

DESCRIPTIVE REPORTS

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SAGE Publications
(Los Angeles, London,
New Delhi and Singapore)
www.sagepublications.com
Vol 1(1): 61–70
10.1177/097340820700100112

Getting Set to Go: Upgrading Migration through an Innovative Educational Programme

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Abstract

In the context of areas that have little prospect in the medium term of providing even minimal livelihoods locally for their overwhelming poor and increasingly migration-dependent rural populations, what does education for sustainable development (ESD) mean? Do efforts to qualitatively improve migration offer a viable strategy for reducing poverty and fostering sustainable development in the source areas? What skills and knowledge enhancement can concurrently improve the livelihoods of migration-dependent households? This paper examines these questions through a narrative on the formative years of the Aajeevika Bureau, an innovative programme dedicated to the improvement in livelihood opportunities for poor, migrant labourers of Rajasthan, India.

INTRODUCTION

Aajeevika Bureau was established as a facility dedicated to provide services to rural migrants of southern Rajasthan—a predominantly tribal region in western India. The populations of this hilly, rain-fed, semi-arid region traditionally depend on subsistence cultivation. Often faced with drought and crop failures, the region's rural

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population is turning to seasonal wage labour mainly in cities, farms and factories of the neighbouring state of Gujarat where the need for cheap labour draws migrants from across the country. Cities are centres of high growth and offer opportunities for economic advancement to thousands. However, these opportunities require skills, confidence and networks on the part of migrants. The mandate of the Bureau is to assist migrants in starting up higher on this spectrum of advantage by providing tools such as skill training, life-skill education, and other support. This paper offers an evaluation of the Bureau's experiences and speculates on what sustainable development might feature for high out-migration regions of the country.

LIVELIHOOD AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH RAJASTHAN

Within the diverse ecological and human landscape of Rajasthan, the southern region occupies a unique niche. The region is traversed by the rugged Aravali ranges and is a pocket of concentration of Rajasthan's tribal communities—the Bhils, Garasias and Meenas. Poverty is a dominant feature of the area with average household incomes substantially below the national average and poor scores on virtually all quality of life indicators (ARAVALI 2003).

Agricultural production is low with limited land available for cultivation, low rainfall and inadequate irrigation cover. Productivity of agriculture is also related to access to information, technologies and markets—all of which have been low in the case of tribal cultivators. Pockets of agriculture intensification do exist in the region but are led by non-tribal farmers with access to irrigation. Despite considerable efforts to improve soil and water management through a succession of donor-supported programmes, the collective impacts on the quality of natural resources and community livelihoods has been modest. Livestock are also a significant feature of livelihoods, but again productivity is considerably below potentials. The considerable forest resources in the area have been degraded and make only modest contributions to income and employment.

With the exception of mining and construction, virtually no other activity in the region generates significant local employment outside the farm sector. Government drought relief programmes do provide limited daily labour opportunities in drought years. Migration has thus become the predominant source of income for the region as a whole and for the tribal households in particular.

Migration Labour Profile of South Rajasthan

A study conducted by Aajeevika (ARAVALI 2003) indicated that migration of workers to jobs away from their homes now accounts for nearly half of the household income for all households in the region and for tribal households the figure stands at over 65 per cent. The incidence of migration is not only large but spreading rapidly to newer destinations and sectors in response to the opportunities created by economic growth.

Construction and mining engage the largest number of tribal migrants. There is indeed a highly skilled group of construction technicians among the Rajasthani migrants—plumbers, carpenters, masons and painters. However, the presence of tribal

labour at these more remunerative levels is limited. The mining and quarrying enterprises have thrived on the availability of cheap tribal labour. Brick kilns across Gujarat engage large groups of Rajasthani tribal labourers.

The hotel and restaurant establishments across towns, cities and highways of the near by states of Gujarat and Maharashtra are the other major employers of migrant labour. Often child labour from Rajasthan enters this sector, working as helpers, sweepers, cleaners and waiters while just a few enter into the more skilled task of cooking. Thousands of tribal and other poor migrant workers find work as domestic help in the cities of Gujarat.

In the industrial areas, factories and commodity markets of Gujarat, tribal labour is engaged in head loading or pushing carts. This is a physically punishing form of wage labour but employment is steady and the wages are relatively better. Small manufacturing and processing units are the other major, diverse cluster which the tribal labour joins on a seasonal basis. The textile market of Surat attracts thousands of young tribal migrants, but few find long-term employment.

A large number of tribal families seasonally migrate to farms in Gujarat to work as share tenants, usually for a paltry share of the harvest. Over the past five years there has been a huge upsurge in the movement of tribal children from south Rajasthan as labourers in the cotton pollination work on Bt Cotton farms across the vast tracts of north Gujarat.

A large category of rural, tribal poor who enter the labour market as migrants do so with few skills, little information and virtually no support services. The implication is that they are paid poorly in return for their hard labour, find themselves trapped in the same form of punishing hard, manual labour with few prospects of advancement, and have no cover from exploitation.

Coming from a background of low-quality rural schooling that has provided few basic skills, tribal and rural poor migrants are unable to enter those sectors of the labour market that require a minimum level of education.¹ Therefore employment opportunities in urban services such as driving, equipment repair, data entry operation, and secretarial services are largely unavailable to these migrants.

The labour and employment opportunities available to the migrants of concern to the Bureau are usually short term, irregular, unstable and highly prone to fluctuations in the market (labour supply, raw material procurement, seasonality, etc.). Wages tend to remain appallingly poor in the case of highly vulnerable casual factory or farm labour.

Absence of services for seasonal migrants aggravates their vulnerability. Inadequate shelter, unavailability of food at reasonable prices, and poor health facilities make the migrants' life one of high costs and multiple risks. Most migrants fall completely outside the network of any formal financial services—thus they cannot save even if they wish to, nor can they obtain loans from banks, and have no safe and reliable means to remit money home.

A strong caste and social dimension limits upward mobility in the labour markets, and those coming from the traditionally more disadvantaged social groups find it difficult to break into new jobs and niches.

The fact that Rajasthani migrants find employment in other states renders them even more vulnerable to exploitation. Out-of-state migrant labour is put to harder work and longer hours and has few support networks. Interstate migrants are easier for local authorities to ignore. Despite migrants' immense contribution to the economy, their presence is seen as a burden on stretched urban resources and infrastructure.

On balance, migration does create new behaviour and progressive mindsets among people and communities. It gives rise to new aspirations among those who have known little other than poverty in their home areas. In its work with migrants, the Bureau often encounters successful cases of rural to urban mobility—from absolute poverty to a life of a certain economic dignity. Migration does offer promise, but for this to be fully realised by significantly greater numbers of migrants requires services, skills and support.

It is in the context of this challenge that the Aajeevika Bureau came into being.

AAJEEVIKA BUREAU—AN INITIATIVE TO SUPPORT MIGRATION AND MIGRANT WORKERS

Genesis and Goals

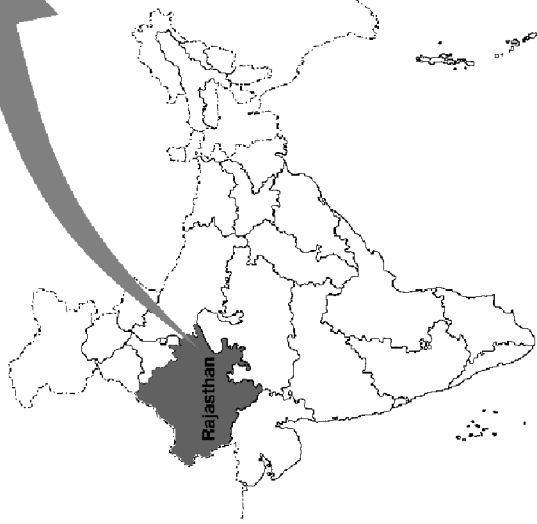
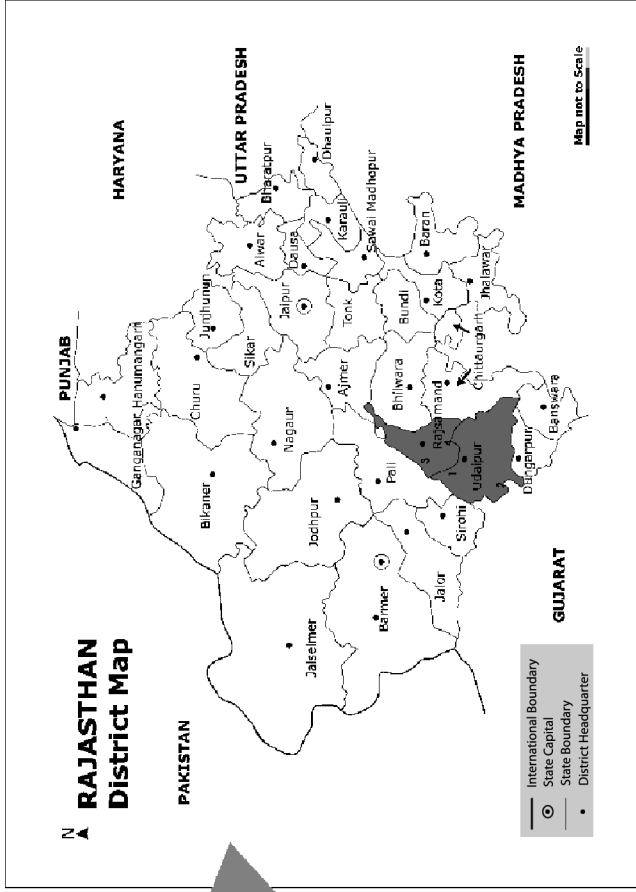
Aajeevika Bureau arose as an action initiative from a 2003 study sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to understand rural livelihoods across Rajasthan (ARAVALI 2003). The major finding was that short-term migration is rapidly replacing agriculture as the major source of income for many families, particularly those in poor, predominately tribal areas. The study confirmed that migration is no longer primarily a response in times of drought and distress, but a regular strategy for the rural poor.

As a direct outgrowth of this study, one of the organisations involved initiated a programme to provide services for migrants from rural areas. This became known as the Aajeevika Bureau and was registered as a separate legal entity in 2005. It is now established as a full-fledged initiative for migrants from southern Rajasthan.

The goal of Aajeevika Bureau is the achievement of *significant improvement in livelihood opportunities of poor, migrant labourers* from southern Rajasthan. The Bureau's objectives include:

- To provide new opportunities to upgrade skills and find employment, and to contribute to a skilled and confident migrant labour force which is able to negotiate higher returns in the labour market.
- To work towards reducing the hardship associated with migration and create a more positive and protected environment for migrant labour.
- To garner greater social and legal legitimacy for migrants.
- To generate new knowledge and facilitate its application in programme and policy associated with migration.

Aajeevika Bureau works both at the source areas in south Rajasthan as well as in selected, high-intensity migration destinations. Currently the Bureau works in four blocks of Udaipur and Rajsamand districts and in two destination centres, namely Idar and Ahmedabad.



The four blocks of Udaipur and Rajsamand districts in Rajasthan where Aajeevika Bureau works
 Source: Based on Survey of India.

Programmes and Services

The Bureau's work has spread geographically and encompasses knowledge generation and dissemination; policy advocacy; and a range of facilitation services for migrants at both source and destination locations. These services are delivered directly through the Bureau and/or in partnership with other organisations.

Registration is the entry point into the Bureau's set of support services and it is fully established at the block levels. By the end of 2006, nearly 3,000 migrants were registered by the Bureau. Registration creates a valid labour record and establishes the bona fide of the migrant who may go through multiple locations and employers looking for work.

The photo ID service (1,800 cards were issued by end 2006) is a highly visible and popular service of the Bureau (see Image 1). The card is being used as an introduction to the individual's bona fide for the employers, peers and even police!

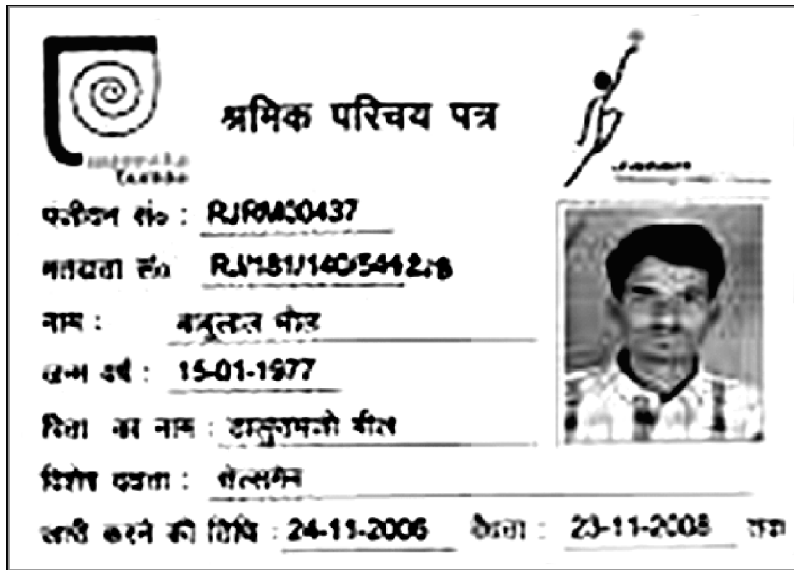


Image 1 Specimen Photo ID Card

The Bureau offers rigorous training of migrant youth in skills that are essential to creating better employment opportunities and enhancing their confidence in negotiating a place in the labour market. The Bureau has conducted regular rounds of training for migrant youth in the construction sector—masonry, plumbing, electricity work, welding, fabrication and carpentry. Hotel and restaurant services form the other major area of training. Similarly, training has also been conducted in other high potential services such as driving, equipment repair and domestic services.

Since the Bureau began its training rounds, nearly 350 persons have been trained. While technical skills form the bulk of the training content, participants are also equipped with knowledge that enables them to gain confidence in urban settings. Typically, the training modules have included literacy and numeracy skills, health

and hygiene, labour laws and workers' rights, information about the market, work ethics, financial management and personality development. Table 1 illustrates the main topics of the training imparted to migrant youth in various skills.

Table 1 Skills Taught

Skill	Learning Level
Masonry	Foundation work Brick and dry-stone masonry for walls, windows and doors Plaster and jointing Building material and mixes
Carpentry	Wooden joints Doors and windows Small household articles Furniture
Plumbing	Threading of pipes Fitting with various angles and joints Knowledge of plumbing material Sanitary fitting from tank, bathroom and kitchen
Electricity and house wiring	Single-phase wiring of homes Switches and fittings Repairs Line management
Welding	Metal beating and shaping Designing and measuring Joining, cutting and bending using tools and gas welding machine Making items such as gates, grills and furniture
Hotel and restaurant services	Waiting, taking orders, explaining menu and making a bill Laying, setting and clearing tables, carrying and serving food and drink Room service including cleaning, dusting, arranging and taking phone calls Light cooking, such as snacks, sandwiches, tea, coffee and eggs Backroom operations, such as store management and laundry Reading, writing and speaking simple and commonly used English and basic mathematics skill

The Bureau offers a placement and exchange service for the broader set of registered migrants coming through its offices. Rural youth trained by the Bureau are offered placements with construction companies, contractors and establishments. The Bureau's placement services are operating briskly with about 400 placements by the end of 2006. Several contractors and establishments looking for specialised skills call upon the Bureau, looking for new recruits.

The Bureau has been paying greater attention to providing support services to migrants' families including communication assistance, linkage with government schemes and provision of emergency assistance to dependents during the migrants' absence. These services enable the worker to have greater stability on the job, rather than rushing home to deal with family crises.

Aajeevika Bureau provides legal aid and counselling services in response to the steady inflow of migrants' complaints and cases involving fraudulence and malpractice. Typically the Bureau team records the cases coming to them and offers the complainant a first advice. Often the Bureau asks the person against whom a complaint is being lodged to come to the centre for discussions, and a settlement may be mediated by the Bureau team. For some cases the team has turned to legal advice or has moved the case to the labour court or police. Workshops that focus on legal and labour rights of labourers have become a regular feature at the Bureau's block level centres.

In addition to the services described above, the Bureau will soon launch a financial service for migrants, encompassing savings, credit and remittance aimed at reducing the debt and expenditures associated with migration. The Bureau also engages continuously in knowledge generation on migrant issues that need broader policy and programme support from government, donors and others. Through its policy advocacy and networking activities, the Bureau is addressing migrants' pressing need for legal aid, arbitration and unionisation.

Challenges and Change

In its efforts to offer migrants more secure and sustainable returns for their labour, the Aajeevika Bureau faced several early challenges. Its major clients are poor, mainly tribal youth who have recently become or are about to become migrants. They have typically dropped out of school; have almost no ability to take risks and are totally dependant on what they can earn for themselves. Providing training for migrants who have no resources to invest in training necessitates approaches that *reduce* the time required for training without compromising quality and rigour. Currently, most training is residential and carried out in urban areas at costs that are beyond the means of virtually all participants. The Bureau is exploring ways to concurrently reduce costs and improve cost recovery, but for the moment the training must be subsidised.

Recognising the migrants' urgent need for income, none of the training programmes has been more than a month long. The fast-track training is oriented at getting good site practice and experience as that is what employers want.

Perhaps the most important learning has been that although training is certainly necessary, it is not sufficient for a more stable and remunerative migration. Placement services and employment counselling are essential. In absence of this support the trainees have little chance of finding a suitable position and are likely to lapse back into unskilled modes of employment.

Poverty and indebtedness create situations of chronic instability and unfavourable conditions for survival in long-term employment. Job attrition rates are high and trained youth have a high risk of dropping out altogether from the skilled job market. In its initial days, the Bureau teams were surprised to witness the wilful dropping out of trainees from what appeared to be excellent job opportunities.² We learned that this category of migrants needs to retain the ability to respond to household crisis; access social networks; and maintain a degree of dignity at their workplaces, even at the expense of higher incomes and future employment prospects. Migrant labour, particularly from tribal groups, may shirk from the regimentation of more formal types of employment because of the restrictions this imposes on their mobility.

Employment in the unorganised, informal sector is expanding more rapidly than in formal/organised sectors. Informal labour markets commonly exploit migrant labour. The Bureau is frequently called upon to assist victimised migrants through arbitration, legal aid or even police intervention. There is little doubt that workers will become more politically aware and want to organise. The training provided by the Bureau may well provide migrants with skills that will enable them to operate more effectively in this realm, but that is not the primary focus of such training. For an organisation whose effectiveness is related to being able to serve as an intermediary between the labour and the employer, this poses a real dilemma that must be resolved on a case-by-case basis with its goal and objectives clearly in mind. The answer may lie in leaving the advocacy and political roles to other organisations while the Bureau continues to focus on improving migrants' basic competencies.

There is clearly a formidable range of migration-related issues that the Bureau and others might address. The challenge for the Bureau is to identify those issues and services which are both high priority and consistent with the organisation's capacities at this stage of its development. The soon-to-be-launched set of financial services was an obvious choice from the perspective of need, but represents a serious leap for the organisation, requiring careful preparation and extensive interactions with organisations that have vast microfinance experience.

A major issue is the extent to which the Bureau should try to improve conditions in the home areas, not so much with a view to reducing migration, but for enhancing prospects for sustainable livelihoods in migration-dependent communities. In this regard, the ability of family members to survive and hopefully thrive in the home areas is a key element affecting the success of the migration experience. Health and financial difficulties at home often compel migrants to abandon their jobs prematurely and at a personal financial loss. Communication, financial and insurance services can all help. But basic improvements in conditions and opportunities in the home communities are also required for migration to become a more remunerative and positive experience. This may seem ironic since poor conditions and limited opportunities at home usually contribute to migration.

The more fundamental issue is the relationship between migration and sustainable development in the home areas which is not a challenge for the Bureau alone, but for all government and private organisations engaged in efforts to develop this area as well as the communities. A better understanding of this relationship is central to devising strategies that will work, as well as to identifying the roles of various players, including the Bureau.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF MIGRATION DEPENDENCY

Migration is not just a reflection of the collapse of agrarian-based livelihood systems in the source areas; it is as much a response to opportunities for better livelihoods (Farrington et al. 2006). Population growth and a scarcity of suitable land has made it virtually impossible for many families to produce enough food for themselves, but

for many, migration was a regular feature of their livelihood systems well before they reached that point. Some irrigation-led agricultural intensification is taking place, but it is seriously constrained by topography and soil conditions (Shah 2001). However, even in the most optimistic scenario (slowing population growth, expansion of irrigated areas, regenerating forests) this is unlikely to have much effect on migration. Some may even prefer migration over agricultural intensification.

One might argue that migration has actually slowed down agricultural change in the region by providing an alternative to the adoption of productivity increasing measures. Yet many farmers opt for migration over investments in their farms as a strategy for improving their livelihoods for a range of reasons. A common and understandable perception is that dependence on farming is synonymous with a life of hard work and endless poverty. Some farmers do not share that pessimism and express their commitment to farming through innovation. They are the leaders in the agricultural intensification process in their areas—and will probably expand their operations in the future, employing labour and leasing additional land for themselves. Whether this is a desirable or undesirable development depends on its character (as well as one's political viewpoint), but it will almost certainly happen, judging from the structural transformation experiences of many other countries.

One could also argue that agricultural intensification in the source communities might be synergistically combined with migration remittances (some of which might be invested locally, rather than just consumed) and what might be termed 'repatriation of skills' ('retired' or lapsed migrants with skills who opt to stay home) in support of local enterprises that generate income and jobs.

There is nothing new about backward linkages or trickle-down effects associated with migration (Dev, S. M. & R. E. Evenson 2003; Johnson, B. and J. Mellor 1961; Johnson, B and P. Kilby 1975; Srivastava, R. & S. K. Sasikumar 2003). But why, after decades of migration and remittances, hasn't more development taken place in the source areas; and why should we expect that to change?

Those concerned with sustainable development in the source areas might look more closely at the extent to which weak demand for goods and services (closely associated with poverty) has constrained the expansion of enterprises in these areas, which in turn could create more jobs, higher incomes and further increase the demand for goods and services. This idea is basic neoclassical economic development theory and although most certainly only part of the answer, should not be quickly dismissed.

The Bureau believes that training and facilitation of migrant workers for remunerative and dignified participation in the current economic expansion offers a viable path out of poverty for many families in southern Rajasthan. Strengthening vocational training and life-skills education will seed a more confident labour force that is both competitive and able to negotiate effectively. For its part, Aajeevika Bureau must provide more targeted training and educational interventions for the younger, in-school generation to prepare them for urban competition and help them take more informed decisions about their future so they can avoid some of the pitfalls described in this paper.

The higher remittances associated with these investments will impact positively on development in the home communities that could in time become a self-sustaining

process. However, sustainable development in the source areas requires improvements in facilitating conditions, including government investments in social and physical infrastructure. These investments will enable local communities to capture more of the benefits of remittances and effectively use the skills that labourers acquire through migration.

Government and NGOs might critically reflect on their methods and effectiveness in the face of various versions of the migrant labour situation discussed here. Many take the view that migration is basically bad and should be reduced. Migration is likely to feature prominently in the futures of these communities and they will hopefully find positive and creative ways to integrate it. The communities themselves must understand and either accept or alleviate the constraints to sustainable development that they face. The Bureau and partner organisations might facilitate this process by exposing communities to a range of experiences in other communities, but should avoid imposing their own visions and agendas. There is an understandable tendency for any organisation to define solutions in terms of what they are able to provide. This sensitisation (of communities and the organisations serving them) is a critical starting point for education for sustainable development.

Notes

1. The argument is that schooling does not adequately prepare rural students for a future of meaningful economic participation, especially in urban, high growth sectors. There is little linkage of education to livelihood. Vocational training in rural schools of Rajasthan is not provided at all. Formal schooling also does not include any inputs on building broader life skills that help in future employability, for example inputs in language, cultural exposure and mobility.
2. In 2006, the Bureau responded to an invitation from a state-of-the-art unit to send 17 trainees to their wire harness plant in Gurgaon, Haryana. Despite attractive salaries, the trainees could not adjust to the regime of factory work in a large urban centre and returned to Udaipur after just a few days.

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