



Building a multifaceted and ground-up response system for internal migration: the case of Aajeevika Bureau

Tara Nair & Divya Varma

To cite this article: Tara Nair & Divya Varma (02 Feb 2026): Building a multifaceted and ground-up response system for internal migration: the case of Aajeevika Bureau, Development in Practice, DOI: [10.1080/09614524.2026.2613930](https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2026.2613930)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2026.2613930>



Published online: 02 Feb 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 37



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

FORTHCOMING SPECIAL ISSUE: INTERNAL MIGRATION, INFORMALITY AND
INEQUALITY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH



Building a multifaceted and ground-up response system for internal migration: the case of Aajeevika Bureau

Tara Nair and Divya Varma

Work Fair and Free Foundation, Bengaluru, India

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the migrant labour support architecture established by Aajeevika Bureau, an NGO established in 2005 in the dominant labour-exporting region of the western Indian state of Rajasthan. The multipronged institutional response crafted by the organisation to address the phenomenon of internal migration has been broadly fashioned as a model of social protection. This paper presents the approach and activities of Aajeevika Bureau in legal education and labour dispute mediation, focusing on three specific interventions: worker facilitation centres, legal aid and education cells, and the labour line.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 August 2025

Accepted 21 November 2025

Introduction

The framework of regulation outlined in the Constitution of India addresses the need to legally secure the rights of all workers to work, a living wage, and decent working conditions (NCEUS 2007). In India, both the central and state governments legislate labour laws. However, the applicability of most of the laws that regulate work, work conditions and welfare benefits (like minimum wages, payment of wages, gender-equal payment, child labour, interstate migration, and social security) is limited in terms of either coverage or benefits guaranteed. They have been compliance-oriented without adequate emphasis on effective enforcement towards improving the conditions for unorganised workers. Seasonal and circular migrant workers are particularly affected by this lapse due to their temporary status and high mobility, resulting in widespread exploitation and an inability to seek redress.

Almost all the enquiries into the labour market dynamics in the urban industrial centres of the country have testified to the deplorable working and living conditions of migrant workers and the routine violation of labour rights they face. Despite the presence of mechanisms under the Industrial Disputes Act (IDA), 1947 and subsequent reforms under the Industrial Relations Code (IRC), unorganised workers are deprived of the benefits of formal legal mediation due to the systemic inefficiencies in the judicial system like unreasonably protracted pendency rate in labour courts, skewed ratio of workers to adjudicating bodies, and inordinate delays in case disposal in labour courts and higher courts. Interstate migrants have to navigate many other barriers to accessing justice, like a lack of documentary evidence to prove an employer–employee relationship, as well as prohibitive cost, and protracted time involvement in the formal case process.

In the case of migrant workers in the country, two additional challenges can make labour governance further problematic – identification of workers and portability of social benefits and services. The identity problem remains intractable despite the introduction of state-level registration

systems (NITI Aayog 2020) for migrant workers operating through designated agencies or local administrative bodies. Institutional, technical, and legal constraints, like a high degree of migrant mobility, weak enforcement of labour laws, lack of financial and technical capacity of local governments, absence of inter-operability across different platforms, poor quality of data, and language and trust barriers, limit the efficacy of these efforts.

Portability of labour rights is essential for accessing the support of trade unions and other collective bargaining platforms at the destination (ILO 2020). The Aadhaar, India's unique identity infrastructure, launched in 2009, has not by itself resolved the problem of portability of social welfare schemes, though it addresses the exclusion errors and distributive inefficiencies in provisioning. The One Nation One Ration Card (ONOR) Scheme, announced a decade later in 2019, was meant to tackle the portability problem in accessing the subsidised food grains assured under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). However, the available data suggests that utilisation of the scheme by interstate migrants has been low as they lack awareness of the scheme, while the dealers are reluctant to engage with a new set of footloose customers (Agrawal and Agnihotri 2022; Tumbe and Jha 2024).

It is acknowledged by the state that without setting up an interstate migrant registration system and interstate coordination of fiscal costs, the portability paradox of welfare schemes will continue to persist (Government of India 2017). The Inter State Migrant Workmen (ISMW) Act (1979) does provide for registration of establishments that employ interstate migrant workers and for the licensing of contractors who recruit such workers. However, it does not provide for the registration of migrant workers. Even the limited scope of this legislation has been rendered ineffective, as the labour market has become more flexible and liberalised since the 1980s, with new economic policy ushered in.

Yawning gaps in the traditional legal labour governance architecture have made legal education and alternative mechanisms of labour dispute resolution more crucial for ensuring fair labour practices. Following a model of mediation, conciliation, and arbitration, the alternative dispute resolution arrangements save the costs and drudgery associated with lengthy labour court procedures. They offer accessible, more flexible, and collaborative solutions to work-related disputes and uphold the fundamental rights of workers. Non-government organisations working on labour issues have organically emerged in many contexts as the neutral third party that assists in conciliation and mediation without assuming the responsibility to render any decisive outcome of negotiation.

In this paper, we present the approach and activities of legal education and labour dispute mediation of Aajeevika Bureau (AB hereafter), a prominent non-government organisation in India. AB works for the well-being of migrant workers, enabling protection of their rights and interests through multipronged activities ranging from community mobilisation to skills development, housing, and research and advocacy. The discussion in this paper is limited to three specific aspects of AB's legal education and aid portfolio – the worker facilitation centres, the legal aid and education cells, and the labour line.

The case of Aajeevika Bureau

AB started its work in 2005 in Udaipur, Rajasthan, in the western part of India. As a “counterweight” within the system, the organisation seeks to ensure dignified and secure lives for communities dependent on migration and labour. Deviating strategically from the conventional approaches that address rural deprivation and exclusion in urban labour markets as separate phenomena, AB recognises that migration is a dynamic and continuous process of movement of people and resources. This movement, more often than not, is circular and involves negotiation of multi-local livelihoods. Hence, AB considers it important to address both the rural sources and urban destinations while designing migration interventions.

AB began its interventions in the early 2000s in Western Rajasthan, a dominant labour-exporting region in the state. The trend towards outmigration of labour had accelerated in this region since the

1990s. The studies carried out by the organisation showed that most migrant workers join the urban labour market as adolescents (Aajeevika Bureau 2020). Having dropped out of education and with no skills, they are forced to do low-paid manual labour in the urban centres as part of a reserve army of faceless, disposable labour. Closely following the struggles of these workers, AB identified three critical gaps that increase their vulnerability at the destinations – lack of local identity leading to invisibility in official statistics; absence of portability of social entitlements like food, health, transportation, and financial services; and exclusion from legal processes that preserve their substantive rights as workers. These issues are closely linked to a larger systemic void in creating mechanisms to identify temporary and circular migrants and integrating them in the larger vision of the country's development.

The multipronged institutional response crafted by AB to address the phenomenon of internal migration has been broadly fashioned as a model of social protection. The model has been informed by an understanding that migration experiences are critically shaped by the infirmities in the labour market, particularly the high degree of informalisation and casualisation, and the vulnerabilities they produce and reproduce continuously. That these workers are structurally deprived of accessing the institutional processes to secure their social and labour rights is a core concern that informs the response strategies developed by the organisation. AB's comprehensive set of solutions integrate information services, local identity building, skills training, legal aid services, financial inclusion, social safety, and family empowerment in the source and destination regions to reduce the hardships of vulnerable migrant groups and improve their income and well-being. A range of institutional structures have been designed to embed these solutions, such as worker facilitation centres (WFC), a local registration system and identity cards, legal clinics and a phone-based helpline, a financial service institution, community kitchens, and trade-based worker collectives. All these programs and institutions have come to constitute the foundations of a multifaceted approach to support migrant workers to enhance their agency and choices.

Worker facilitation centres

One of the earliest initiatives of Aajeevika Bureau was to create a local mechanism to help migrant workers with the necessary counselling support before departure to the destinations. The worker facilitation centres (WFCs) started off as nodal institutions, accessible to workers locally in the source areas and at the destinations. Over the years, these WFCs have evolved into multi-functional institutional facilities that coordinate a range of targeted services for migrant workers like legal aid, access to social security schemes, worker registration services under state and central schemes, and financial inclusion support. The photo ID cards issued by the centres helped many migrant workers access banking and other services, claim protection against harassment from police and civic authorities, and enrol in the voter registry in the 2000s when such instruments were not in vogue.

WFCs also act as advocacy centres and mediation spaces for workers and employers/contractors. Driven by the sore lessons from the migrant crisis in the pandemic times, many large corporate entities have come to recognise that the invisibility of undocumented workers and their exclusion from social security benefits and public services affect business profitability and reputation alike. They look up to WFCs as critical intermediaries, in which labour rights and welfare interface with corporate productivity and profits. The WFCs under the Social Compact initiative, run by Aajeevika Bureau in collaboration with industry partners in Pune and Ahmedabad, offer services like documentation for proof of identity, labour registration, and linking with government schemes, aside from legal support.

Legal education and mediation

The legal aid function of WFCs is coordinated by the Legal Education and Aid (LEAD) cells and mediated by workers' collectives promoted by AB in its working areas. LEAD Cells provide migrant workers needing assistance to resist labour rights violations with mediation and arbitration

support without getting entangled in costly and time-consuming litigation processes. These violations include wage theft (encompassing practices such as non-adherence to minimum wage regulation, non-payment, underpayment or delayed payment of wages, illegal deductions, or denial of overtime), exclusion from social security benefits, gender discrimination, or denial of compensation for workplace injuries and fatalities (Vignesh 2024).

In India, where a large majority of workers are informally employed, the provision of legal aid and advice is beset with serious challenges. The major impediment to accessing justice is the lack of documentary evidence to prove the existence of an employer–employee relationship. Studies carried out in certain clusters by AB have shown that most of the industrial workforce do not have a written contract or any other formal documentation, such as pay slips that testify to their worker status. This acts as a barrier to formal case registration. A small percentage of organised workers in the country, in contrast, enjoys the patronage of trade unions and has the advantage of formal employment contracts outlining the terms and conditions of their work, including wages, benefits, and working hours. This makes accessing legal protection under various labour laws less difficult for them.

The LEAD centres of AB, run by a team of lawyers and counsellors/outreach workers, mainly focus on assembling all fragments of evidence of labour rights violations to create a stronger and more persuasive base for arbitration and negotiation with employers and contractors. As a recent study shows, workers, in most cases, are ignorant about the liability of the principal employer. The legal aid team collects the necessary legal data on behalf of the complainant to make claims against the right individuals (Bharadkar and Kaushal 2025). In case the employer is unheeding and the claim is escalated to the law enforcement institutions, the legal team equips the workers with legal awareness and helps them in filing the necessary reports and gathering evidence.

The labour line

AB introduced phone-based legal mediation in August 2011. In 2015, this was institutionalised as the Rajasthan Labour Line (RLL) with Udaipur as the administrative headquarters. The Labour Department of the Government of Rajasthan came on board as a partner in this initiative, especially to provide support to workers covered under the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996 and the BOCW Welfare Board. The law regulates the employment, safety, and welfare of construction workers in the state, and the Board administers welfare programs for them. As of March 2024, a total of 17,737 cases were registered with RLL. An overwhelming 97 per cent of the cases pertain to wage theft. Within this category, non-payment of wages constitutes 92 per cent. About 40 per cent of the cumulative number of claims were made by construction workers, and 35 per cent by workers in various service occupations. Manufacturing workers registered 20 per cent of the cases. Overall, 63 per cent of cases were resolved through mediation. The total amount claimed in the 11,133 resolved cases amounted to INR 435.2 million.

Since 2021, the labour line initiative has been scaled up to the south, north, and west of India, with centres in Mumbai, Gurgaon, and Bangalore, covering nine states and 13 cities. Over the past five years, 90,400 cases have been registered with ILL, with a resolution rate of 60 per cent and recovery of INR 744 million. The average time gap between registration and resolution of cases in the ILL system is about six months. This is quite impressive given that the labour courts in India report an unreasonably protracted pendency rate. As of September 2020, 8,000 cases and 2,257 applications had been pending for more than five years in the 22 Central Government Industrial Tribunals alone (The Hindu, 21 September 2021). A total of 17,396 civil cases relating to labour were pending in the district courts of India as of March 2025 (National Judicial Data Grid).

The learnings

Within the broad framework of facilitation, different regional centres have adapted their approaches based on the locational specificities, characteristics of migrant workers, availability and nature of

financial and technical resources and profile of other stakeholders. Cases are typically sourced through associations of workers or the labour line. In some industrial hubs (like in Pune) supported by a multi-stakeholder platform called Social Compact, comprising corporates, worker organisations and experts, the principal employers take the responsibility to secure cooperation of labour contractors to resolve complaints.

The counsellors and case managers are trained to handle the cases with empathy and understanding. Typically, an ILL case manager deals with about 350 complaints in a day. They patiently and diligently work through each case after securing the confidence and cooperation of the complainant, who often approaches them with very limited information. From verifying the credentials of the contractor/ employer, to assessing the employment relation and work conditions, and ascertaining the nature of complaints, the counsellor spends considerable personal time. In the process, they educate the workers and document the case in detail. The commitment and proficiency of the cadre of community (union/collective) leaders has contributed remarkably to the overall efficiency and impact of the legal mediation activities. The workers are found to have become conscious of the exploitative practices and employers' accountability (Vignesh 2024). Such patient and time-consuming processes of interaction and documentation are possible only when the case origin and resolution mechanism are decentralised, grounded, and constantly monitored.

A recent evaluation of AB's legal aid services observed that cases involving small contractors are easier and faster to resolve than those against large contractors or establishments (Bharadkar and Kaushal 2025). The flexibility of the former with respect to processes of decision-making seems to be the reason for this. Also, the larger employers and contractors possess more structural power in a bargaining situation, making the workers drop their complaints in the middle for fear of retaliation or loss of future work opportunities.

The representation of women in the registered cases has been very low – only 5–9 per cent. The gender dimension of internal migration is an inadequately explored question, despite an observed increase in the feminisation of internal migration. The legal aid and worker facilitation functions will have to understand this paradox and craft more process-driven strategies to bring the doubly exploited migrant women workers within their ambit.

We have presented in this paper a few critical elements of the migrant labour support architecture established by Aajeevika Bureau to fill the gaps in the traditional structure. While the case study demonstrates the constructive role that NGOs can play to plug these gaps, the role of the state cannot be underestimated in translating the lofty labour legislation into real welfare benefits for workers through regulatory innovations. In the absence of clearly articulated regulatory and enforcement strategies that incentivise fair labour practices, internal migration will remain a low road phenomenon undertaken by the desperate and exploited by feudal capitalism. In other words, as Baxi (2020) puts it, if the impunity granted under the corporate-governance view of labour welfare continues to inform the judicial framework, the unorganised workforce will be systematically rendered "disorganized" by the forces of both the capital and state. The labour laws will continue to be just an archive of competing claims and difficult reconciliation.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Tara Nair:** Conceptualization, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Divya Varma:** Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

The authors are with Work Fair and Free Foundation, which has been incubated by Aajeevika Bureau.

References

- Aajeevika Bureau. 2020. *Creative Practices and Policies for Better Inclusion of Migrant Workers: The Experience of Aajeevika Bureau, Udaipur.*
- Agrawal, Sarthak, and Archana Agnihotri. 2022. "Food Security for Interstate Migrants an Empirical Analysis of the ONORC." *Economic and Political Weekly* 57 (51): 18–24.
- Baxi, Upendra. 2020. "Book Review of Industrial Relations and Labour Laws by S.C. Srivastava." *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 62 (3): 342–350.
- Bharadkar, Kavya, and Shubham Kaushal. 2025. *Possible Pathways to Wage Justice.* Aajeevika Bureau, Udaipur.
- Government of India. 2017. *Report of the Working Group on Migration, Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation.* New Delhi.
- International Labour Organisation (ILO). 2020. *Road Map for Developing a Policy Framework for the Inclusion of Internal Migrant Workers in India.* Geneva: ILO.
- National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector. 2007. *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector.* New Delhi: NCEUS.
- Niti Ayog. 2020. *Empowering Migrant Workers through Skill Development and Livelihood Generation: Best Practices from States and Districts.* New Delhi.
- Tumbe, C., and R. K. Jha. 2024. "One Nation, One Ration, Limited Interstate Traction: Migration and PDS Portability in India." *Urbanisation* 9 (1): 87–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/24557471241237098>
- Vignesh, M. 2024. *A Study on Labour Exploitation, Legal Aid and Empowerment of Workers in the Informal Economy.* Aajeevika Bureau, Udaipur.