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Assessing the Consequences of the COVID-19 Lockdown for Migrant Labourers in Assam

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Abstract

The nationwide lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic has led to millions of migrant workers across the country reversing their migration involuntarily. During the pandemic, the halt in economic activity resulted in massive unemployment. As the distribution of migrants shifted, it created an opportunity to study the pandemic's impact on them. The main objective of this paper is to examine the socio-economic profile of migrants, the post-pandemic effects on them at their destinations, and the factors influencing their decisions to return after the pandemic. The study is based on primary data collected through a snowball sampling method conducted from July to December 2022

among 322 returned migrant workers in the Kokrajhar district of Assam. The findings indicate that the majority of migrants are male, under the age of 35, married, and possess very low or no educational qualifications, with a significant portion belonging to the Muslim community. Most of these migrants previously worked in construction or as daily laborers. The analysis reveals that migrants who were unemployed during the pandemic are more likely to return to their places of origin. Additionally, the number of working days and the status of remittances are significantly related to job satisfaction among migrants.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Return Migration, Internal Migration, Employment, Assam

1. Introduction

Migration is a universal phenomenon that has occurred for both animals and humans since ancient times. In the past, humans and animals migrated in search of food and better living conditions. In modern times, migration often involves people moving to improve their standard of living, driven by factors such as geography, politics, and the economy. Unequal economic development across regions creates push and pull factors that motivate individuals to relocate from one area to another. The pursuit of better employment opportunities, a higher quality of life, and future prospects are significant reasons that compel people to migrate to destinations that offer these advantages (Bhagat *et al.*, 2020) ^[3]. The World Migration Report 2010 projected that economic disparities, climate change, shifts in policies, and technological advancements would increase the number of global migrants from 214 million in 2010 to 405 million by 2050. Currently, there are approximately 164 million migrant workers worldwide, comprising 4.7% of the global workforce (ILO, 2020). Among these international migrants, 17.5% are from India (Global Migration Report 2020). In a developing country like India, agriculture supports 70% of livelihoods in rural areas (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2022). This sector primarily relies on monsoon rains, and factors such as limited arable land and a growing population lead to seasonal unemployment, contributing to increased rural out-migration (Heberfeld *et al.*, 1999) ^[1]. Development is uneven across the Indian subcontinent, resulting in significant income disparities and differences in living standards. The rural-urban divide in income, employment, and other economic factors heavily influences migration patterns. The Indian constitution permits citizens to move freely within the country without restrictions (Bhagat, 2008) ^[2]. Consequently, the rate of internal migration has risen over time, with rural-to-urban and interstate migration being prominent trends. In 1991, there were 225.8 million internal migrations in India, accounting for 11.81% of the population. By 2011, this number increased to 449.9 million, comprising 12.06% (Census of India, 1991, 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in India, which began in January 2020, led to a health emergency, prompting the Government of India to announce a nationwide lockdown on March 25, 2020. This lockdown significantly impacted the country's population, paralyzing the economy and affecting all sectors. It resulted in a decline in aggregate demand across the

nation (Guha, Islam, & Hussain, 2021) ^[10]. Employment in unorganised sectors, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, as well as among small businesses and startups, suffered greatly due to the lockdown. By May 2020, two-thirds of workers had lost their jobs, and those who retained their positions experienced a decrease in wages. Consequently, there was a substantial reverse migration as individuals returned to their rural homes from urban areas (Kesar *et al.*, 2021) ^[12]. The pandemic drew attention to the often-invisible migrant labor force, comprising both men and women engaged in various organised and unorganised sectors within urban areas, many of whom maintained families in rural locations. As they lost their jobs and could no longer survive in cities, mass reverse migration occurred throughout India, shifting populations from urban back to rural settings (Dandekar & Ghai, 2020) ^[5].

The North-Eastern states of India present unique geographical challenges compared to the rest of the country, primarily due to their mountainous terrain and agrarian focus. Economic development in these states differs significantly from that in other regions of India. Because most of the population resides in rural areas and the region lacks sufficient employment opportunities, the workforce participation rate is lower than the national average. As a result, economic development and job creation in the Northeast have been lagging (Das, 2018) ^[6]. In search of better employment prospects, a significant number of migrants have left Assam and other parts of the Northeast for larger cities in Kerala, Chennai, and Bangalore (Deori, 2016; Arya, 2018; Marchang, 2018; Douminthang & Xavier, 2020) ^[7, 1, 16, 8]. Many of these migrants possess lower educational qualifications, leading them to seek work primarily in the unorganized and informal sectors. Unfortunately, those employed in these sectors are among the most vulnerable. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing nationwide lockdown hit migrants in the informal sectors particularly hard. Many faced sudden income cuts or were paid only half of their usual wages, making it extremely difficult to sustain themselves in these cities. With no other options available, many migrants were forced to return to their home regions, often facing unemployment upon their return (Losume & Bhagat, 2020) ^[15]. After this reverse migration, many individuals found that they had no viable employment opportunities in agriculture back in their native places. A study conducted in Assam in 2021 indicated that 30% of unmarried male migrants with minimal education and limited or no cultivable land chose to return to their previous destinations, as they had no other means to support themselves and their families (Borah, 2022) ^[4].

The scenarios of migration and the status of migrants changed significantly before and after the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, anyone could move freely to different locations without restrictions. However, after the pandemic, relocating within the country became more complicated. Individuals were required to present additional documentation, such as vaccination certificates and travel history. Finding accommodation in other states also posed challenges. The nationwide lockdown altered people's perceptions of health and hygiene, which, in turn, had a substantial impact on lower-income groups, as the cost of living increased compared to pre-pandemic times. Furthermore, many regions imposed restrictions on the number of migrants to manage the pandemic according to government regulations

(Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021). The status of migrants changed significantly after the pandemic, with many choosing to seek opportunities closer to home rather than moving to distant cities (Siddiqui, 2022) ^[18]. As a result, the rate of migration declined during the post-pandemic period, both domestically and internationally.

This paper examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants working in various sectors in the Kokrajhar district of Assam. Like other parts of the country, complete and strict lockdowns were imposed across the state by the end of March 2020 due to government regulations. As a result, many small businesses, construction projects, and both public and private organizations were shut down. Some startups and small businesses were forced to reduce their workforce due to a lack of operations and the inability to pay employees. Migrants, who worked in different rural and urban areas, had no other option but to return to their native villages, leading to a significant reverse migration (Guha, Islam, & Hussain, 2020) ^[9]. The effects of this reverse migration due to the COVID-19 pandemic were particularly evident among migrant workers in the Kokrajhar district of Assam, India.

2. Data and Methodology

The study is based on primary data collected through structured questionnaires administered during in-depth interviews using the snowball sampling method. These interviews were conducted in various parts of Kokrajhar district in Assam. Between July 2022 and December 2022, a total of 322 migrant workers who had relocated to the district were interviewed. The participants included migrants working in both organized and unorganized sectors, and the study covered both rural and urban areas of the district. Secondary data was obtained from the Census of India.

3. Study Area

Kokrajhar district is located on the north bank of the Brahmaputra River. It is bordered to the north by Bhutan, to the west by West Bengal, to the south by Dhubri district, and to the east by Chirang district. The district covers an area of 3,169.22 square kilometers. According to the 2011 Census, the total population of the district is 886,999, which constitutes 0.7% of India's population and 2.84% of Assam's population. Out of the total population, there are 344,466 migrants, including 340,936 internal migrants and 3,441 immigrants, making up 98.9% and 0.99% of the total migrants in the state, respectively. The population density is 269 persons per square kilometer, and the decadal growth rate of the population has been 5.21% over the last decade. The overall literacy rate in Kokrajhar district is 66.62%, and the sex ratio is 959 females for every 1,000 males. Additionally, the workforce participation rate in the district is approximately 37%.

4. Results and Discussions

According to the 2011 census, internal migrants in Kokrajhar primarily come from West Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand, making up 71.2%, 12.6%, and 3.6% of the migrant population, respectively. Among these internal migrants, 36.9% are male and 63.1% are female. Most migrants prefer rural areas as their destination, with 90.1% choosing rural settings compared to just 9.9% opting for urban locations. Additionally, immigrants in the region

consist largely of individuals from Bangladesh (68%), followed by 4% from Pakistan and 2% from Nepal.

Table 1 shows the socio-economic profile of the migrants. The majority of the migrants are male (63.3%). Out of these nearly half (50.3%) are below the age of 35 and 57% in between 36 to 45 age group. An inverse relationship between the level of education and the number of migrants is observed (i.e. as the level of education increases the number of migrants decreases and vice-versa). 74.8 % of the migrants are married and 15.5 % are unmarried. Three-fourths of the migrants (75.8%) belong to the general cast, one-tenth belongs to the scheduled caste (10.2%) and only 5.3% and 7.8% belong to scheduled tribe and other backward classes respectively. The majority of the migrants are Muslim (50.3%) followed by Hindu (44.1%). Nearly half (i.e. 48.8%) have small family size. Migrant workers are employed across various daily wage work (34.8%), construction works (46.9%) and some employed in government or private sectors (17.1%). Poverty (50.3%) is the main reason for migration followed by lower pay (30.7%) and unemployment (15.5%). More than half of the migrants are found to be satisfied with the job they are employed (58.7%) in and the wage they receive (56.2%) and 31.4% of the migrants were not satisfied with the wage they receive in the district.

Table 1: Description of socio-economic conditions of migrants

Variables	n	%
Sex		
Male	204	63.4
Female	118	36.6
Age		
<35	162	50.3
36-45	153	47.5
>45	7	2.2
Education Level		
Illiterate	88	27.3
primary level	54	16.8
Middle School	50	15.5
High School	47	14.6
Certificate and Diploma	35	10.9
Graduate and above	48	14.9
Marital Status		
Married	241	15.5
Unmarried	50	74.8
Others	31	9.6
Religion		
Hindu	142	44.1
Muslim	162	50.3
Christian	12	3.7
Others	6	1.9
Cast		
General	244	75.8
ST	17	5.3
SC	33	10.2
OBC	25	7.8
Others	3	0.9
Family Size		
Small	106	32.9
Medium	157	48.8
Large	55	17.1
Others	4	1.2
Occupational Status		
Daily wage worker	112	34.8
Construction works	151	46.9
Government and Private Sector	55	17.1
Others	4	1.2

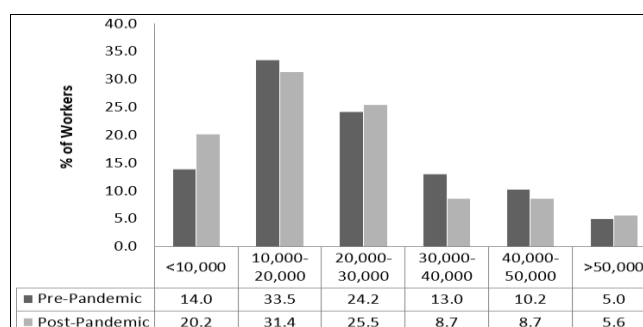
Reason for migration		
Unemployment	50	19.3
Poverty	162	32.6
Lower pay	99	32.6
Others	11	15.5
Job satisfaction		
Satisfied	189	15.5
Not Satisfied	39	50.3
Others	94	30.7
Wage Satisfaction		
Satisfied	181	56.2
Not Satisfied	10	56.5
Others	40	43.5

Source: Primary survey July- December, 2022

The scenario and livelihood of the migrants has changed after the pandemic. The labour market has deteriorated with massive unemployment, a decline in average income, and a shutdown of businesses causing involuntary reverse migration. Migration becomes a survival strategy for households without physical assets. (Borah, 2022) [4]. Half a million interstate migrants returned to their place of origin during the lockdown (Losume & Bhagat, 2020) [15].

During the pandemic, more than two-thirds (68.6%) of migrants lost their jobs as a result 92.6% of the migrants returned to their place of origin because all economic activities were held to a standstill (see Table 2). The job loss during the pandemic has affected the income of the migrants. After the pandemic, the proportion of migrants with income below rupees ten thousand per month has increased from 14% to 20.2%. The percentage of migrants in the lower income categories has also increased after the pandemic (Figure 1). It is revealed that migrants were willing to work at any possible wage after the pandemic as unemployment and lack of income haunted the majority (68.8%) of the migrant households during the pandemic.

In the absence of a source of income, 62.8% of the migrants returned voluntarily and 37.2 % migrated involuntarily as the pandemic ended. As construction works and businesses gear up after the pandemic, employment opportunities open up and nearly three-fourths of the migrants could get employment without any delay. This is because more than three-fourths of the migrants are engaged in construction and daily wage jobs, which require very little or no education and training. And almost 77% of migrants earn an income of less than thirty thousand per month. Still, around one-third of the unemployed migrants could not find employment easily. Although the majority of the migrants were earning lower incomes, nearly three-fourths of the migrants could send their remittances back home.



Source: Primary Survey, July-December 2022

Fig 1: Income of the migrants pre and post-pandemic in Kokrajahar, Assam

Table 2: Description of the impact of the pandemic on migrants

Variables	n	%
Pre-pandemic status of work		
Worked in the district	217	67.4
Worked elsewhere in the state	36	11.2
Worked outside the state	69	21.4
Reverse migration during pandemic		
Returned	298	92.5
Did not return	24	7.5
Status of work during the pandemic		
Unemployed	221	68.6
Employed	53	16.5
Half-scaled	48	14.9
Post-pandemic migration	N=298	
Voluntary	187	62.8
Involuntary	111	37.2
Post-pandemic employment opportunities	N=221	
Found Job Easily	162	73.3
Was not easy finding a job	59	26.7
Status of remittance		
Remittance not sent	82	25.4
Remittance sent	240	74.5
No. of workdays		
5 days	12	3.7
6 days	78	24.2
7 days	232	72.0

Source: Primary Survey July- December, 2022

4.1 Determinants of migration

Based on the survey a basic logistic regression model has been fitted and the results in the form of odd ratio and significance level are shown in Table 3. Demographic and socio-economic variables such as sex, age, educational level, marital status, religion, caste, family size and occupational status do not appear to have a significant impact on the decision for return migration, post-pandemic migration and post-pandemic status of employment. Reverse migration during the pandemic had a significant impact on migrants' status of work during the pandemic. Migrants unemployed during the pandemic are 4.12 times more likely to migrate after the pandemic. And migrants' decision to return has a significant impact on job satisfaction, wage satisfaction, post-pandemic status of employment, status of remittance and number of working days. Job and wage satisfaction are positively associated with the status of remittance after the pandemic.

Table 3: Determinants of return migration

Variables	β	t	Sig.
Sex	-0.145	0.865	0.885
Age	0.005	0.892	0.892
Education level	-0.571	0.623*	0.377
Marital status	-0.347	0.707	0.424
Religion	0.028	1.028	0.978
Caste	0.256	1.291	0.623
Family size	0.162	1.177*	0.682
Occupational status	-0.234	0.723	0.741
Push factors of migration	1.181	3.268*	0.007
Job satisfaction	0.521	0.600	0.500
Wage satisfaction	0.061	0.942	0.895
Pre-pandemic status of work	1.498	0.48	0.688
Reverse migration during pandemic	1.678	6.451**	0.000
Status of work during the pandemic	1.141	4.129**	0.001
Post-pandemic migration	1.926	2.126*	0.047
Post-pandemic employment opportunities	-3.539	-1.151	0.264
status of remittance	1.891	2.138*	0.046
No. of working days	0.925	2.523*	0.018

Constant	-2.735	0.089	0.059
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Source: Calculation based on the author's survey conducted from July to December 2022

*Significant at 5% level

** Significant at 1% level

5. Conclusions

An increase in reverse migration trends indicates an economic downturn, which adversely affects migrants working in unorganized sectors. During the pandemic, reverse migration was largely involuntary, as many migrants faced unemployment and financial hardships. This paper aims to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socioeconomic profiles of these migrants, the factors leading to their return migration, and the post-pandemic consequences. The study is based on a survey conducted in the Kokrajhar district of Assam. The majority of the migrants are male, young, unmarried, and have little or no education, with 50% belonging to the Muslim community. Poverty is the primary reason for their migration. Most migrants work in construction or various daily wage jobs. While they express satisfaction with their jobs, many are dissatisfied with the wages they receive. The reverse migration during the lockdown was primarily due to unemployment. However, after the pandemic, most migrants returned to their previous work in the district. Those who were unemployed during the pandemic actively sought employment once it subsided. Given their lack of proper education and training, many migrants find themselves only able to work in construction or daily wage jobs. In desperate situations, they are willing to accept any wage offered. The study analyzed various factors related to the post-pandemic conditions of migrants, including their employment status during the pandemic, post-pandemic migration rates, remittance status, and the number of working days. The findings of the regression analysis reveal that post-pandemic employment status, remittance status, and the number of working days significantly impact the job satisfaction of migrants. Additionally, it was observed that the circumstances faced by migrants during the pandemic significantly influenced their decision to migrate again after the pandemic.

Migrant workers are the backbone of every growing economy. Consequently, the pandemic should serve as a turning point for policymakers to implement measures that protect migrant workers during economic downturns. Skill training and job protection, such as MGNREGA job cards, should also be made available to migrants, as working in unorganized sectors often comes with uncertainty.

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