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What Happens When an Employee Dies in Harness? Rights under Employees Compensation Act, 1923

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PUBLISHED 22 August 2025

Introduction

The sudden death of an employee during the course of employment is both a human tragedy and a legal event. While families are left coping with the emotional loss, the law seeks to provide financial support through statutory compensation and other post death benefits. In India, the **Employees Compensation Act, 1923 (EC Act)**, along with related labour and welfare legislations, lays down the framework to ensure that the dependents of a deceased employee are not left without means of livelihood. This protection applies uniformly to all categories of employees whether permanent, probationary, or trainees reinforcing the principle that the security of workers and their families is a paramount concern of labour welfare laws.

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Applicability: Who Qualifies as an “Employee”?

Under Section 2(1)(dd) of the **Employees Compensation Act, 1923**, the term employee has been defined in an inclusive manner to cover a wide range of categories. It expressly includes any person engaged as a trainee, whether paid a stipend or salary, in addition to regular workers. Judicial interpretation has further clarified that a probationer is not a separate class of employment but merely a temporary phase within the employer – employee relationship. Consequently, probationers, trainees, and adhoc appointees fall within the protective scope of the Act.

Therefore, regardless of whether the deceased was a confirmed employee, a probationer, or a trainee, the law treats them as an “employee” for the purposes of compensation and benefits under the EC Act.

Compensation Payable to Dependents

The foremost benefit available under the **Employees Compensation Act, 1923** is the statutory compensation payable to the dependents of a deceased employee. This is designed to provide financial security to the family following the untimely loss of income.

1. Quantum of Compensation

Section 4(1)(a) of the Act prescribes the formula for determining the lumpsum compensation in the case of death:

Compensation = 50% of the employee’s monthly wages × Relevant factor (as per Schedule IV, based on the completed years of age at last birthday).

- A statutory wage ceiling applies for computation purposes (currently notified at **₹15,000 per month**, unless enhanced by the State Government).
- The relevant factor is age-specific, with younger employees having higher multipliers, thereby ensuring greater support for families who lose their breadwinner early in life.

2. Funeral Expenses

In addition to the compensation, Section 4(4) mandates the employer to deposit a fixed amount towards funeral expenses of the deceased employee. The statutory minimum is **₹5,000**, though this may be revised by notification from the government.

3. Interest and Penalty for Delay

Timely payment is a legal obligation. If the employer fails to deposit the compensation amount with the Commissioner within 30 days of the death, the following consequences apply under Section 4A:

- Interest at the rate of 12% per annum (or a higher rate as notified) becomes payable on the outstanding amount.
- The Commissioner may also impose a penalty of up to 50% of the compensation if the delay is without justification.

Disbursement Procedure

The Employees Compensation Act prescribes a clear mechanism to ensure that compensation is paid in a lawful and transparent manner to the rightful dependents of the deceased employee.

- **Deposit with the Commissioner:** As per Section 8 of the Act, the employer is required to deposit the entire compensation amount with the Commissioner for Employees Compensation who has jurisdiction over the place where the accident occurred.
- **Inquiry and Identification of Dependents:** Once the deposit is made, the Commissioner conducts a summary inquiry to determine the legal dependents of the deceased, such as the spouse, children, or dependent parents. Based on this inquiry, the Commissioner apportions and disburses the compensation in the prescribed manner.
- **Advances in Special Cases:** The law permits an employer to provide dependents with an advance on account of compensation, up to an amount equal to three months wages. This advance is later adjusted against the final compensation payable, ensuring immediate relief to the family without disturbing the statutory process.

This statutory procedure safeguards against private settlements, prevents disputes, and ensures that the compensation reaches only those legally recognized as dependents of the deceased employee.

Immediate Steps for Employers

In the event of an employee's death during the course of employment, the employer is under a statutory duty to act without delay. The following steps must be taken promptly:

1. **File the Accident Report:** Submit the prescribed accident report in relevant Form within seven days to both the Commissioner for Employees Compensation and the District Magistrate.
2. **Collect Supporting Documents:** Obtain essential records such as the death certificate, proof of age, salary slips, and legal heirship documents from the family to enable accurate assessment of compensation.
3. **Deposit Compensation:** Calculate and deposit the payable compensation (including funeral expenses and any applicable interest for delay) with the Commissioner, using relevant Form.
4. **Participate in the Inquiry:** Attend the proceedings before the Commissioner to assist in determining the rightful dependents and ensuring early disbursement of compensation.

Non-compliance with these obligations not only delays financial relief to the dependents but may also expose the employer to penal action under Section 18A of the Act.

Conclusion

The Employees' Compensation Act, 1923 serves as a vital social welfare legislation, ensuring that the dependents of an employee who dies in the course of employment are not left financially vulnerable. The law makes no distinction between permanent staff, probationers, or trainees every employee is equally protected under its provisions.

For families, this compensation, along with benefits under other labour and welfare legislations, ensures financial stability in the face of tragic loss. For employers, strict adherence to statutory timelines and procedures is critical to avoid legal liability and ensure timely support for the bereaved family. In essence, the Act balances compassion with accountability offering relief to dependents while compelling employers to uphold their obligations promptly and transparently.

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