

Aajeevika Bureau

Rural, seasonal migrant workers are a massive workforce with numbers that touch nearly a 100 million across India. They drift through the economy, often at its very bottom end, remaining largely outside the reach of state services and devoid of opportunities offered by the growing markets. Despite the major contributions migrant workers make to India's prosperity, they suffer neglect from employers, public and government alike. To help these poor rural migrants, Aajeevika Bureau was established as a charitable trust in 2005 in Udaipur in Rajasthan.

Aajeevika Bureau is a specialized non-profit, public service organization set up to provide solutions, services and security to seasonal migrants who leave their villages to find work in cities, factories and farms. Presently it is fully functional in 5 blocks of Udaipur and Rajsamand districts of Rajasthan.

Aajeevika Bureau works both in the 'source' as well as the 'destinations' of rural migrants within western India. The Bureau addresses issues that collectively influence the contributions of rural migration to the national economy, the livelihoods of the migrants and their families, and the very survival of their home communities. It provides a range of services to help migrants improve their outcomes from the labour markets and acts as an agent of policy change and advocacy in favour of migrant workers.



Aajeevika Bureau provides a number of services to migrants aimed at establishing their identity, increasing incomes and reducing expenditures, and emergencies associated with their movement away from their villages. The main target of Bureau's livelihood services are unskilled, semi-skilled, seasonal and vulnerable migrant men and women. The node for the Bureau's work and services to migrants is a network of centres known as the Shramik Sahayta Evam Sandarbh Kendra.

Registration is an entry point to the migrant workers into the Bureau's support services. Registration of migrant workers is aiming to fill a huge gap in data and information on the numbers, location and spread of seasonal migrants. Registration also forms the basis of Bureau's services such as counselling, training, placement, legal aid and financial services. Migrants are carried out through a locally identified network of volunteers in the villages, as well as directly at the Bureau's centres.

Registration is accompanied by the issuing of a photo identification card. The purpose of the photo ID card is to create a legitimate public identity of the rural migrant and to serve as a proof of residence, skill and organizational association. The photo ID card is a powerful means to establish identity - it reduces police harassment, helps in a bona-fide introduction and leads to a sense of association with a broader umbrella of migrant workers.

There is a steady inflow of workers coming to the Bureau centres with complaints of fraudulence and malpractice against them relating to incidents at destinations, some of which result in the termination of their employment. The field centres register and respond to cases requiring intervention between workers and their employers/contractors. In more difficult cases where arbitration is not possible, assistance is sought from experienced legal practitioners. Workshops that focus on rights of labour are a regular feature of Bureau's communication with migrant workers. As part of its counselling, legal information is regularly provided. A simple take away attendance diary that the Bureau has developed continues to be very popular and useful as it helps keep a record of work done and payments received. Another publication ("*Pardes Jaane Se Pehle*") provides practical tips and cautions to those who are on the threshold of leaving their homes for work.

As a core service for migrants Aajeevika Bureau creates regular opportunities for skill training and up-gradation to help them improve their prospects in the labour markets, enhance their incomes, and establish themselves more lucratively in an environment that is offering better returns.

In order to help rural migrants, especially younger workers, break into the new, more skilled niches of the market, Aajeevika Bureau facilitates vocational training and upgradation in a variety of skills. The Bureau has devised special programmes and modules aimed to include those who do not have enough time to invest in long term trainings and who cannot afford disruptions in their earnings. Rural youth identified through Bureau's own centres as well as through its partner agencies are provided with hands-on training opportunities. Trainings are conducted in all the field centres of the Bureau and often in collaboration with other training institutions that have the infrastructure and expertise for this unique group of young learners.

The trainings offered by the Bureau combine rigorous and practical technical training with a series of life skills, personality and confidence building inputs. The Bureau has learnt that the ability to negotiate markets and new opportunities require skills that go beyond technical proficiency in a particular trade or occupation.

The Bureau has facilitated training in the areas of Plumbing, House wiring, Masonry, Welding, Carpentry, Hospitality and Hotel services, Retail, Salesmanship and Customer relationship, Office assistance and Secretarial practice, Apparel production and Industrial tailoring and Driving etc.

Aajeevika Bureau serves as the nodal agency of finding and disseminating regular information on jobs, openings and vacancies amongst its clients. The Training and Placement Cell of the Bureau continuously scans markets and is also approached by a wide number of employers looking for workers in various positions. If considered suitable in terms of offer and work conditions, the Bureau disseminates this information through its field teams across their areas of operation.

Rozgar Melas (Employment Fairs) are regularly organized by the Bureau in order to bring employers together with potential workers. These events are also used by the teams to build a data base of interested youth to who information can be given at a time when there is a more appropriate opening for them. The Bureau teams also counsel youth in making appropriate career or training choices.

All Trainees of Aajeevika Bureau are provided a one-time placement opportunity at the conclusion of their training. In case of their drop out or retrenchment, the Bureau provides them with additional connections and networks for ensuring that they remain in the job markets.

As a core strategy of mobilization, the Bureau has started to collectivize migrant workers on occupational lines. A



collective provides the benefit of association and mutual help among its members.

A group also makes it possible for individual members to engage in more forceful bargaining and to provide new work opportunities to each other. At a later point a collective can evolve into a body that might negotiate contracts and even enter joint contracts with employers or service users.

At this time there are nearly 20 active collectives with a membership of nearly 2000 workers. These include collectives of construction workers, cart pullers, plumbers, factory workers and head-loaders. A new collective is coming up for workers in the catering business and rickshaw pullers. The Ahmedabad, Udaipur and Jaipur centres of Aajeevika Bureau have provided the context for promotion of several collectives, given the high concentration of migrants in these urban centres.

Keeping in mind the unique difficulties faced by migrant workers in accessing credit, savings and remittances, Aajeevika Bureau has promoted a new entity (a Section 25 Company) with the mandate of providing comprehensive Financial solutions. The company is known as the Rajasthan Shram Sarathi Association(RSSA) and it has launched a micro-lending programme for migrant workers registered by the Bureau's field centres. The programme is presently in an action-research phase in which a set of loan products are being tested before being launched on more commercial lines.

Aajeevika Bureau has been pushing commercial banks to open their doors to migrant workers. Migrants are not able to produce adequate identity documents to meet the Know Your Customer (KYC) norms of banks hence remain excluded from banking services. The Bureau is assisting large scale opening of bank accounts among migrant workers by helping them access the no-frill account provision in banks. A few banks have started to accept the Photo ID card as a valid introduction document, hence easing the process of account opening.

The Aajeevika Bureau is a Service Delivery Partner in an innovative Contributory Pension Scheme launched by the Government of Rajasthan. The scheme is aimed to provide pension coverage to the large number of unorganized sector workers of the state and the Bureau is using its networks to include migrant workers in its fold.

The inception of Aajeevika Bureau was a direct outcome of the results of a study aimed at understanding rural livelihoods across Rajasthan. The major finding of the study 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.

Aajeevika Bureau continues to build this understanding through a dedicated and ongoing research and knowledge generation programme. The results of the research undertaken have helped determine, expand and modify its operations. Through these studies, Aajeevika Bureau has also tried to inform and influence mainstream views on migration and reach out to a broader audience.

As a large and vulnerable section of India's unorganized labour force, migrant workers have poor social security, and meagre protection from malpractices and hazards. Yet for most migrants, migration is an inevitable reality – driven by lack of opportunities in rural areas and motivated by an urge to engage in the more rewarding options in more prosperous parts of the country. Organizations like Aajeevika Bureaus can provide better prospects for growth and advancement to these poor rural migrants and India needs more of this kind of organizations. ☺

* Information till February-2009