COVID-19 OUTBREAK: MIGRANTS, EFFECTS ON ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented shock to the economy as well as environment. The economy was already in a bad state before Covid-19 struck. With the prolonged lockdown, economic downturn and associated disruption of demand and supply chains, the economy is likely to face a period of slowdown. It is uncertain where and when new cases will emerge. New cases are being reported day by day. In India UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa and Assam have registered a sharper rise in corona virus cases than the rest of the country after the returns of migrants to their own states (Hindustan Times). The migrants started coming back to Assam after being wrecked in parts of the country with jobless. It was lack of opportunities that drove them to work in other parts of the country. The number of daily positive cases has seen a huge spike, when the migrants started returning to their home state. This situation will considerably affect the society, economy and environmental aspects. This large scale of people will contribute to the population growth. This growth in population will have serious repercussion in the employment scenario of the state. Increased population in Assam will create pressure upon available stock of food and will create food shortage problem. Rapid growth of population is largely responsible for the perpetuation of vicious circle of poverty in underdeveloped regions. This entire pushed them in ecologically sensitive areas and cutting of forests for cultivation and living. Which has been an important factor responsible deforestation and leading to heavy impact of climate change like loss in bio-diversity, atmospheric carbon emission etc. in future. Most of them are coming back to Assam without maintaining social distancing. And they are getting infected during the travel. To prevent the community spread and for this effective quarantine policy need to implement. This will impose more burdens on the government to tackle those problems. Thus an attempt has been made in this paper to analyse the economic and environmental issues in Assam after the return of migrants. This study is based on secondary data and descriptive in nature. The required data are collected from newspapers, journals etc.

Key words: covid-19, migrants, economy, environment, Assam.

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1. INTRODUCTION

An outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS CoV2) which was later named as COVID-19 by World Health Organization (WHO) emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019. Since its outbreak, the disease has spread to mostly all over the world and was declared as pandemic on 11th March 2020 by WHO. To stop all kinds of human activities to certain avoidable extent, many countries declared lockdown to some extent or complete to prevent the transmission of the virus. The corona virus has inflicted destruction across the globe for lives and livelihoods. With the prolonged lockdown, economic downturn and associated disruption of demand and supply chains, the economy is likely to face a period of slowdown. The International Monetary Fund already declared that the world is into a recession. The full economic impact of the crisis is still difficult to predict but preliminary estimates are US\$2 trillion. The Indian population mainly comprise of daily wage earners. In India, there would serve consequence on 81 per cent people employed in the informal sector (ILO, 2018). Almost 90 per cent of the workers in the informal sector have survived with no minimum wage or any kind of social security (Sharma, 2020). According to ILO statistics, 92% of jobs are informal in the sense that they exclude any form of protection, contract and guarantee of continuity (ILO 2016) in India. Even after the unorganised worker's social security act (2008), only 5-6% got enrols for social security. According to Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) of 2017-18, 71.1% had no job contract, 54.2% are not eligible for paid leave and 49.6% has no social security (Mohanty, 2019). India is also characterized by the crucial role of internal migration and circulation (Bremar 2007; Picherit 2018). Along with rural to nearby urban areas, internal migration includes long-distance, inter-state migration, with massive flows from the poorest states in north-eastern India to the most employment-intensive states located in the west and south. Lockdown force a massive influx of workers to return home, even though transport infrastructure had already been drastically reduced. The migrants started coming back to Assam after being wrecked in parts of the country with jobless. Lockdown means nothing, where people, not just the poorest, depend on mobility and sociability to make a living. Arranging basic necessity making them earn their livelihood. The impact of the pandemic on human lives is severe, but the effects on the economy and on environment are also a concern.

2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

In this pandemic situation people are coming back from the places where they went in search of livelihood to their respective home states. According to a report of Hindustan Times in India UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa and Assam have registered a sharper rise in corona virus cases than the rest of the country after the returns of migrants to their own states. A lot of people from Assam have been living in other states. Most of them are casual workers who lose their jobs in this lockdown situation and coming back to Assam. This will have both economic and environmental impacts in Assam. To prevent the unfavourable situation due to this return of migrants, it is necessary to discuss about the impacts and preventive measures.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the economic impacts of covid-19 in Assam due to returns of migrants
2. To study the environmental impacts of covid-19 in Assam due to returns of migrants.

4. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This research paper is descriptive in nature, based on secondary source of data. The data for the study was collected from different sources like, government websites, different published research papers, newspapers etc.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As the exact data for returned migrants are not available anywhere, so to understand the situation and have a rough figure of the migrants, a table has been shown in the following which reveal the reasons for migration from Assam.

Table 1 Reasons for Migration as per 2011 census report

Reasons	Persons
Work and Employment	6,45,868
Business	2,39,835
Education	1,14,923
Marriage	51,64,592
Moved after Birth	3,13,148
Moved with household	17,10,024
Other	19,66,062

Source: office of the Registrar General and Census Commission India

From the above table it is seen that there are several reasons for migration from Assam to other states. Marriage moved with household and other reasons are the leading. People migrate for work and employment purposes along with business purposes consists a considerable number. People migrate from Assam to other states in search of improved livelihood. Pull factors of better job opportunities in urban areas, prospects of higher wages and push factors of Assam like less job opportunities, poverty etc are the main reasons of migration. The casual workers among those migrants lose their job during this lockdown situation and have to return back to their respective homes. Not only the casual labourers but also their families and students, who were studying outside of Assam, are coming back. This will have a great impact on economy of Assam.

5.1. Economic Impacts

The economic consequence of the returns of migration varies widely. Mainly it will increase the population of Assam and government of Assam have to spend a lot quarantine centres, medical facilities, social securities.

Cost in Medical Stuffs: In this pandemic situation medical stuffs are the frontline workers. They are working continuously and serving people selflessly. Since corona virus spread human to human, people coming from outside have to quarantine first and have to does their swab test. If they results positive in their test they need to be under medical observation till recovery. Government of Assam is building separate covid hospitals, research centres and have to appoint new medical stuffs. This whole thing will cost a lot and government have to spend a big amount in this.

Unemployment: Despite all efforts towards development, it has not been possible to provide employment to all job seekers before the covid-19 pandemic lock down situation. Hence, the economy of Assam will face more unemployment. Most of the returned migrants are casual labourers or other family members who does not pose any higher educational qualification. Or some of them are students, who are not able to complete their courses as well.

Food Problem: Increased population in Assam will create pressure upon available stock of food and will create food shortage problem. Inadequate supply of food leads to undernourishment of the people which lowers their productivity. It further reduces the production capacity of the workers. As the returned migrants are not only from working age group, despite all efforts for raising agricultural production, it will not be sufficient to feed the excess population. It is sad but people try to extract and store more than they need. This will also create food shortage and will increase the general price level too. This will harm the economy more.

Social Security Measures: Rapid growth of population is largely responsible for the perpetuation of vicious circle of poverty in underdeveloped state. On account of sudden increase in population state need to spend a major part of its GDP on social security measures like food, medical facilities and other necessary goods etc. Thus savings and rate of capital formation will decline more than before.

5.2. Environmental Impacts

The current pandemic greatly contributed to improving the air quality, especially in the countries and areas which are strictly observing the lockdown and quarantine measures. As for several respiratory diseases low-quality air is one of the main factors responsible and diseases as well. The strict quarantine measures have reduced the number of visitors in the national parks and urban areas; thus, minimizing the human intervention in wildlife. Besides, a massive reduction in tourism also led to improved water quality due to reduced sewage discharge into the canals and dropped other human activities like shipping etc. in the local and global levels, which in turn has positively impacted the aquatic life and marine ecosystem. Due to restrictions on transportation and industrial activities the COVID-19 pandemic has also greatly minimized the noise pollution.

Due to shortage of food and as wild food presents an essential part of the food basket, especially in poor societies, the trend of extracting the forest resources more than before will lead to loss in biodiversity. Increased population in Assam will create pressure upon available stock of food and will create food shortage problem. Rapid growth of population is largely responsible for the perpetuation of vicious circle of poverty in underdeveloped regions. This entire pushed them in ecologically sensitive areas and cutting of forests for cultivation and living. Which has been an important factor responsible deforestation and leading to heavy impact of climate change like loss in bio-diversity, atmospheric carbon emission etc. in future

6. POLICY RECOMENDATION

The central and states government in India under the special economic package, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna (PMGKY) scheme etc. tried to take care of the economy and the poorest among the poor but effective implementation of this scheme poses a big challenge (Jha 2020). The government has recently announced Rs. 20 lakh crores package to revive the economy, but the actual effect of the plan lies in the effective implementation of the plan. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a mega 20 lakh crore rupees package for the Indian economy on 12th May 2020 which is 10 per cent of total GDP. The current package is inclusive of the past package (PMGKY, RBI liquidity measures, interest cuts) which was around 4 percent of GDP. The major focus of the package is land, labour, liquidity and laws which will cater needs of cottage industries, MSMEs, labourers and middle class. Also the Government of Assam has decided to convert also arranged the private hospitals to offer cashless treatment to all AAA and PMJAY beneficiaries for various ailment. In the interest of providing medical relief and financial assistance to the poor and needy people of the state and

the view of the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and establish “Assam Arogya Nidhi Trust” in place of existing “Assam Arogya Nidhi Scheme” to provide financial and health care services to all eligible persons suffering from various serious diseases including COVID-19.

6.1. Some of the Policy Measures should taken to Tackle the Problems

- Look at the price- government have to look at the prices imposed on commodities. Sometimes sellers set the prices at a very higher by taking advantages from the lockdown. The poor will not able to get the commodities. This will be severe attack on poor returned migrants and poor people of the states as well.
- PDS- Government should expand the Public Distribution System (PDS), by supporting the main food calorie intakes. so that people get more benefits than before. Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS), which provides a free meal to every kid enrolled in schools, is currently stopped.
- Rural economy- The return migration will create excess pressure on the agriculture and rural economy which will result in a significant number of people to fall into abject poverty. Agricultural reforms such as competitive credits, modern farm inputs and better producer price to be taken to make agriculture profitable. cash incentive and wage subsidy should be given to save migrant labourer and marginal farmers save them from poverty and starvation. It is not possible to absorb the whole into agri sector so that returned migrants can be engaged in the jobs in MGNREGA.
- Informal workers are always demanded in manufacturing industries. Government should take initiative to bring them back to their jobs.
- Skill mapping- government should work on mapping the skill poses by those returned migrants. So that they may be engaged in their localities.
- MSME- In Assam small units of production can be done. By understanding the situation of this pandemic time. Food processing, delivery and other small enterprises can be organised with the concern of government assistance. So that the returned migrants could involve in there.

7. CONCLUSION

To prevent the bad impacts on environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic by those returned migrants who are coming back to their home, they should be given social securities as well alternatives for their livelihood. Localization of industries and employment are the need of the hour. The effective demand of the people needs to be increase. This will boost the economy. Apart from providing credits, there is also a need to work on institutional factors such as law and order, corruption etc. for effective implementation of the policies. If the economy of the Assam stabilized then only the environment will be stable. If not then people do search options in extracting of environmental resources ultimately.

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