

Overseas Development
Institute



Worrisome Folds

**A Situation Analysis of Migrant
Textile Labourers from Southern
Rajasthan**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Migration has emerged as a major livelihood strategy in Southern Rajasthan over the past two decades. Aajeevika Bureau's initial work in the area gave us the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of issues related to migration. This not only helped us answer important questions like, 'what is migration' but also led to a collection of rich data on the destinations for migration, major trades where migrant labour works as well problems and other issues of migration.

This study focuses on migrant labour from Southern Rajasthan to the textile market of Surat. In addition to examining the living and working conditions faced by migrants, the study explores the scope for increasing skills and incomes and the roles that the Bureau might play.

The impact of burgeoning population and declining productivity of natural resources is quite evident in the tribal-dominated Gogunda Block of Udaipur District of Rajasthan. Nearly 44 per cent of the population of Gogunda belongs to the Scheduled Tribes. The predominantly hilly terrain of this Block means that only 13.09

Gogunda: Key Indicators

per cent of its total geographical area is cultivable, of which only 18 per cent is irrigated. Persistent drought or drought-like situations have adversely impacted the local economy of Gogunda as other parts of Southern Rajasthan. Decreasing productivity in agriculture coupled with limited employment opportunities in the area has pushed the youth to seek employment opportunities outside their area. Current estimates indicate that, close to 83 per cent of the total 30,133 households in Gogunda derive a major share of their income from labour; 63 per cent of these households have one or more

persons out-migrating to generate labour-based income. Further, 60 per cent of this migration is outside the State of Rajasthan.



A very large portion of this migrant labour from Southern Rajasthan travel to the adjoining state of Gujarat. More than 75 per cent of migrants to Gujarat are engaged in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs such as

working at construction sites, in hotels, running tea stalls, or as wage labourers in the textile town of Surat. The latter group constitutes the focus of this study.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objectives of this study were to:

- Understand the living and working conditions of migrant labour from Southern Rajasthan in the textile market of Surat;
- Understand the process of recruitment and development of hired migrant labourers;
- Explore possibilities of enhancing skills as well as incomes of migrant labour; and
- Explore possibilities of Aajeevika Bureau intervening to improve the livelihoods of this category of migrant workers.

The study was centred in Gogunda and Kumbhalgarh blocks of South Rajasthan as a large chunk of migrant workers in Surat are from these 2 blocks; 15 villages from these 2 blocks were selected. The primary data for this study was collected through individual interviews and discussions with around 170 migrant textile labourers.

Group discussions were also conducted with migrant workers and personal histories prepared for selected individual migrants to explore and highlight specific and interesting aspects of their life and work. Secondary data in existing documentation on the same client group were also reviewed to enrich this study.

3. SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF TEXTILE LABOURERS



Surat is known as one of the biggest market for synthetic fabric in Asia. It is also one of the main industrial towns of the country, which boasts of - apart from a flourishing textile industry - of brisk diamond

trade, big construction businesses, and a well-established chemical industry. More than twenty million metres of fabric is manufactured or and traded in Surat on a daily basis. The majority of the work is carried out by contractors and brokers.

3.1 Textile Industry of Surat: An Overview

The textile industry in Surat depends heavily on wage labourers which are largely sourced and recruited by contractors. The industry comprises four main types of enterprises:

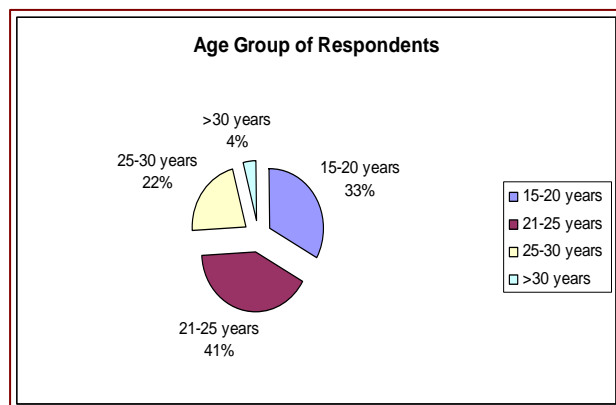
- (a) Yarn Mills: Synthetic yarn is manufactured in these mills. The main kinds of wage work opportunity offered here include machine operation, packing, and transport.
- (b) Looms: The raw fibre obtained from yarn mills is converted to finished yarn and then used to manufacture cloth in these looms. There are more than 700,000 such looms in Surat.
- (c) Textile Mills: The cloth prepared in looms is washed, dyed, and printed in the textile mills, and then forwarded to the textile market.
- (d) Textile markets: Surat contains more than 30 textile markets in Surat, each of which has between 3000 to 5000 shops where over 60,000 labours from South Rajasthan are employed annually. Workers receive

dyed and printed cloth from mills, check it, cut it to the required size, stitch and fold it to convert it into a product destined for retail and wholesale markets throughout the country.

Despite there being a variety of options for working in the textile industry, the textile market is the preferred option for migrant labour from Rajasthan. Labour contractors are also from Rajasthan and recruit from their home areas. The contractor usually makes boarding and lodging arrangements, free of cost for the labour. A worker can earn between Rs 400 to Rs 3000 per month, depending on his experience and position.

3.2 Labour in the Textile Market of Surat: A Profile

Age Group of Migrant Labour: Workers are initiated into the trade at a very



young age, often less than 14 years old, through labour contractors. These young boys, usually from south Rajasthan, are preferred by traders as shopkeepers as they feel they are, “energetic, hardworking, docile and require low

maintenance (i.e. can be underpaid)”.

More than 10,000 of the estimated 60,000 workers from Rajasthan are below 14 years of age. Most of these have entered the market through contractors. More than 40 per cent of the labourers interviewed for this study confirmed having entered the market as labourers while they were between 10 to 14 years of age. After reaching 30 years of age, a majority of labour from this market either look for other opportunities or return home. A small number

learn new skills and move on to more skilled, better paying positions and continue to work in the textile market of Surat, beyond 35 years of age.

Social Groups of Migrant Labour: The majority of the unskilled and child workers in the Surat textile markets are from Scheduled Tribes. The data also indicates that 63 per cent of these labourers belong to Gameti Tribe, and the remainder are Rajputs, Meghwaals and other Scheduled Caste groups. Many of the tasks in the market require the formation of workgroups. Gametis reportedly prefer working in groups as they derive moral strength and security from such associations. Most labour contractors who supply labour to the textile market are themselves from the ST community, which also has a bearing on the preponderance of Gameti labour in Surat.

Families of Migrant Labour: The migration cycle of many workers begins when they are between 10 and 12 years of age when they are still unmarried. However, once married, almost 80 per cent of the labourers prefer to maintain joint families as they feel that their parents, wives and children will be able to look after each other better.

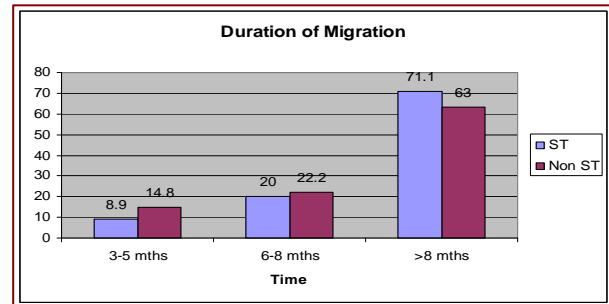
The migrants' preference for joint families at home stems from the realisation that while away working in Surat, they always remain concerned about their parents, spouse, children, and/or other family members, back in Rajasthan.

Another study found that this joint family system does not find equal favour with the migrants' wives¹. Many daughter-in-laws in joint families reported loss of freedom and erosion of decision-making power after their husbands migrated to Surat. Focus group discussions in the same study indicated that it is difficult for the family to migrate long distances and for a long periods of time so the joint family arrangement may be the least problematic for married male migrants.

¹ "Impact of Male Migration on Women", Aajeevika Bureau, 200?

3.3 Duration of Migration

The textile market of Surat has seasonal fluctuations but remains active throughout the year and therefore the movement of labourers to and from the market is a year-round activity. There is enough



work available throughout the year and the demand for labour remains buoyant.

A trader or contractor usually employs a fixed number of labourers and this is the reason why such a large number of workers spend over 8 months in a year in Surat. Close to 90 per cent of migrant labourers, however, remain attached to the same former employers/textile traders across migration cycles. This study also revealed that two thirds labourers from Southern Rajasthan spend six months or more every year work in the Surat textile markets. Surat is more than 500 kilometres from South Rajasthan which helps explain the long periods migrants spend at this destination. Another reason for the long migration cycles of textile market labourers has to do with their age. In addition, a major portion of migrants are children and labour contractor pressure them and their guardians/family members back home to extend the migrants' stay in Surat.

3.4 History of Migrant Labour in the Surat Textile Markets

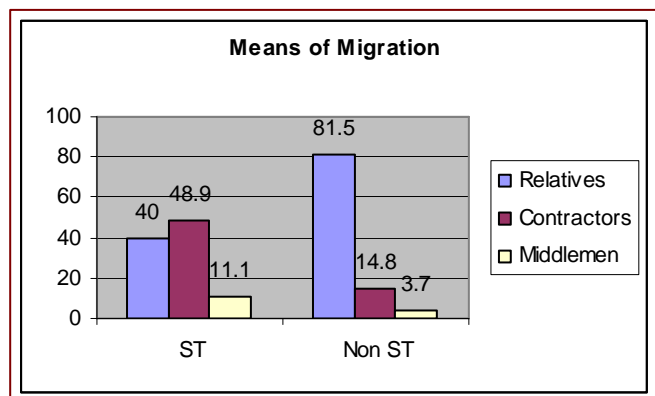
The first association of migrant labour from Southern Rajasthan with the textile markets of Surat was not by accident, but is a result of continuous labour influx and its subsequent absorption in the markets of Surat, over several years. The labourers from Gogunda are found working at three different levels in the textile market: (i) the textile merchants who are generally non-tribals, mainly Jains,; (ii) contractors for labour and other work;

and (iii) skilled and unskilled textile labourers, the latter mostly being youth from the ST community.

The earliest migrants to Surat from Southern Rajasthan were non-tribals who are today engaged as traders in the textile market. Subsequently, these traders hired workers at various levels and for different tasks to expand their trade in Surat. The workers who were taken to Surat began to work as skilled and unskilled workers with these traders. The rising demand for labourers gave rise to the system of labour contracting which saved the traders' time and effort by recruiting labourers, mainly children and young people from ST communities in Southern Rajasthan. Following this, the workers looked for different kinds of employment, in the same market and this is probably the reason why the labour from Gogunda has restricted itself to the unskilled, exploitative, less remunerative, and child-labour textile markets of the area textile market.

3.5 Modes of Labour Recruitment into Surat's Textile Market

Migrant labour scouting, selection, recruitment, and absorption into the textile market of Surat is a multi-staged process that begins in the source villages. Relatives and acquaintances of labourers in South Rajasthan were cited as the



main medium of their entry into Surat by 55 per cent of the contacted migrants, followed by labour contractors and local shopkeepers (36 per cent). In fact, the former category serves as informal labour agents for the textile traders in Surat and each labour-sourcing relative or acquaintance gets paid Rs. 70 to Rs. 80 per person supplied. In addition, they also receive the

transportation costs of the labour between the source village and the destination.

For labour entry in the textile markets of Surat, contractors always serve as a conduit. This fact is further corroborated by the migrant registration entries received by the Bureau, wherein the labourers migrating to Surat invariably mention the name and address of the labour contractor as their employer. However, it is difficult to estimate the number of such labour contractors recruiting workers from South Rajasthan as many of them work as wage labourers in the same market. They are able to function as labour contractors as they are well known figures among the labour community.

3.6 Career Progression in Surat's Textile Market

There is a wide variety of tasks that an unskilled labourer can perform in Surat's textile market. Most new recruits are found doing unskilled and



simple tasks like sari folding, packing, and dusting shops in the first few weeks. Most tribal recruits are entrusted with this sari-stitching task, 71 per cent entrants belonging to the Rajput and other non-tribal communities were employed inside

the shop.

Where progression within a job is concerned, it is a slow process for a majority of the unskilled labourers who start with the sari folding and stitching job. Approximately 66 per cent of them move to other jobs in the textile industry within one year, even though there is no certainty that they will get the work or wage of a skilled labour or not. On the other hand, 19 per cent migrants take between 1 and 3 years to move to the next level of work

and 16 per cent take between 3-5 years to graduate from sari folding to sari cutting in the textile market of Surat

Only about 5 per cent of new migrant labourers are able to make a direct entry into the semi- and fully skilled tasks such as cutting saris and embroidery, respectively. These tasks are also better paid than the unskilled ones (please see Table 1). None of these skilled labourers encountered were tribals, and all were educated and experienced. As might be expected, there is a direct correlation between a labourer's educational level and the type of work he is entrusted with in the textile market.

Table1: Work, Skills and Wages in the Textile Industry of Surat

| S. No. | Work | Skill Level | Average Monthly Wage (in Rupees) |
|---------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|---|
| 1 | Sari Cutting | Semi Skilled | 2500.00 |
| 2 | Sari Folding | Unskilled | 1500.00 |
| 3 | Stitching a Folded Sari | Unskilled | 550.00 |
| 4 | Sari Packing | Semi Skilled | 2000.00 |
| 5 | Embroidery | Skilled | 5000.00 |
| 6 | Salesman on Shop-floor | Skilled | 3000.00 |
| 7 | Other Shop-based Assistance | Unskilled | 950.00 |
| 8 | Cooking Food for other Labourers | Semi Skilled | 1000.00 |
| 9 | Middle men in the Industry | Skilled | 3500.00 |
| 10 | Loom or Mill Worker | Skilled | 3000.00 |

The initial two months after the entry of a new recruit in Surat's labour market present the most challenges. Amongst the first tasks that the migrant labour is given is cooking for his colleagues. The labourer has to adjust to new working conditions, new people, and congested accommodation. The drop out during this period is high as a result.

3.7 Living Conditions of Migrant Textile Labourers

Survey results indicate that 92 per cent of all the migrant labourers stay with one another in rooms that have been rented by the contractor on their behalf. The accommodation comprises small, dingy, and poorly-ventilated rooms (10 ft. X 12 ft.) sometimes with a toilet and bathroom; between six to ten labourers occupy each such room. All expenses of the labourer related to room rent, water and electricity charges, and costs of boarding while in Surat, are borne by the labour contractor. However, the living conditions of migrant labourers are unhygienic and uncomfortable – many of these rooms have asbestos roofs that become unbearably hot during summer. Many times, they have to make do with only dry *chapattis* (round, flat, unleavened bread) for meals, without any *dal* or vegetables.

The minority of migrants that have their own lodging and boarding arrangements in Surat were found to be better off in terms of living conditions and diet, though they end up paying more for these services.

Invariably, no arrangement is made for the entertainment of labourers. Migrants find such expenses a major drain of their savings, if they choose to watch a movie, eat outside, or go shopping in the city.

Though labourers from Gogunda and Kumbhalgarh have been migrating to Surat over several years, they have failed to integrate with the society in their destination. Their tribal background and long daily work hours have as much to do with the limited integration as the lack of trust exhibited by the local population.

3.8 Working Conditions of Migrant Textile Labourers

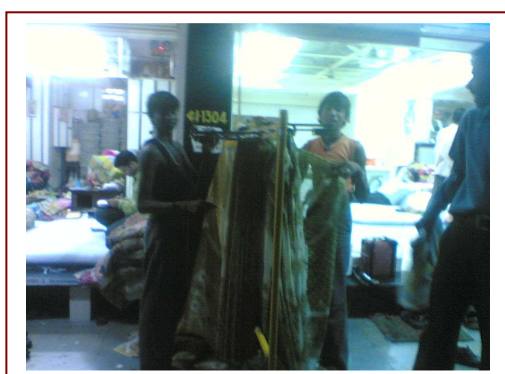
The textile market in Surat is spread out along the Ring Road in a radius of 5-6 kilometres.

There are hundreds of shops in the multi-storied buildings where thousands of labourers work.

The working conditions for textile workers vary according to the tasks assigned to them. The worst off are child labourers who

are assigned unskilled tasks. They work long hours in cramped, dim-lit surroundings, often in the basements of shops (to escape legal action for hiring child labour). Labourers on the shop floor or in the open have better working conditions.

Textile labourers face heavy on-the-job pressure. Working hours range from 10 to 12 hours per day; those engaged in sari folding have to spend this time standing. Each sari shop employs about four to five labourers who cut, measure, fold, stitch, and pack 2000 to 2500 saris every day.



The price of being homesick

Motiram is from Vagda village of Gogunda. He is 18 years old. Two years ago, he went with a sari-cutting contractor from his village to Surat. Motiram missed his village and family very much. One day he was half an hour late for work. The contractor scolded him for that.

Motiram told the contractor that he was home sick and that he wanted to go home for a visit. This angered the contractor and he beat Motiram with the meter-stick. This frightened Motiram and one night he ran away.

At the time of the study, he was at home. He would like to go back to work in Surat but even the thought of the contractor frightens him and he has not been able to muster up the courage to go back.

Workers often travel 10-12 km distance between their lodgings and work-place on foot. The labourers are served tea once or twice a day, and are also given a daily break of one hour for light refreshments in the afternoon.

The work day begins at 8.00 am; the shops open at 9.00 am and by 10'o clock in the morning there is brisk activity. Corporal punishment is often handed down to the labourers even for small or no faults of theirs by the employers. The helplessness of the child labourers forces them to continue to toil despite poor working conditions and employer misbehaviour.

3.9 Wages

Payment of Wages: Labourers in Surat is generally employed on a monthly-wage basis. The monthly wage is usually decided at the source in the presence of the parents/ guardians of the soon-to-be migrant worker. The details are:

Table 2: Payment of Wages

| Sr No | Wages paid | No of workers | Percentage |
|-------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| 1 | Monthly basis | 55 | 76.3 |
| 2 | Daily wage | 17 | 23.7 |
| | Total | 72 | 100 |

About a quarter of the migrant labourers receive a daily wage and the remainder are paid on a monthly wage. Skilled jobs like sari cutting and embroidery tend to have a daily wage rate.

Payment Process: In the absence of a written agreement between the contractor or trader and the labourer, underpayment, delayed or irregular wage payment is the norm, despite the fact that there has been a verbal agreement, usually in the presence of the other people including the workers parents/guardians. The young age of the migrants, the distance from home and the long duration of the migration are some of the reasons that lead to underpayment or irregular or delayed payment.

Absence of any saving avenues with young labourers at the destination is a key reason for contractors preferring to settle their labourers' payments at the end of the migration cycle, usually in the source villages and in front of the young labourer's guardians/parents. The fact that the wages are with the employer for a long time and the absence of written records is also a reason for irregularities. Any loss of wages due to poor record keeping or confusion usually is borne by the worker.

Skilled workers like salesmen and sari embroiderers usually get paid at the destination at the end of the month. Young workers are not paid regularly at the destination as the labour contractor feels that if they have money, they will not complete their contracts.

The work relations between the migrant labourer and his employer are sometimes spoiled due to differences over wages and payments. The distressed labourer may abandon work and leave for his village without taking the wages due to him from his employer. The homeward journey becomes even more tedious when the labourer does not have sufficient money to pay the return-bus fare, forcing him to hitch hike through unsafe locations.

Savings in the absence of formal systems

Maganlal has been working as a contractor in the Surat textile market for the past 6 years. Keeping his savings safe in Surat is a challenge for him. He wants to open a bank account in Surat but no bank seems willing to accept him as a customer – some say it is not possible to do so as he is from outside the state, while others insist on so many formalities that it is impossible for him to fulfil them. Maganlal has therefore given up the option of opening a bank account.

Now, if he wants to save money, he either lends it others on interest or keeps it stashed away at home. The situation is such that when he has a significant amount of cash, he comes to the village to deposit it in his account there. He feels that money is safer in a formal banking/government system but unfortunately for him, the formal systems do not consider him a safe bet.

Savings: Responses from migrant labourers indicate that they do not have any large sums of money that are readily accessible to them. The workers

who receive a monthly wage often participate in saving groups that they themselves have organised.

Remittances: The migrant labourers in Surat return home a maximum of four times in a year. Given the family needs, remittances are a critical component of migration. Workers who migrate for long periods have limited options for sending money home. Regular remittances are transmitted through friends and relatives (in 84 per cent of cases), and less frequently through contractors (9 per cent) and demand drafts / money orders (6 per cent).

Lack of education and the fear of complicated Government procedures prevent these labourers from accessing formal means of remittances available in their destination. On the other hand, the few semi-educated workers who would like to use the banking system are unable to do so as bank managers hesitate to make them customers, given their migrant status. Workers opt for informal systems of making transfers through friends/relatives. However, these informal arrangements are not risk free, as there have been several reported cases of delayed/under- or even non-payment of the remitted amount by the carrier to the labourer's family. In 41 per cent of the cases, the labourers reported delays or losses while sending money through others. There are also reports of the person entrusted with the money delaying payment for months or appropriating at least part of the amount. Of the respondents, 27 per cent said that while they had personally not suffered on this account, they were aware of such instances. Focus group discussions revealed that such cases are an occupational hazard but that workers are forced to use these systems in absence of more reliable alternatives.

Cases of bungling are rare where the contractor acts as the money carrier, as he fears erosion of social capital and traditional labour linkages from the source villages

Advances: Advances are readily available, from employers especially to unskilled migrant labourers . Over eighty percent of respondents reported receiving advances, from their employers when they needed them. This is owing to the long-term linkages that these labourers have managed to build with the textile traders over several migration cycles. Of the remainder, some did not get an advance owing to their unreliability in the eyes of their employers.

Paradoxically, the skilled and, thus, better paid embroidery workers and loom operators in Surat find it difficult to obtain advances from their employers, since they are considered “mobile” workers who can more easily change employers, given the demand for their skills in Surat. By providing advances to their unskilled labourers, the textile traders are more assured of their continuous (tantamount to “bonded”) association with them in the future migration cycles. Sometimes, the labour contractors pay an advance to the parents/guardians of the young migrant forcing him to work where the contractor wants him to.

4. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The key issues related to the lives and livelihoods of the migrant labour in the Surat textile market that emerge from the field work for consideration and contemplation are as follows:

- The high levels of engagement of child labour in the textile markets of Surat is a major issue. Given the nature of work in the textile market, the traders find employing children and youth both convenient and economical. Due to their young age, it is possible to make them work for 10-12 hours a day. There is a demand for young workers in the market and this encourages the contractors and middlemen to pay an advance to the parents/guardians and take the children away to Surat.
- Working conditions for labourers are poor and especially unsuitable for children. The labour contractors do not say much to the parents about the kind of working conditions their children will experience.
- The employers in the textile trade of Surat fear the law preventing child labour, but not sufficiently to make them stop employing children. They keep looking for ways to make the practice legal. During the study, it was found that the traders try to register them as labourers. There was evidence of employers trying to use village Sarpanches and other local leaders to change the birth records.
- Relatives and acquaintances of labourers are involved as labour agents in the textile market. Migrant labour is recruited through labour contractors and traders as well as through others. There are some experienced labourers who begin serving as labour leaders of sorts. These people enjoy a good reputation at both ends – in the village they are seen as familiar and successful people and parents send their children without hesitation

and in the destination they are seen as reliable suppliers of labour. These labour leaders can usually draw on a group of labourers to meet market demand. They commonly get a commission of Rs 20-25 per labourer that they supply. These middlemen are usually labourers themselves but have been employed as skilled workers for a long time.

- Tribal youth continue to be engaged among the migrants in unskilled or at best semi-skilled, and thus, poorly paid tasks in the textile markets. The data indicates that tribal youth are almost never employed inside the shop where they deal with clients or any other task that can be classified as dignified or has less drudgery. The most menial kinds of tasks tend to be reserved for tribals. These workers on the other hand, find it extremely difficult to move from the unskilled segment to the skilled segment, especially if they are from tribal communities. More commonly, a non-tribal youth will progress to becoming an accountant, salesman or broker but the path of the tribal youth ends at being an embroiderer, sari cutter or labor contractor.
- The low levels of education of tribal youth is one of the major reasons why they almost always get the jobs with the lowest requirements in terms of skills and hence the lowest remuneration. The labourers from southern Rajasthan do not have the ability or confidence to use existing opportunities in the market to upgrade their skills and hence wages. Workers from other parts of the country, because of their skill sets, find direct employment in cloth mills and looms which have better wages. The migrant workers from south Rajasthan seem more interested in following the current conventional upward route (for the region) of sari cutting and embroidery.
- Rehabilitation and alternative income generation opportunities for the 'retired'/'not-in-service' migrant labourers from South Rajasthan are quite

limited. Discussions with workers indicate that they leave their village at a very young age, usually as children of 12-13 years and are unable to work in the textile market after they are 30-35 years old.

5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

The textile industry in Surat offers several opportunities to adult migrant workers from South Rajasthan to profitably engage in income generation activities. However, harnessing this potential requires a concerted effort along one or more of the following lines:

- **Activities with families of migrant labour:** There is a need to raise awareness among the migrants, their families, and also among the labour agents, about the unsuitability of working conditions in the textile market for child labourers. There is also a need to sensitize the people who are responsible for sending children to labour in the textile market.
- **Sensitising and Registering Middlemen:** Sensitising labour agents and traders on the need to improve working and living conditions of all categories of workers (especially migrant labourers) in the textile market is needed. Such sensitization can better ensure the sustainability as well as profitability of their engagement in the textile markets. There is a need to identify contractors who are willing to motivate their colleagues and traders not to employ young children. In addition, before registering traders, they should submit a list of workers that they are taking with them in order to have a database of the workers who have migrated.
- **Creating alternative employment options:** Identifying opportunities for alternative income generation and skill enhancement of the tribal youth of Gogunda, would serve to harness the potential of various kinds of semi-skilled and skilled migrants with experience in Surat and other migrant destinations throughout the country.

- **Alternative areas in the textile industry:** Ninety five per cent of the migrant labour from south Rajasthan are attached to the textile market



whereas the opportunity to earn higher wages lies mostly elsewhere in the textile industry.

For example, sari embroidery provides a better wage rate than sari cutting. There is a need to better prepare migrants for entry into the higher paying segments rather than always beginning at the lowest rung of the ladder. For example, sari cutters can become sari salesmen or sari embroiderers, and unskilled labour can explore options in the textile manufacturing industry that has a higher wage rate.

- **Organising labour:** There is scope for organising the migrant labourers in the textile markets of Surat into a labour collective for asserting their rights, for engaging in collective bargaining, and also for creating a social net for tiding over bad times in an alien land.
- **Registration and Tracking:** Needed services include registering and tracking migrant labourers for the provision of micro finance and various other support services to them at the destination and also to their families at source.
- **Transport Services:** Migrants would benefit from cheaper and more reliable transport facilities between the source Districts in South Rajasthan and Surat.