

A STUDY ON ABUSE OF POWERS BY RTO OFFICIALS

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BEST CITATION – KIRUTHIGA K, A STUDY ON ABUSE OF POWERS BY RTO OFFICIALS, *INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW (IJLR)*, 4 (4) OF 2024, PG. 74-78, APIS – 3920 – 0001 & ISSN – 2583-2344.

Abstract

The abuse of power by Regional Transport Office (RTO) officers in India poses a significant challenge to the integrity and efficiency of the transport system. This article explores the various forms of abuse, including corruption in vehicle registration and licensing, and extortion during enforcement activities. Such practices undermine road safety, diminish public trust, and impose financial burdens on individuals and businesses. To address these issues, the article suggests implementing digital systems for greater transparency, providing rigorous training for officers, increasing public awareness, and strengthening legal frameworks. By adopting these measures, India can enhance the effectiveness of its transport system and restore public confidence.

Introduction

The Regional Transport Office (RTO) in India plays a pivotal role in the country's transportation infrastructure. Established to manage vehicle registration, issue driving licenses, and enforce traffic regulations, the RTO is crucial for maintaining road safety and ensuring compliance with legal standards. Despite its importance, the RTO has been plagued by issues of power abuse, which significantly undermine its effectiveness and public perception. Abuse of power by RTO officers manifests in various forms, including bribery, extortion, and corruption.

Functions of RTO

⁶⁵These are the functions of RTO official:

1. Vehicle Registration: The RTO oversees the registration process for motor vehicles within its jurisdiction.
2. Driving Licenses: The RTO conducts driving license tests, issues driving licenses to qualified applicants, and maintains records of licensed drivers. It may also handle the renewal, suspension, or cancellation of driving licenses.
3. Issuance of Fitness and Pollution Certificates
4. Tax Collection: The Regional Transport Office collects various taxes and fees related to motor vehicles, such as road tax, vehicle transfer fees, and permit fees.
5. Permits and Transport Regulations: The RTO may issue permits for commercial vehicles, regulate their operation, and enforce transport-related regulations. This includes monitoring compliance with load limits, passenger safety norms, and operating routes.
6. Enforcement and Traffic Management: RTO officers often collaborate with enforcement agencies to enforce traffic rules and regulations.
7. Environmental Norms: RTO issues a Pollution Under Control (PUC) Certificate to vehicles to verify the condition of the vehicle and the related equipment.

Forms of abuse

1. Corruption in Vehicle Registration and Licensing:

Bribery for Expedited Services: RTO officers often demand bribes to expedite vehicle registration or issuance of driving licenses. This bypasses

⁶⁵ TRANSPORT INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA - P.S. Kharola

the standard procedures a law and allows individuals to avoid delays and requirements, leading to unregulated or improperly documented vehicles on the road. In some cases, officers issue driving licenses without conducting proper tests or verifying qualifications. This practice undermines road safety by allowing unqualified individuals to drive.

2. Extortion during Enforcement:

Arbitrary Fines and Penalties: During routine checks or traffic stops, officers may impose arbitrary fines or penalties on motorists. These fines are often exaggerated or unwarranted, with officers using their authority to extract money from drivers. Instead of issuing official receipts and following proper procedures, officers may collect fines in cash and pocket the money, avoiding any formal record of the transaction.

3. Misuse of Authority in Inspections:

Exploitation of Legal Ambiguities: Officers might exploit vague or ambiguous traffic laws to harass or penalize vehicle owners. This misuse of legal discretion can lead to frequent and unjustified penalties. Officers may conduct unnecessary inspections or cause delays to pressure vehicle owners into paying bribes or making unofficial payments to avoid inconvenience.

4. Manipulation of Records:

Tampering with Registration and Licensing Records: There have been instances where RTO officers manipulate records to facilitate illegal activities, such as registering vehicles with false documents or altering licensing details for personal gain.

5. Favouritism and Nepotism:

Preferential Treatment: Officers might provide preferential treatment to certain individuals or businesses in exchange for bribes or other favors. This can result in unequal enforcement of regulations and unfair advantages for those with connections.

One notable legal case involving an RTO officer is the ⁶⁶“Ravi Pujari vs. State of Maharashtra” case. Ravi Pujari, a notorious underworld gangster, was implicated in a high-profile scandal involving corruption and bribery within the Regional Transport Office. In the early 2000s, Pujari’s criminal network was found to be involved in extortion schemes where RTO officers were reportedly accepting bribes to issue fake licenses and registration documents. The case attracted widespread attention due to Pujari’s criminal background and the involvement of public officials. Investigations and subsequent legal proceedings revealed a systemic problem within the RTO, leading to the arrest and prosecution of several officers on charges of corruption and misconduct. This case highlighted the significant issue of corruption within the RTO system and underscored the need for rigorous reforms to ensure integrity and accountability in public administration.

The ⁶⁷“Manohar Bhanushali vs. State of Maharashtra” case from 2014 is a notable example of corruption involving an RTO officer. Manohar Bhanushali, an RTO official in Mumbai, was implicated in accepting bribes to issue driving licenses without proper procedures. The case emerged following a whistleblower’s report, leading to an investigation that exposed a network of corruption. Bhanushali was convicted and sentenced, highlighting systemic issues within the RTO and underscoring the need for stronger oversight and accountability in public offices.

The recent case which depicted abusive power of RTO officials is Sri T Manjunath vs State Of Karnataka on 26 July, 2024. The decision was made by a single judge bench of Justice HP Sandesh while rejecting a petition filed by T Manjunath, who was arrested under the Prevention of Corruption Act. The court rejected Manjunath’s petition, stating, “Sanction was

⁶⁶ “Ravi Pujari Case: Details of Corruption and Legal Proceedings”, Supreme Court of India Records, 2012.

⁶⁷ “Manohar Bhanushali vs. State of Maharashtra: Case Summary and Judgment”, Bombay High Court Records, 2014.

granted having considered the material available on record regarding demand and acceptance of the alleged bribery.”

Another case which affected vigorously by a negligent act is

Effects of abuse of power by RTO officials

1. Decreased Road Safety:

Increased Accident Rates, Corruption and improper licensing lead to unqualified drivers on the roads and vehicles that may not meet safety standards. This results in higher accident rates and increased risk of road-related fatalities and injuries and reduced enforcement of Safety Standards

2. Undermined Institutional Integrity:

Erosion of Public Trust, Persistent corruption and abuse create a perception of widespread inefficiency and dishonesty within the RTO. This erodes public trust in the institution and government agencies as a whole.

3. Economic Impact:

Higher Costs for Individuals, Vehicle owners and drivers often face additional costs due to bribes and unofficial payments. These extra financial burdens disproportionately affect lower-income individuals and small businesses. Economic Inefficiencies in Businesses this can hinder overall economic growth and productivity.

4. Operational Inefficiencies:

Delays and Bureaucratic Inefficiencies, Corruption and abuse can cause delays in the registration and licensing processes, leading to inefficiencies and a backlog of work. This disrupts the smooth functioning of the transport system. Resources intended for regulatory and safety functions are diverted due to corrupt practices, resulting in inadequate service delivery and reduced effectiveness of the RTO.

5. Legal and Ethical Concerns:

Increased Legal Risks, The prevalence of corruption can lead to an environment where legal standards are compromised, and ethical boundaries are blurred. This creates a legal and

ethical quagmire that is difficult to navigate. Efforts to address corruption and enforce traffic laws become more challenging when the very officers responsible for enforcement are engaged in corrupt practices.

Legal statutes governing the abusive power by RTO

In India, several legal statutes and regulations govern the functioning of the Regional Transport Office (RTO) and address issues related to abuse of power:

- Motor Vehicles Act, 1988: This is the primary legislation governing road transport and vehicle registration in India. It includes provisions related to the issuance of driving licenses, vehicle registration, road safety, and penalties for traffic violations.
- Bharata Nyaya Sanhita (BNS): Section 173 of the BNS states about bribery and corruption, which can be relevant in cases of abuse of power by RTO officials.
- Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988: This act deals specifically with the prevention of corruption among public servants and provides for the investigation and prosecution of corrupt practices.
- Right to Information Act, 2005: This act allows citizens to request information from public authorities, including the RTO, thereby promoting transparency and accountability.
- Central Motor Vehicles Rules, 1989: These rules, made under the Motor Vehicles Act, provide detailed procedures for the implementation of the Act, including vehicle registration and licensing.
- State-Specific Rules and Regulations: Each state in India may have its own set of rules and regulations that complement the Motor Vehicles Act and address local issues related to transport and road safety.

These statutes work together to regulate RTO functions and address abuses of power by

providing legal frameworks for enforcement, accountability, and transparency.

Suggestions

To reduce the abuse of power, Official's actions and their complaints can be made public Providing training on ethics and customer service Educate the public about their rights Protection of whistle-blowers.

Conclusion

The abuse of power by RTO officers undermines public trust and compromises the integrity of the regulatory system. Addressing these issues requires stringent oversight, accountability measures, and a commitment to ethical conduct within the RTO. By enforcing transparency and empowering citizens to report misconduct, we can work towards a fairer and more effective transportation regulatory framework. It is essential for the authorities to take proactive steps to restore confidence and ensure that power is exercised responsibly and justly.

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INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW [IJLR – IF SCORE – 7.58]

VOLUME 4 AND ISSUE 4 OF 2024

APIS – 3920 – 0001 (*and*) ISSN – 2583-2344

Published by
Institute of Legal Education

<https://iledu.in>

