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How SRIJAN uses immersions as part of its recruitment process

by RAJ KUMAR and HARIDARKEE

SRIJAN (Self-Reliant Initiative through Joint Action) arranges an overnight stay in a village for its prospective employees as a way of assessing their commitment to working in a rural environment. Once appointed, a two-week stay in a village during their orientation helps to deepen their understanding of rural life.

Introduction

SRIJAN (Self-Reliant Initiative through Joint Action) is an organisation of techno-managerial professionals, which includes social workers, agricultural engineers, computer engineers, management graduates, and agriculture graduates. SRIJAN aims to promote strong, self-reliant people's organisations and enterprises. It aims to enhance people's access to natural resources and markets as well as their capacity to manage them in a sustainable manner. SRIJAN collaborates with Government, the private sector, and other civil society organisations as a strategy to promote the interests and rights of scheduled castes and tribes, and poor women and men, and create space for their organisations in government planning and implementation.¹ The ultimate impact we wish to see is a sustained increase in the incomes

of the rural poor.

Although registered in 2000, SRIJAN has been operational since April 1997. It has projects in several sectors, such as water, rural poverty reduction, and biomass energy. SRIJAN has recently been expanding its presence in the locations where it currently works, as well as its theme-based programmes in water resource management and market-led livelihood businesses. This means that we need more staff to work with us. We look for people who can toil hard in the tough terrain of rural India, engage themselves with the poorest, understand their needs, and think of innovative solutions. We need people who can apply their technical skills of mobilisation, engineering, and management to work out solutions to rural problems. Our staff also need an intrinsic drive to work with the rural poor – and this often comes at the cost of living a better (comparatively luxurious for them) life.

We follow a well-defined procedure for recruitment, which includes several steps. First of all, an ad hoc team of SRIJAN staff members contact and arrange visits to some of the most renowned institutes and universities connected to

¹ Scheduled Castes (*Dalits*) and Scheduled Tribes (*Adivasis*) are Indian communities accorded a special constitutional status because of their social and economic conditions.

**Capacity building
for trainees.**

Photo: SRIJAN

SRIJAN sectors of intervention. Students are briefed on the organisation (its objectives and activities). Then, those interested in applying undergo specific tests and group exercises. A final interview follows and the pre-selected candidates are invited to a field visit of 1 to 2 days, which includes an overnight stay in a village.

For SRIJAN, this is a chance to consider candidates' predisposition and approach to working in a rural environment. For urban youngsters, their idea of rural life is often limited to what they know through Hindi movies. Even candidates with a rural background may discover that changes have occurred since they left their villages to study, so the stay in the village is a valuable part of the selection process.

This experience – intended to orient people on their career choice – leads to further selection. This is either because candidates themselves voluntarily withdraw or because SRIJAN's local field team recommend that they do so. It is a reality check for all.

The remaining candidates undergo an induction-cum-orientation programme. During this time, they get more acquainted with SRIJAN's philosophy and its approach and interventions by interacting with senior professionals. They also experience some of the main development issues.

Field exposure visits

As part of the induction-orientation programme, newcomers are assigned to different field teams and leave for a second village stay of 15 days. This is intended to deepen their understanding of rural dimensions – such as people, culture, social structures, power dynamics – as well as SRIJAN interventions. Each junior member of staff is supported by a mentor/field guide throughout the field stay.

Usually, a task is assigned which varies depending on the local context. An example is finding out the various government institutions working in a given village and the villagers' level of satisfaction with them. For this purpose, too, junior professionals are encouraged to maintain a daily field diary to record their thoughts and observations at the end of the day.

The new staff stay with families which the local team have identified in advance. Families are selected from the poorest sections of the community, usually scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The guests are expected to contribute to the costs of their stay and, since villagers normally do not accept cash, they usually purchase vegetables and other important items. We explain to the host family that the stay is meant to enhance the professional's understanding of their village. We explain that the person is visiting to find out more about them

– and this is possible only by staying with them.

What the host families feel about the village stay really depends on SRIJAN's interventions there, and the level of interaction that SRIJAN staff have with the villagers. Where SRIJAN has been working in an area for some time, people have a better understanding of the reason for the visit. In new villages, even though we tell them the same thing, at times we are unable to prevent a certain amount of expectation by the villagers that the guest will recommend some benefits for the poor. Over the period of the visit, though, we find that such expectations are reduced.

Mentors introduce the guests to their respective host families. Afterwards, it is up to each guest to establish rapport with the host family and decide about his/her schedule (who to meet and what places to visit). This is so that the junior professionals are not dependent on their facilitator/mentor for answering any questions. What is most important for us in SRIJAN is not how much newcomers learn, but rather how they approach rural life and rural people. Nonetheless, mentors pay frequent visits to them to discuss issues and problems faced.

Sharing experiences

At the end of the 15 days, the junior professionals come back to the field office and present their experiences to the rest of the team. They are also encouraged to report on their assignment and field observations, which are later shared with all staff members by email. This last document is not for evaluation purposes; it is rather meant to understand new junior professionals' perspectives, their areas of professional interest, and their approach to field issues.

Neither the stay nor the report is intended to be research contributing to SRIJAN's work. Primarily, the intended benefit is to enhance that person's understanding of the village and the rural context. However, when the junior executive goes to stay in a new village where SRIJAN is not already working, we do make use of the data and information gathered. Mostly, this is not structured research. Instead, the junior executives are encouraged to live the experience, such as working in the fields with the villagers. There are no special meetings with the villagers and so the villagers do not have to spend extra time talking to the professional.

Generally, we have observed that this field exposure generates a lot of excitement amongst our new recruits, and in many cases sets their future career direction. However, this learning process is not without difficulties and challenges. Young professionals, especially those who have never lived in villages before, may become very apprehensive when

informed about the field stay (see Haridarkee's account later in this article). The language barrier, for example, may constitute a problem for them, at least initially. But once they realise that there are other ways to communicate, they start relaxing and enjoy the immersion experience fully.

Challenges ahead

Currently, while the recruitment and selection process is well documented and systematic, the immersion experiences (initial field visits, orientation/induction, and the subsequent field stays) are not. Very often, field exposures are arranged according to the need of the moment once the recruitment and selection process is over.

In light of this, SRIJAN plans to critically review the entire system, streamlining the immersion components. As part of this review, SRIJAN will extend the duration of the initial village stay to 3 days (as Haridarkee and others have suggested – see below) and introduce a feedback system to improve the entire process.

At SRIJAN, we believe that these forms of exposure and learning are very effective. Therefore, we intend to institutionalise it and document as the Immersion Programme in SRIJAN.

Haridarkee reflects on his field exposure visit with SRIJAN

When SRIJAN came to OUAT (College of Agriculture) during a recruitment drive, I was among the people shortlisted. We were later informed about a field exposure in Madhya Pradesh (MP). I was not sure I wanted to take part. But I thought about it for 3 days and finally decided to go.

When I travelled to Madhya Pradesh, I still had a lot of doubts and questions about the village, its environment, and whether there would be any correlation between my educational knowledge and the type of activities planned for that village. I was a little bit tense as I would get no answers until I reached the designated location.

Despite some difficulties in locating the SRIJAN office in Jaisinagar (MP), I finally reached it and met with some of the team members who briefed us on what to do in the village. They told us that we had to conduct a study, document it, and share it with the team afterwards.

Then I discovered that I had to go to Kharmou village and stay there overnight. When I heard this, I became nervous, thinking about the night stay. I had never had such an experience before, so I was rather hesitant. Still, I went to Kharmou with Ravi (a SRIJAN staff member). Several times on the way, I thought about getting down from the bike and going back, as I also didn't know the language spoken in

**Trainees
interacting with
the community.**

Photo: SRIJAN

that area (Bundelkhandi). Moreover, although I had been told that the road was one of the best, the journey turned out to be very painful, at least for me.

After 45 minutes, we reached Kharmou and met with Prem Bheru's family. When Ravi left to go back to the office, I felt as if I was in an unknown world where nobody knew me and vice versa. As I said, I could not understand their language. Therefore, for one hour, I kept silent, just looking here and there. Later, Prem, (the eldest son of the family and the only Hindi speaker) joined us. He told me not to worry because he would help me throughout the whole process. Only then did I begin to feel a bit more relaxed and could start answering villagers' questions about me and my village.

Next, I visited the village with Prem. We went to the dairy and met with two members of the self-help group. I was unable to understand them properly, but I still felt good talking to them. Within a few hours, I was very much familiar with all villagers and also asked some questions about their village and traditions. This was a very interesting experience and helped me to review my previous opinion about the village and its inhabitants.

Afterwards, Prem and I went back home and had dinner together. I noticed that some of the family members were laughing at me, so I asked why, and discovered that my

different way of talking and behaving was funny to them. After dinner, we listened to some excellent music.

On the next day, I encouraged the villagers to draw their village map.² Their participation in this exercise was very lively. It is exactly because of their level of interest and their willingness to take part that I decided to join this sector.

After this induction programme, I changed in my attitude towards villagers and rural realities. Because of this, I now really think such kinds of experiences are very much necessary, especially before joining the development sector.

Some modifications to the programme could actually make it more effective in my opinion:

- The exposure should last for a minimum of 2 to 3 days. In one day it is very difficult to get a clear picture of the village.
- The field stay should be followed by a discussion with some senior staff about the village, the type of work proposed, and any potential constraints. This would make it easier for a new recruit to decide whether or not to join the organisation and prepare them for a long-term commitment.

² While the assignment is usually to identify poor families, the methodology used is not structured and is left to the participant.

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