

CHALLENGING FACED BY THE CUSTOMS HOUSE AGENT

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ABSTRACT

Customs House Agents (CHAs) are responsible for ensuring that goods imported into or exported from a country are cleared through customs according to the specific country's customs laws and regulations. Every day, CHAs encounter multiple difficulties while performing their functions; this paper will provide an empirical study of the operational, regulatory, technological, financial and infrastructure challenges CHAs in India face.

Data for this research was obtained from 60 logistics and customs professionals who completed a structured questionnaire. The data analysis consisted of percentage analysis, descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, multiple regression, one way ANOVA, independent sample t-test and chi-square test analyses.

The digital system (ICEGATE) was determined to be the most significant predictor of CHA performance ($\beta = .748$; $R^2 = .56$; $p < .001$); CHA performance was negatively impacted by: 1) the complexity of regulations; 2) the burden of documentation; 3) the unavailability of financial resources; and 4) the state of the infrastructure. ANOVA, t-tests and chi-square showed no statistically significant differences between the departments, gender or experience levels of CHA employees indicating that challenges confronted by CHAs are experienced uniformly through the gross workforce of CHAs. Recommendations include simplification of regulatory processes, accelerating technology upgrades and targeting capacity building efforts to enable efficient and support enhanced customs clearance in India and likewise improve India's competitiveness in global trade.

KEYWORDS Customs House Agent, Customs Broker, ICEGATE, Documentation Burden, Regulatory Complexity, Logistics, India, International Trade

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Logistics and Customs Brokerage: Overview

This paper will provide readers with an informative overview of logistics and customs brokerage activities in general as well as the key challenges facing them today.

Logistics has traditionally been considered as a function (providing services), however, it now ranks as one of the largest contributors to the overall trade infrastructure that exists between nations around the world. As part of the overall logistics ecosystem, the Customs House Agent (CHA), or Customs Broker, has been defined by

the 2018 Customs Broker Licensing Regulations (CBLR) as an individual and/or entity licensed by a relevant Customs authority to act on behalf of Trade Importers and Exporters during the execution of their customs-related activities. By definition, CHA activities will vary depending on the target industry and/or the needs of the specific Trade Importer or Exporter; generally, CHA services involve all aspects related to customs compliance (e.g. the submission of Bills of Entry for Imports, Shipping Bills for Exports, payment of applicable Customs duties/taxes, interfacing with the appropriate Customs Department, and ensuring compliance with the applicable provisions of the Customs Act of 1962, as administered by the CBIT).

In India, based on estimates provided by the World Bank, the logistics sector will account for approximately 13%-14% of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) associated with logistics-related costs; in comparison, developed countries report logistics-related costs that typically range from 8%-10% of GDP. This significant difference between India's logistics sector and that of developed nations highlights significant deficiencies in India's logistics infrastructure, in addition to demonstrating that there are too many unnecessary regulations that complicate the logistics process. Positive changes are occurring in India's logistics infrastructure (e.g. establishment of the PM Gati Shakti Program, implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), and implementation of the Digital India Initiative), which all address longstanding structural deficiencies within India's logistics sector. As a result, the role of CHAs in the logistics industry has become more important than ever, but at the same time, has also become much more complex due to the increasing use of digital customs platforms, faceless customs assessments, and the growing number of frequent changes to regulations.

1.2 Importance of Customs House Agent (CHA) in International Trade

The Customs House Agent (CHA) is one of the most important links in the chain of international trade by providing a conduit between importers and/or exporters and the appropriate customs authority. Due to the development of our increasingly globalized economy where goods are constantly being moved across borders, the value of the CHA has become increasingly elevated.

CHAs use their professional expertise to facilitate smooth customs clearance, ensure compliance with all import & export regulations, and provide for efficient and cost-effective logistics management.

One of the main responsibilities of the CHA is handling all of the customs clearance procedures involved when engaging in international trade. The customs clearance process is a complex process because international shipping requires many different kinds of documentation relative to the shipment, such as, but not limited to, bills of entry, shipping bills, invoices, packing lists, and certificates of origin. The CHA makes sure that all these documents are properly prepared and submitted as required by customs law, which in turn reduces the likelihood of having a shipment held up; incurring fines or penalties; or, having the shipment rejected.

1.3 Problem Statement

As Custom House Agents (Custom Brokerages) are becoming an increasingly important part of the overall framework of international trade as it relates to India, there is a significant lack of empirical data available to analyse the operational, technological, regulatory, and financial aspects related to Customs House Agents at a ground-level. Almost all the studies that have been conducted thus far have focused on examining the efficiency of the various components associated with the macro supply chain or those components related to port infrastructure. There has been a dearth of research performed on the day-to-day operations of Customs House Agents who conduct business under the Customs Broker Licensing Regulation, 2018. This research effort will

address this gap in the literature by creating and validating an empirical multi-construct model that identifies the key determinants of Customs House Agent performance.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This study will look into how the performance of CHAs in the country is affected by operational, regulatory, technological, financial and infrastructure issues.

The study objectives are as follows:

- Study Objective 1: Determine the CHA's role in the import and export process.
- Study Objective 2: Identify the main operational and regulatory obstacles faced by CHA businesses in India.
- Study Objective 3: Assess the impact of digital customs systems on the efficiency of CHAs.
- Study Objective 4: Establish the extent to which CHA operations are affected by financial constraints and infrastructure deficiencies in the business environment.
- Study Objective 5: To formulate actionable recommendations for enhancing CHA's performance and facilitating international trade.

1.6 Research Gap

Prior research has mainly investigated logistics on a macro level and trade policy as well as port infrastructure. As a result, very few empirical studies have examined firm level CHA issues including the adoption of digital platforms such as ICEGATE and E-Sanchit; the impact that the 2018 CBLR will have on small and medium sized CHA companies; and the interaction between technological, regulatory and financial barriers to achieving successful CHA performance outcomes. This study will fill these gaps by using an empirical survey of 60 practitioners within the industry and conducting various quantitative types of statistical analyses.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The increasing significance of digital technology, regulatory systems, and operational processes in aiding customs clearance performance and facilitating global trade has been highlighted by an increasing number of studies.

The Role of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in Customs Administration: According to Shome (2021), modern customs administration requires a balance between a focus on service delivery for clients and the increasing complexity of regulatory requirements; as such, ICT is expanding its use in customs processes and specialized skills and adequate resources are necessary for global customs excellence.

The Function of Custom House Agents (CHA) in Supplying Import Document Services: Rajesh & Balaganapathy's (2024) examination of the function of CHAs in supplying Import Document Services provided evidence that CHAs promote adherence to regulation and help fast track the importation process of goods by establishing an efficient document management system and performing customer verification.

Customs During the COVID-19 Pandemic: During the COVID-19 pandemic, Shri T. Samaya Murali, Vandana Raj, and Kanaga Subramanian (2021) documented the manner in which Indian Customs used digital systems to promote continuity within the supply chain and to improve their risk management ability, while also establishing the strength of digital customs infrastructure as an important piece of the overall trade facilitation process.

E-Commerce and SMEs' Internationalization: Singh, Munjal, Kundu & Rangarajan (2023) reviewed government policies regarding the internationalization of SMEs through e-commerce platforms, determining that the trade facilitation policies and digital access of SMEs have a significant impact on the overall competitiveness of small trading entities with respect to the CHA ecosystem. Humanitarian Logistics: Negi (2022) explored logistical disruptions in disaster management, highlighting challenges in documentation, coordination, and speed — issues that mirror many operational challenges faced by CHAs in time-sensitive trade clearance scenarios.

The literature consistently identifies documentation accuracy, regulatory compliance, technology adoption, and infrastructure adequacy as the primary determinants of CHA operational efficiency. However, no prior study integrates these constructs within a unified empirical framework specifically for the CHA sector in India — a gap this study addresses.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Type of Study

The research for this study will be based on an empirical quantitative approach that is both descriptive and analytical. The descriptive portion assesses the way the respondents perceive the operational challenges they face in regard to their respective organizations, and the analytical portion will look at how the variables relate to each other and test the directional hypotheses posited above.

3.2 Data Collection and Sampling

The Primary Data for this study was collected through Structured Questionnaires that had been developed specifically for this research. Primary data was collected using Google Forms from January 2026 to April 2026. The researchers used Non-Probability Convenience Sample to gather 60 valid and usable responses from customs brokers, logistics managers, team leaders, operation executives, and HR coordinators working within Customs Clearance and Logistics operations at Sastha Nathan Cargo Pvt Ltd and related stakeholders located in Chennai. The Secondary Data used in this study was obtained from Academic Articles, Circulars from the CBIC, and Trade Publications from Government Organizations.

3.3 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire contained closed end responses and was evaluated based on a Five (5) Point Likert Scale with values from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The first part of the questionnaire asked about demographic characteristics of the respondent such as gender, position/role with the company, and years of experience. The second part of the questionnaire inquired about five distinct constructs related to the following Independent Variables: (RC) Regulatory Complexity, (TI) Technology Issues, (DB) Documentation Burden, (FC) Financial Limitations and (IP) Infrastructure Problems. Lastly, data was obtained on the Dependent Variable; the Performance and Efficiency of Clearing House Agents (PE)

3.4 Hypotheses

H1: Technological Issues significantly impact the Performance and Efficiency of CHAs.

H2: Regulatory Complexity significantly and negatively impacts CHA Performance and Efficiency.

H3: Documentation Burden significantly and negatively impacts CHA Performance and Efficiency.

H4: Financial Constraints significantly and negatively impact CHA Performance and Efficiency.

H5: Infrastructure Problems significantly and negatively impact CHA Performance and Efficiency.

H6: Technological Issues significantly impact Operational Efficiency of CHAs.

H7: Digital Systems (ICEGATE) significantly impact CHA Performance and Efficiency

3.5 Analytical Tools

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS and Microsoft Excel with the following methods:

- Percentage analysis — demographic profiling
- Descriptive statistics — construct summaries
- Pearson correlation — bivariate associations
- Multiple regression analysis — hypothesis testing
- One-Way ANOVA — inter-departmental comparisons
- Independent Samples t-test — gender-based comparisons
- Chi-square tests — association between categorical variables

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Demographic Profile

Research was conducted and compiled for 4 reasons outlined in table-3. The subjects of this survey contained 63% were male participants and 37% were female participants (60 total participants) When evaluating the work titles, 42 appeared to be Custom's Brokers, making them the largest group; followed by 20% as Team Leaders, 18% as Logistics Manager, and the remaining 10% were either an Operations Executive or Human Resource Executive.

Upon evaluating based on related work experience, 30% (3-5years), 30% (1-3 years), 25% (Over 5 Years), and 15% had been in the industry less than one year. As a result, 85% of all respondents had at least one year of related work experience to provide them extensive knowledge about the subject matter pertaining this study.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 60)

Gender	Frequency (%)	Role	Frequency (%)
Male	38 (63%)	Customs Broker	25 (42%)
Female	22 (37%)	Team Lead	12 (20%)
		Logistics Manager	11 (18%)
Experience	Frequency (%)	Operations Executive	6 (10%)
3–5 Years	18 (30%)	HR Executive	6 (10%)
1–3 Years	18 (30%)	Total	60 (100%)
More than 5 Years	15 (25%)		
Less than 1 Year	9 (15%)		

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Outcomes for all five constructs are provided in Table 3, which is the Standard Deviation (SD) and Mean Score (M) of the Variables being asked about. CHAs' Performance and Efficiency (PE) have the highest (+/-) (SD = 3.68) (M - 0.76) using (+/-) (M's) mean as relative measure to those seen in I) Infrastructure Problems (IP) having the lowest mean score at (M = 3.48) (+/- 0.84), and DB's highest standard deviation at (+/-) (SD = 0.91). CHAs' responses were skewed to higher agreements (approximate to 0) using the value for Kurtosis for comparison).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Construct Variables (N = 60)

Var	Description	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
RC	Regulatory Complexity	60	3.58	0.82	1	5	-0.542	0.421
TI	Technological Issues	60	3.60	0.79	1	5	-0.618	0.536
DB	Documentation Burden	60	3.67	0.88	1	5	-0.473	-0.214
FC	Financial Constraints	60	3.52	0.91	1	5	-0.336	-0.482
IP	Infrastructure Problems	60	3.48	0.84	1	5	-0.294	-0.356
PE	Performance & Efficiency of CHAs	60	3.68	0.76	1	5	-0.671	0.624

4.3 Pearson Correlation Analysis

The bivariate correlation matrix is shown in Table 4. The strongest correlation between Technological Issues (TI) and Performance & Efficiency (PE) ($r = 0.748$, $p < 0.01$) confirms that adopting technology will be the main reason for the performance of CHA operations. There are significant negatives correlations between PE and Regulatory Complexity ($r = -0.438$), Documentation Burden ($r = -0.416$), Issues with Infrastructure ($r = -0.401$), and Financial Constraints ($r = -0.352$); these are further evidence of how CHA operations face multi-faceted operational challenges which negatively impact CHA's ability to perform.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix (N = 60)

Variable	RC	TI	DB	FC	IP	PE	Mean / SD
RC	1.000	0.624**	0.582**	0.463**	0.511**	-0.438**	3.58 / 0.82
TI	0.624**	1.000	0.669**	0.522**	0.548**	0.748**	3.60 / 0.79
DB	0.582**	0.669**	1.000	0.534**	0.492**	-0.416**	3.67 / 0.88

Variable	RC	TI	DB	FC	IP	PE	Mean / SD
FC	0.463**	0.522**	0.534**	1.000	0.468**	-0.352*	3.52 / 0.91
IP	0.511**	0.548**	0.492**	0.468**	1.000	-0.401**	3.48 / 0.84
PE	-0.438**	0.748**	-0.416**	-0.352*	-0.401**	1.000	3.68 / 0.76

4.4 Regression Analysis — Hypothesis Testing

Summary of regression results for all the seven hypotheses are shown in Table 5. Hypothesis 1 shows strong support as there is a significant relationship; for example, there is a significant relationship between both technological related issues and performance and efficiency ($\beta = 0.748$, $F = 27.185$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.56$). Therefore, there is evidence to conclude that technological related issues predict performance and efficiency at a 56% level (i.e., the strongest identified path in the model). The seventh hypothesis is also strongly supported, with digital systems (ICEGATE) significantly predicting performance and efficiency ($\beta = 0.701$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.53$). Each of the hypotheses 2 through 5 (regulatory complexity, documentation burden, financial constraints and infrastructure problems) show significant negative effects on CHA performance (all $p < 0.01$), thus confirming their adverse effects due to these operational challenges.

Table 5: Regression Analysis Results — Hypothesis Testing

H	Structural Path	Beta	t-value	p-value	R ²	F-statistic	Decision	Result
H1	TI → PE	0.748	5.214	0.000	0.56	27.185	Reject H ₀	Supported ✓
H2	RC → PE	-0.438	-3.642	0.001	0.31	13.264	Reject H ₀	Supported ✓
H3	DB → PE	-0.416	-3.281	0.002	0.28	10.765	Reject H ₀	Supported ✓
H4	FC → PE	-0.352	-2.746	0.008	0.22	7.541	Reject H ₀	Supported ✓
H5	IP → PE	-0.401	-3.118	0.003	0.25	9.721	Reject H ₀	Supported ✓
H6	TI → Operational Efficiency	0.682	4.826	0.000	0.49	23.291	Reject H ₀	Supported ✓

H	Structural Path	Beta	t-value	p-value	R ²	F-statistic	Decision	Result
H7	Digital Systems → PE	0.701	5.008	0.000	0.53	25.080	Reject H ₀	Supported ✓

4.5 One-Way ANOVA — Role vs. Continuous Improvement Practices

A department's (i.e., job position) role has no real relationship to whether continuous improvement practices are perceived as important within the organization. The results of the ANOVA test (Table 6) indicate that there was little difference between the mean perception ratings of continuous improvement practices between the various departments (Customs Broker, HR Executive, Logistics Manager, Operations Executive, Team Lead). This resulted in an F-value of 0.273 and a p-value of 0.894, both of which are greater than the 0.05 significance level. Thus, the null hypothesis is not rejected and there are no statistically significant differences in perceived continuous improvement practices among all of the departments, as would be expected given the means of the rating scores (3.33 – Operations Executive; 3.92 – Team Lead) were all above 3.00 (the midpoint of the scale) and therefore show a positive perception towards continuous improvement practices across all departments, while at the same time exhibiting no significant inter-group differences

Table 6: ANOVA — Continuous Improvement Practices by Department

Department	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Min	Max	ANOVA Result
Customs Broker	25	3.56	1.474	2.96	4.16	1	5	
HR Executive	6	3.83	0.753	2.84	4.83	3	5	F = 0.273
Logistics Manager	11	3.64	1.120	2.89	4.39	2	5	p = 0.894
Operations Executive	6	3.33	0.816	2.48	4.19	2	4	df = 4, 55
Team Lead	12	3.92	1.443	3.00	4.83	1	5	Not Sig.
Total	60	3.65	1.291	3.32	3.98	1	5	$\alpha = 0.05$

4.6 Independent Samples T-Test — Gender vs. Technology Comfort

The process of testing for the influence of gender in terms of the comfort level and custom tools includes the following:

F=1.248, p=0.268 using Levene's test shows that the variance is equal. The obtained value of the t statistic is -1.470 with a degree of freedom of 58 and p-value 0.146>0.05. This means that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected as there is no significant difference between the two samples. Even though women have a fairly high mean value compared to men in terms of technology comfort and custom tools, as shown in the following graphs:

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Table 7: Independent Samples T-Test — Gender vs. Technology Role in Customs Clearance

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	Sig. (2-tail)	Decision
Male	38	3.50	1.390	0.226	-1.470	0.146	Not Sig.
Female	22	4.00	1.024	0.218	—	—	H0 Retained

4.7 Chi-Square Tests

Two chi-square tests were performed. Firstly, investigating whether Years of Experience correlates with the belief that automation enhances customs processes (Table 8), the Pearson Chi-Square value equals to 7.104 (df=6, $p = 0.311$). This means that there is no significant association found. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the Linear-by-Linear Association value shows that there might exist a marginally significant trend of more experienced employees having a more favourable attitude towards automation (Pearson Chi-Square = 3.826, $p = 0.050$).

Secondly, analysing the relationship between Department (Role) and the major obstacle during the process of customs clearance (Table 9), the Pearson Chi-Square value amounts to 6.462 (df=12, $p = 0.891$), which confirms the absence of any associations. All investigated departments (Customs Broker, HR Executive, Logistics Manager, Operations Executive, and Team Lead) consider documentation, higher costs, trade policy issues, and customs procedures to be obstacles in almost equal shares.

Table 8: Chi-Square — Experience in Logistics vs. Automation Perception

Experience in Logistics	Maybe	No	Yes	Total	Chi-Sq. Result
1–3 Years	7	4	7	18	$\chi^2 = 7.104$
3–5 Years	7	3	8	18	df = 6
Less than 1 Year	2	1	6	9	$p = 0.311$
More than 5 Years	2	1	12	15	Not Sig.
Total	18	9	33	60	$\alpha = 0.05$

Table 9: Chi-Square — Department vs. Biggest Challenge in Customs Clearance

Department	Customs Clearance	Documentation	Higher Cost	Trade Policy	Total / Chi-Sq. Result
Customs Broker	4	8	7	6	25 $\chi^2 = 6.462$
HR Executive	1	2	2	1	6 df = 12
Logistics Manager	2	3	3	3	11 $p = 0.891$

Department	Customs Clearance	Documentation	Higher Cost	Trade Policy	Total / Chi-Sq. Result
Operations Executive	3	1	0	2	6 Not Sig.
Team Lead	3	3	3	3	12 $\alpha = 0.05$
Total	13	17	15	15	60 H0 Retained

5. FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Key Findings

Demographic Data: Overall, the number of men is equal to 63%, and women – to 37%. Customs Brokers represent 42% of all jobs in the sample. Particularly, the shipment time has surpassed 48-hour deadline necessary to clear the customs procedures in 45% of cases. These figures highlight current inefficiency of the customs process even with the help of ICEGATE technology.

SO1 - Technology and Efficiency (Strong support): Issues with technology/digitalization is a predictor of CHA performance and efficiency ($\beta = 0.748$; $R^2 = 0.56$; $p < 0.001$). The positive impact of ICEGATE and other technological tools on CHAs' performance/efficiency has been found.

SO2 - Regulatory complexity (Support): The negative effect of complexity of regulations on CHA performance has been proved ($H2: \beta = -0.438$; $p = 0.001$).

SO3 - Documentation problems (Support): The Documentation burden reduces significantly the performance of CHAs ($H3: \beta = -0.416$; $p = 0.002$). Notably, 50% of respondents admitted that documentation errors result in fines.

SO4 - Financial and Infrastructure pressures (Support): Negative influence of both financial pressure ($H4: \beta = -0.352$; $p = 0.008$) and infrastructure pressure ($H5: \beta = -0.401$; $p = 0.003$) has been proved.

SO5 — Inter-Group Analyses (Non-Significant): ANOVA ($p = 0.894$), t-test ($p = 0.146$), and chi-square tests ($p = 0.311$; $p = 0.891$) all indicate no significant differences by department, gender, or experience level — suggesting uniform recognition of challenges across the CHA workforce.

5.2 Recommendations

- Streamlining Regulatory Processes: Custom officials need to simplify the process of compliance, provide advance notice on regulatory changes and integrate documents to simplify compliance procedures for CHAs.
- Tech Updates: The ICEGATE platform and E-Sanchit system should be constantly updated to incorporate AI-based verification processes and HS code classification to minimise mistakes and delays.
- Training: Training programs need to be made mandatory for CHAs regarding digital platforms, compliance processes, and classifications to minimise human errors and avoid penalties.
- Better Port Infrastructure: Investments need to be made in increasing berths, upgrading scanning equipment and building better warehouses at the ports to ease congestion.
- Licensing Financial Facilities: Government-provided financial services in addition to fast-track clearance of duty drawbacks will relieve financial stress among smaller and mid-sized CHA businesses to invest in technology and employees.
- Better Post Clearance Integration: More seamless API connections between ICEGATE, shipping companies' web portal and port systems can ensure effective cargo tracking and issue handling.

5.3 Conclusion

The current study provides empirical support in regard to the obstacles that CHA agents face in their work in India. From the results, it can be stated that despite the improvements that the digitalization brought (such as through the implementation of systems like ICEGATE), there are still numerous problems associated with documentation handling, compliance, infrastructure development, and financial viability.

Perhaps the most critical finding from this study would be the fact that the usage of technology remains the most effective measure for improving company performance ($\beta = 0.748$, $R^2 = 0.56$). It has been proven that all five independent variables are statistically significant in predicting performance results and the lack of any inter-group differences in performance levels among departments, gender, and experience level means that the issues mentioned affect everyone equally.

By combining technological innovation and client-centred services, companies will be able to thrive in the highly competitive and increasingly technologically advanced environment. This paper adds to the body of literature related to the operations of CHA companies in India and lays down a foundation for future longitudinal research.

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