of goods, operations at V-Xpress were divided into various stages between the hubs and branches (see Exhibit 3). For each stage, an individual at either the destination branch or the hub was held accountable for receiving the goods and for their delivery to the next destination. This process brought accountability to the system, unlike in earlier times when no particular person was held accountable for consignment delivery.

For achieving timely deliveries, time schedules were set for each stage of the movement of goods as a measure of effective control. The use of Global Positioning System-enabled information technology tools attached to the entire fleet gave real-time data, making it easy to track the movement of consignments and prevent delivery delays. This technology also provided a value-added service to customers by sending them real-time information updates using short message service and emails. The company also invested in training customer care executives and providing a dedicated toll-free number for its customers. The major hubs used mechanized handling equipment[[9]](#footnote-9) for efficient operations, helping to reduce vehicular turn-around time and transit time. V-Xpress was able to deliver 90 per cent of its shipments on time, which was considered among the best timely delivery in the industry.

As the company was strengthening its internal processes, Vishal Shah, son of Ashok, joined V-Xpress in 2010 as a third-generation entrepreneur of the family-managed business. Vishal had a postgraduate diploma in family-managed business, and about one year of work experience at Kuehne + Nagel International AG.[[10]](#footnote-10) Initially, Vishal was given the responsibility of handling key customer accounts. Over the next few years, he was responsible for handling key business areas including sales, marketing, human resources, and finance. Soon Vishal became one of the core team members of V-Xpress management, and was responsible for enhancing information technology solutions in the business.

ENABLING ZERO SHORTAGE

V-Xpress wanted to assure its clients of the timely and safe delivery of goods, especially when the goods were expensive. However, the industry assumed that a shortage of goods (especially expensive goods) during delivery was inevitable. In June 2014, Harshwal and his team at V-Xpress declared a new call for action—namely, “zero shortage”—that was to be achieved by December 2014. After this declaration, an entirely new process began to evolve.

For achieving the objective of zero shortage, V-Xpress offered pan-India, door-to-door express cargo service through closed-body, waterproof-containerized vehicles. The cargo was handled through the hub-and-spoke system, wherein the cargo was shipped from various locations to a centralized hub. The cargo was then segregated as per the spokes and dispatched accordingly. The entire process of express service began with filling in the docket and picking up the consignment from the clients, which was carried out by a dedicated team of more than 250 associates who worked for V-Xpress on a contractual basis. After picking up the consignment, the associates delivered it to the nearest V-Xpress branch. The booking branch checked the received consignment for its packing and docket quality and then made a docket entry in eCargo, an enterprise resource planning system, and forwarded the consignment to the hub. At the booking hub, the consignment was unloaded and checked as per the docket information; the goods were then loaded into the fleet vehicles according to their respective service routes. At the delivery hub, the consignment was unloaded and again checked for quantity as per the docket, and then loaded into vehicles according to feeder route. At the delivery branch, the consignment was unloaded and the quantity checked as per the docket. The concerned V-Xpress associates loaded the consignment in their vehicles and went out for delivery. These associates took acknowledgement in the form of a mobile proof of delivery for instant consignment delivery confirmation (see Exhibit 4).

The branch receiving the goods received a code on the trip hire challan[[11]](#footnote-11) prepared by the hub operations supervisor; it mentioned details such as the fleet driver’s code and name; the names of the operations supervisor and the other employees inspecting the cargo; the fleet truck number; the start and end destinations of the trip; the details of the goods transported in terms of their exact weight, the route path to be followed by the fleet driver, the total running hours (total estimated time to complete the trip), the seal number, and the seal condition (whether rightly sealed or not); and the signatures of the fleet drivers and the V-Xpress operations supervisor. This information was used to monitor everyone involved in the entire logistic movement, as each consignment passed through an average of 20 pairs of hands before reaching the final destination.

Earlier, the loading and unloading of goods at the hubs/branches was monitored by security, which was largely outsourced. Although this process was supervised, the problem of shortages still arose, so V-Xpress decided to build an in-house security team. V-Xpress established 24-hour monitoring teams at the head office that worked in shifts to constantly monitor the loading and unloading of goods with the help of installed cameras and closed-circuit televisions at all the hubs. Steel seals with lock codes were installed on the doors of trucks carrying goods, and could be opened only by a heavy metal cutter kept at each branch.

A system of ticketing was developed for responding to customers’ queries in a smooth and transparent manner. The system was also envisaged as a transparent platform of communication within the organization. Any employee facing a difficulty in delivering services could raise a ticket, as per the prescribed format, and assign it to the person responsible for providing the solution. The person raising the query and the person answering it within the ticketing system were identified only by their docket numbers. The concerned responsible person, termed the “parent,” needed to resolve the issue within a predetermined time frame of two hours. In case of any deviation, the ticketing cell intervened to ensure solutions from the parent, and the query was automatically escalated to the CEO—who directly monitored the situation on a daily basis. Unanswered queries and any escalated issues would then be answered by the parent in “zero hour” meetings, which were held at the corporate office under the guidance of the CEO and with the entire operation team in the delivery chain.

V-Xpress management took strict action against shortages found in delivery and did not allow any truck to move from its destination where shortages were noticed. Loading reports were sent by the on-duty security personnel to the head of security at head office. Real-time solutions to shortage issues were offered by the operations and vigilance teams using technology. Those responsible for any deviation in quantity were identified, and those found guilty were told to leave the company, which helped in establishing among employees the seriousness of management about shortages. Changing the mindset of employees and making them believe that deliveries could be shortage-free was difficult, but by September 2014, V-Xpress had finally achieved 100 per cent shortage-free deliveries.

The technology used to achieve zero shortages and timely delivery enabled the regional offices of V-Xpress to instantly update customer information, thereby providing maximum support to customers. Customers could track the movement of their goods at the click of a button, which led to an increase both in consignments from existing customers and in the company’s clientele base and revenue (see Exhibit5).

THE MEETING

Ashok warmly greeted Harshwal and congratulated him on receiving the Best Express Cargo Service Provider of the Year award. Harshwal thanked Ashok and said that management’s support of investing in systems and processes and the best surveillance technologies had finally paid off, as the division had achieved the challenging objective of zero shortages. Ashok continued the discussion by apprising Harshwal of his intention to enter the e-commerce delivery business.

We have successfully implemented zero shortage and timely delivery for our express delivery clients for more than one year, and now I would like you to use this strength for expanding our business to e-commerce players. Along with delivery of regular products, the e-commerce sector is characterized by picking up fragile, delicate, and expensive goods from the doorsteps of e-commerce companies and committed on-time delivery to customers’ doorstep. I believe V-Xpress could offer its zero shortage and timely delivery service to e-commerce companies, which will also help us in realizing our full potential. E-commerce companies are currently relying heavily on the unorganized segment of the time-bound, door-to-door express delivery companies. These players, comprising over 85 per cent of market, have less than five vehicles and are not in a position to provide the services expected by players like Flipkart and Amazon.

Harshwal was intently listening to Ashok. He was aware of the issues of fake product deliveries plaguing the e-commerce sector (see Exhibit 6). He was also aware of the challenges in expanding the business, especially for last-mile delivery. He replied:

India’s express delivery market has seen a growth of around 17 per cent in last five years. The market of express delivery has especially picked up since 2012, as Indian consumers have started making purchases on e-commerce platforms. However, the growth in e-commerce transactions along with a mega sales push by e-commerce players has propelled the demand for delivery boys to an all-time high, leading to an increase in salaries and incentives, sometimes totalling ₹25,000.[[12]](#footnote-12) The problem has been further accentuated by the growth of hyper-local delivery players catering to food and grocery delivery. As I understand, there are currently 100,000 bikers on the road, and staffing firms are grappling with a severe shortage of bikers.

Ashok was well aware of the challenges in building last-mile delivery for e-commerce delivery. However, he also perceived that delivery for e-commerce players was a lucrative business that could significantly increase revenues. He believed V-Xpress could charge a premium for delivering goods safely and timely to e-commerce customers. He proposed the following:

We can charge a different price from e-commerce players. For instance, V-Xpress charges a price of ₹6–7 per kilogram [kg] for a shorter distance [less than 500 kilometres (km)] and ₹14–15 for a longer distance [more than 500 km] for its regular shipment [a minimum weight of 50 kg and maximum of 1000 kg], making a yield average of ₹9.08 per kg. For the e-commerce sector, as the consignments are to be delivered in a maximum distance range of 35 km—the distance from the company warehouse to the end customer—we can charge ₹45 for a 1-kg consignment and ₹35 for a 500-gram consignment. I think we can get a yield of ₹22 per kg.

Ashok and Harshwal’s meeting ended. Ashok was confident that V-Xpress’s strength lay in its professional approach, which had helped in building strong processes, and he was sure Harshwal would come up with a strategy for moving ahead.

EXHIBIT 1: V-Trans Group’s logo in 2000

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Source: Company documents.

EXHIBIT 2: V-Xpress branches and hubs, 2007–2015

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Number of Branches** | **Number of Hubs** |
| 2007 | 117 | 12 |
| 2008 | 188 | 13 |
| 2009 | 211 | 14 |
| 2010 | 216 | 14 |
| 2011 | 197 | 16 |
| 2012 | 215 | 17 |
| 2013 | 265 | 18 |
| 2014 | 261 | 19 |
| 2015 | 261 | 19 |

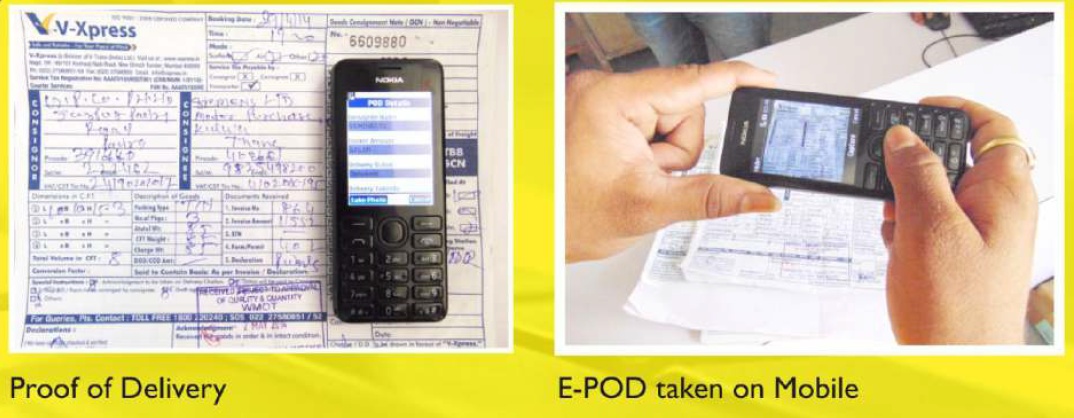
Source: Company documents.

EXHIBIT 3: V-xpress’s Six stages of consignment delivery

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Stage Number** | **Location** | **Activity** |
| 1 | Consignor’s Location | A V-Xpress associate fills in the docket and picks up the material. |
| 2 | Booking Branch | The branch in charge checks the received material in terms of its packing and docket quality, makes a docket entry in eCargo, and sends the material to the booking hub by feeder route. |
| 3 | Booking Hub | The material is unloaded and checked in terms of docket information and actual material. The goods are then loaded in the appropriate service route vehicle. |
| 4 | Delivery Hub | Goods are unloaded and checked in terms of quantity and docket quality. They are then loaded in the appropriate feeder route vehicles. |
| 5 | Delivery Branch | Goods are unloaded and checked in terms of quantity and docket quality. A V-Xpress associate loads the goods in the vehicle and leaves for delivery. |
| 6 | Consignee’s Location | A V-Xpress associate delivers the goods at the customer’s place and takes an acknowledgement in the form of a proof of delivery. |

Source: Company documents.

EXHIBIT 4: V-xpress’s Proof of Delivery

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Source: Company documents.

EXHIBIT 5: V-xpress’s Income statements, 2011–12 to 2013–14 (in US$ millions)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2013–14** | **2012–13** | **2011–12** |  |
| Revenue from Operations | 197.98 | 166.79 | 133.27 |  |
| Operating Expenses | 141.81 | 118.89 | 90.96 |  |
| Employee Benefits | 1.80 | 1.50 | 1.14 |  |
| Finance Costs | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |  |
| Depreciation | 0.08 | 0.08 | 0.08 |  |
| Other Expenses | 47.45 | 40.25 | 35.15 |  |
| Net Profit before Taxes | 6.84 | 6.06 | 5.93 |  |

Source: Company documents.

EXHIBIT 6: Short Note on the Issue of fake products sold and delivered by

e-commerce players

From 2014 onward, increasing media reports from India noted incidents involving deliveries of rocks and bars of soap when customers had actually ordered expensive electronics items. For instance, Livemint reported in October 2014 that a 29-year-old customer had placed an order for a Samsung Galaxy Note 3 Neo from Flipkart, but ended up receiving a rock. In the same month, various media outlets reported that a customer named [Laxminarayan Krishnamurthy](http://www.livemint.com/Search/Link/Keyword/Laxminarayan%20Krishnamurthy) received a bar of soap instead of the Samsung phone he had ordered on Snapdeal. He received a refund from Snapdeal a week later, after he had complained on [Facebook](http://www.livemint.com/Search/Link/Keyword/Facebook).

In addition to dealing with fake products, e-commerce players such as Amazon.com Inc., [eBay](http://www.livemint.com/Search/Link/Keyword/eBay) Inc., and [Alibaba](http://www.livemint.com/Search/Link/Keyword/Alibaba) Group Holding Ltd. (Alibaba) also struggled to stop the sale of second-hand products. For example, in 2008, eBay Inc. was imposed a fine of €38.6 million by a French court for selling fake Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton (popularly known by brand name [LVMH](http://www.livemint.com/Search/Link/Keyword/LVMH)) bags and clothing. In 2011, Alibaba fired some executives when it learned they had granted special status to more than 2,000 sellers who later cheated customers. In this scandal, Alibaba paid more than US$2 million to customers from its customer compensation fund, which was set up in 2009 to make amends with shoppers who received fakes or were not delivered what they were promised.

The problem of fake products in e-commerce has been reported mostly through sales made by third-party sellers who register themselves to sell through e-commerce players’ marketplace platforms. For example, sales made on the Flipkart platform are made by its subsidiary, WS Retail, and several other third-party sellers. While WS Retail merchandise is stored at Flipkart’s warehouse, not all third-party sellers store their products at the warehouse. These sellers prefer to deliver to customers directly whenever a sale is made on Flipkart. This means that Flipkart does not have supervision over products delivered from its third-party sellers’ storage locations.

E-commerce players try various means to control the actions made in bad faith by third-party sellers. Flipkart has a team that performs a quality check of the third-party seller by visiting its location before approving it to sell and directly deliver. Flipkart also allows its customer to leave reviews and ratings on its website for products and sellers, which can help other customers in making informed purchase decisions. If a seller receives multiple low ratings, then its rank on Flipkart is affected, and Flipkart can even delist it. Similarly, Amazon.in uses metrics that help it to record and measure the extent of a problem. Amazon India also conducts mystery shopping for third-party sellers on its platform who list, pack, and ship products on their own. It conducts random periodic checks to test sample products and take action against third-party sellers who are found guilty. Amazon.in has taken action against guilty third-party sellers many times, either by delisting them or by changing courier services.

Note: € = EUR = euro; €1 = US$1.0833 on March 31, 2015.

Source: Prepared by authors based on Mishra Ashish and Dalal Mihir, “Rock, Paper, Scissors, er, e-commerce,” Livemint, November 4, 2014, accessed October 18, 2016, [www.livemint.com/Industry/PcNXmfpakCgcYzDLvukXMM/Rock-paper-scissors-er-ecommerce.html](http://www.livemint.com/Industry/PcNXmfpakCgcYzDLvukXMM/Rock-paper-scissors-er-ecommerce.html); Jain Sanya, “Delhi Man Orders Phone Online, Gets Soap on Delivery. His Post Is Viral,” NDTV, September 13, 2017, accessed September 13, 2017, <https://www.ndtv.com/offbeat/delhi-man-orders-phone-online-gets-soap-on-delivery-his-post-is-viral-1749831>.

1. ELSC Conclave, “9th Express, Logistics & Supply Chain Leadership Awards - 2015,” Express, Logistics & Supply Chain Leadership Awards, September 30, 2015, accessed November 9, 2016, www.elscconclave.com/award-winners/2015.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vijay meant “victory” in the Sanskrit language. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A transport hub was a place where cargo collected from different branches was exchanged and rerouted to fleets for delivery; a branch was a place for cargo pick-up and delivery. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Being ISO 9001 certified meant an organization had met the requirements of ISO 9001. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, “Working Papers,” ICRIER, March 2009, accessed October 9, 2016, http://icrier.org/publications/working-papers/. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A pin code, also known as a postal index number, was a six-digit code used in the post office numbering by Indian Post. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. India Mart, “Gati Kwe Express Distribution,” India Mart, 2016, accessed October 9, 2016, https://www.indiamart.com/proddetail/Gati-kwe-express-distribution-12745746062.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Safexpress, “Reach,” accessed October 9, 2016, www.safexpress.com/Reach.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mechanized handling equipment was mechanical equipment used for the movement, storage, control, and protection of materials, goods, and products throughout the manufacturing, distribution, consumption, and disposal processes. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kuehne + Nagel International AG was a global transportation and logistics company based in Schindellegi, Switzerland. As of 2015, it had more than 1,000 offices in over 100 countries, and over 63,000 employees. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A challan was an official form or document, such as a receipt or invoice. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ₹ = INR = Indian rupee; ₹1 = US$0.02 on March 31, 2015; All currency amounts are in INR unless otherwise specified. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)