



Migrant Loaders and Porters in Ahmedabad: A Profile

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Introduction

Migration has emerged as a major livelihood strategy in South Rajasthan over the past two decades. This is because agriculture-based livelihoods of migrant communities have been under perpetual threat from droughts and famines. Aajeevika Bureau's initial work in the area has contributed to a better understanding of the various issues related to migration (including the type, patterns and problems of migration) as well as led to a collection of rich data on the destinations for migration and major trades that migrant labour are engaged in.

Over the years, Rajasthani migrants have come to dominate specific trade niches in Ahmedabad. Construction is one of the largest sectors for migrant workers and there are Rajasthani migrants working across all levels of the construction labour chain, including the more skilled areas of carpentry, stone laying, polishing and fabrication. Large number of Rajasthani workers also work at hotels, restaurants, canteens or other catering services. Other occupations include running of small wayside eateries, junk and scrap recycling, head loading and load-cart pulling, vegetable vending and domestic work. There are sectors in which the Rajasthani migrants constitute a growing workforce such as the security services and transportation.

Profiling of a group or a community according to their trade or occupation may be done without much difficulty, but the findings from such categorisation could be illusory as the inherent skills vis-à-vis the acquired skills after migration are often a complicated mix and indistinguishable. Thus, pegging a migrant group to a single profile defined by their trade may not very accurate. Nonetheless, such profiling enables an understanding of the migration related experiences of Rajasthani migrants by examining the following areas that may vary across profiles:

- Types of Migrant Groups
- Migration patterns and trends
- Support systems at the destination areas
- The recruitment system of migrant labour
- The relationship between owners, contractors and labour
- Migrant incomes, expenditures, savings and investments
- Work and living conditions at destination areas
- Communication between migrants (at the destination) and their families (at source)
- Potential for skill up gradation and livelihood diversification

The group of Loaders and Porters

Estimates from a dipstick study (called the study from here on) and field observations in Ahmedabad suggest two things - loaders and porters form a significant portion of the Rajasthani migrant population in Ahmedabad and that almost all of the head loading work here is done by Rajasthanis. Apart from Rajasthanis, a small number of migrants from Madhya Pradesh and Bihar have also entered the loading arena. Rajasthani migrants working as loaders and porters typically come from the southern parts of their state. Source districts include Udaipur, Sirohi, Jalor, Jodhpur and Barmer. Other destinations where Rajasthani loaders are found include Bangalore, Unjha, Sumerpur, Kelwa stone quarries and Udaipur.

Hundreds of loaders and porters from Rajasthan are found working all year long across the markets (including agricultural markets or *mandis*), construction sites, godowns, factories and commercial areas of Ahmedabad. Largely unskilled, they work as handcart pullers, pedal rickshaw drivers and head loaders (*Hamaali ka kaam*). They can be found in all corners of the city - Jamalpur vegetable market, Kalupur market, Madhavpura spice market, Odahav, Rakhial metal factories and in industrial estates like Vatva or Naroda.

This group of migrant loaders from Rajasthan comprise largely of tribals and *dalits*. However, their contractors and employers are usually non-tribal. Unlike other trades, entry into this sector is open and requires little social networking. Most workers in this sector are a floating population with respondents in the study stating that they live and work in Ahmedabad for twenty to twenty five days a month at a stretch and then return home for a few days only to be back again thereafter. This routine is practiced also due to the strenuous nature of their jobs. It is quite common to find migrants belonging to joint families engaged in long-duration loading assignments in various destinations. However, it is not clear whether this is because of the joint nature of their families allowing them to extend their migration cycles or because short duration distress migration is not required in joint families endowed with a social safety net.

While migrant loaders are invariably male and ranging in age from 18 to 45, most of them tend to be between the ages of 26 and 35. In the study, 68% of the respondents were found in the latter age group with just a handful of loaders who were older than 45 years. The work is physically demanding requiring high stamina and strength. These loaders do not use any mechanical supports and load goods that sometimes weigh more than twice their own body weight. Physical (read load bearing) capacities hold the key to their successful and continued engagement in this vocation. As a loader gets older, he tries to shift to other physically less strenuous occupations or in many cases, he stops engaging in income generating activities altogether. The duration of a loader's career is short, often not lasting more than five years. Even before a loader turns 30 years old, he is often physically spent.

Migration cycle of loaders and porters

The migration cycle of loaders and porters depends largely on the nature of commodities and/or loads that they are hired to handle. In case of agricultural produce, loaders are required to work for six months, in migration cycles that last one to one and a half months. Loaders working in agricultural markets or *mandis* work for about four months a year, in migration cycles of one to two months. The annual requirement of loaders working in stone quarries is longer - generally six to eight months in a year in two to three month-long cycles.

Recruitment Patterns

A migrant's entry into the city of Ahmedabad is not a random act. In each of the sectors that have been reviewed, there are well-established systems of labour recruitment and sourcing. Younger migrants enter the city and find employment through family connections, social networks or labour agents and contractors.

The intermediary (such as a contractor or labour agent who could be a relative or friend) that a migrant accesses to find employment, largely determines what he will do for the first many years and in a way circumscribes a path for advancement and growth. Due to this reason, there are specific migration streams from source areas to destinations such as Ahmedabad. Thus, a socio-geographical cluster in Rajasthan will start providing labour for a specific trade or occupation at the destination and this will become a well-established pattern of labour movement.

Contractors play a key role in initiating and continuing the engagement of a migrant as a loader in a *mandi* or a construction site. These contractors usually engage middlemen for labour scouting, for distributing wages to loaders and for other tasks requiring direct interface with migrant labour. These middlemen invariably belong to the same community and/or village from which labour is sourced. They are mostly literate, smart, and former loaders themselves (who have worked with their contractors for two to three years in the past) and are well known to and trusted by the migrant loader.

However, only a few loaders rise to the ranks of a middle man, the majority continue to engage in short duration migration cycles (of two to three months) as loaders. In many cases, the middleman prioritises the appointment of his own kith and kin as loaders with the contractors that he himself works for in order to put together a familiar (read dependable) and a more pliable work group.

Living and Working Conditions

Loaders work in the toughest of work settings - in crowded, hot, noisy and extremely polluted market and factory spaces where they are often required to work without breaks. The study found that the working hours and conditions of migrant loaders from Gogunda (a block of Udaipur district of Rajasthan) vary depending on the kind of commodities and loads that the labour is hired to handle. However, in nearly all cases, the daily work shifts of loaders remain odd and unpredictable.

Generally speaking, the work conditions of loaders are characterized by strenuous physical labour in unnatural postures and carrying loads more than twice the loader's own weight. None of the respondents in the study had ever used helmets, gloves, hooks or any other protective gear. This group is thus exposed to a high level of risk while lifting and transporting goods. Though the nature of the work is often hazardous (for example, loading and unloading of iron beams and electric poles), there is no accident cover provided.

The work typically requires daily engagement at the work sites and there is no written agreement between the contractor, employer and the loader. Wage calculations are unilaterally carried out by the contractor/employer, with little room for negotiation. These loaders and porters lack any mechanism for resolving payment related grievances. The physically punishing nature of this work also make these loaders easy prey to addictions like drinking and drugs that are prolific and easy to access on the streets of any large city including Ahmedabad.

The living conditions of loaders are also amongst the most difficult. Many live out in the open and those who have carts sleep on their carts. Other loaders live in makeshift camps and other temporary residences in or near their work sites. A few also live in night shelters or in barracks provided by their contractors. There are no toilets, nor is there access to safe drinking water and often there is not even a place to cook a meal.

Almost all the loaders interviewed in this study said that they paid for sanitary facilities - paid toilets and bathrooms that have sprung up in the neighbourhoods near markets and yards. Cramped and unhygienic living conditions, lack of any drinking water facility and other civic amenities make these living spaces hub of infectious diseases, breeding ground for socially despicable habits and harmful addictions. Many interviewees reported being picked up and harassed by the police when there were reports of theft in the nearby areas.

Earning and expenditure patterns

The daily earnings of head loaders are relatively higher than other migrant populations, ranging from Rs.100 to Rs.250 depending on the location of their work. For example, the loaders in Jamalpur market earn more as most of their work is that of head loading. In other markets, loaders work on a piece rate basis, per sack or ton rate. Some even get paid a daily wage. The handcarts or rickshaws are available for rent as well. Thus, some loaders own their carts, while the majority rent them. The carts are rented at Rs 80 to Rs 125 a week, depending on the physical condition of the cart. If the cart breaks/over turns and the goods are damaged, the losses are the loader's responsibility. In times of crisis, the loaders have to depend on their friends or relatives for financial support. Due to the uncertain nature of their jobs, it is difficult for them to get money from moneylenders. In some cases, loaders borrow money at extremely high interest rates. In cases when goods are damaged, a loader can be in dire need of financial help. If he is unable to repay a loan or cover the cost of the damaged goods, he is expected to work for the same shopkeeper/employer until he has repaid him in full, the latter often being decided the shopkeeper/employer himself. As most loaders do not stay with their families, they do manage to accumulate savings.

Many loaders eat in roadside stalls. Boarding arrangements for loaders are also made by their contractors, in the form of a community mess that dispense meals of low nutritive value. The community nature of this facility also means that food is served only at fixed times, without consideration of the eating schedules, habits, and preferences of the migrant loaders. The advantage of this facility is that these meals are cheaper than similar food sold in the open market. In Unjha *mandi* of Ahmedabad, for example, loaders spend an average of Rs.1200-1500 for their lodging and meals, on a monthly basis. Estimates from the study suggest that more than one third of a loader's total income is spent on food and about the same for lodging. Miscellaneous expenses include spending on communication services, public toilets, and substance abuse (alcohol and drugs).

Conclusion

There are several important issues that come to the forefront when one looks at the lives and livelihoods of migrant loaders and porters in general and those in Ahmedabad in particular. Firstly, there exists diversity in the work profiles, destinations, job timings, and other work conditions of migrant loaders.

Secondly, the association with the labour contractors is often irregular, of short-duration and insecure. This is aggravated by the lack of a written agreement to guide the terms of engagement between the loader and his contractors. There is also a condition of bonded labour created through a system of advances being paid to needy labourers. For any long-term work for the benefit of migrant labour in Ahmedabad, one needs to understand the multiple roles that intermediaries and social networks play. It is essential to work with these intermediaries to improve the quality of services and protection availed by the migrant loaders.

The lack of any type of social security options (including health insurance/services) makes loading a high-risk occupation. While migrant loaders do accumulate savings, the small and infrequent nature of payments prevents regular and substantial savings.

Poor living and working conditions as well as the lack of a balanced and adequate diet in the face of a physically draining occupation continues to be a reality for the labour engaged as loaders and porters in Ahmedabad.