

# **Covid 19 And Infelicity Of Migrant Worker In Assam—A Sociological Introspection.**

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## **I. Introduction.**

COVID-19, perhaps the greatest havoc mankind have ever witnessed in the 21 century across the globe. The virus had its genesis in the Wuhan city of China in the month of December, 2019. The virus was a menace for human society for its unknown nature and rapid transmission mechanism. In its inception, the infectious disease was new to the world with no curative aspects available until the approval of 2G drugs was discovered by the DRDO, in India on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2021 (<http://www.mprnc.org>). The disease had rendered the whole world in an unprecedented crisis and turmoil and lingering uncertainty with innumerable death, generalized global economic depression, and unemployment etc. owing to imposition of prolonged lockdown, which was the only option to control the rapid transmission of this dreaded entity. Human life in every nook and corner of the world was confronting with acute crisis with multidimensional magnitude. The poly-faceted effect of covid19 is still prevailing in the world and people are confronting with acute miseries. In those days seemingly impossible had happened in all arena of life. Markets were shut down, school-colleges were closed, festivals and rituals were restricted and national and international borders were sealed, all forms of communication were on halt. Entire gamut of social system was topsy-turvived by this tiny virus named as “Novel Corona Virus” or SARS COV-II. The worst affected aspects of a nation were economy, education and culture. Suddenly, peoples’ ways of doing were astounded. The term ‘new normal’ was replaced with in- vogue habits and practices. Health and disease acquire primacy as well as priority over any other aspects. Etiquette, custom and manners were shifted with the facets of new normal for survival of human life. Social distancing appears as new normal social interaction pattern. The term new normal first appeared in the world in 2008 to refer to the global financial crisis. This term had been used again during the COVID-19 pandemic to point out how it had transformed the basic amenities of life. Upshot of covid19 had proved the Spencerian approach ‘organismic whole’. Society as system exists with many sub-systems of economy, polity, education, culture, and many others. A change in one would lead to change in others. (Spencer, 1896) It had also negated Marxian approach of economic determinism that economy as infrastructure is the key driving force to initiate social change (Marx and Engel, 1846).

Alternatively, relevance of Weberian approach that it is not the economy only rather any other aspects of society may be instrumental in initiating social change (Weber, 1968).

The virus was first identified in 1965, but this new mutant strain of virus appeared as fatal in December 2019 first. Since the inception it has taken the lives of 6,566,610 number of people as of as of 28<sup>th</sup> October 2022 (WHO, 2020). The disease appears with common symptoms like fever, running nose, diarrhoea, headache etc. The virus is transmitted through droplet and has primarily created havoc for human society for its unknown nature and rapid transmission mechanism. Even scientists believed that animals are also susceptible to be infected by the disease. Main route of transmission of virus are mouth, nose, touching the infected person etc. Since the disease had no curative aspects discovery of vaccines for immunization was on laboratory trial (vaccine was developed by the end of January 2021); health experts across the world agreed that social isolation and social distancing were the only remedial measures to prevent the exponential growth and transmission of the virus.

The disease was spreading like conflagration particularly in the countries of the West. Consequently, World Health Organization (WHO) was compelled to declare the disease as pandemic on March 11<sup>th</sup> 2020. Strict social isolation and social distancing were accounted for only remedial measures to combat the rapid transmission of virus from the infected person to healthy person. Along with this frequent washing of hands with soap and alcohol based sanitiser, avoiding the touching of eyes, face nose, mouth, wearing of masks and avoiding contact with a potentially infected person were some of the obvious advice for controlling and retarding the spread of viruses. World Health organization (WHO) enforced following strict protocols of behavior related to preventive and protective aspects (WHO, 2020)

i. Social distancing and Social

- ii. Using of face masks and
- iii. Frequent Hand Washing.
- iv. Avoiding touching of nose, eyes and mouth

Social isolation and social distancing mean restriction of mass gathering. Maintaining physical distancing between individuals from one another keeping at least six feet distances. Accordingly, advised the respective administrative authorities to instruct and ensure general public to follow mandatory COVID-19 protocols.

\* Stay at home

\* Stay out of crowded places and mass gathering

\* Maintenance of at least 6 feet distances even in conversation with known people at home.

Focusing in Indian context, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), Government of India had been taking strategic plan of actions particularly when the disease was on zenith and very first spreading to different countries of the world. Thermal screening and minimum 14 days quarantine were made mandatory for foreign travellers immigrated to country. People were made aware of using all possible measures including electronic and print media also. The importance of social distancing and maintenance of hygiene were publicized by social media. The first COVID-19 case in India was reported from the Kerala on 3rd January 2020 gradually, new cases were started to be reported from multiple metro cities such as New Delhi, Maharashtra, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Patna, West Bengal and so on. West Bengal had reported its the first COVID positive patient which was borne by a student who returned from UK to the State, and tested was positive. The first death due to corona virus in India was reported in Karnataka on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Since then till 25<sup>th</sup> October 2022, 44,644,938 confirmed COVID positive cases were reported and enlisted to be 528,980 numbers of death. (<http://covid19.who/int>.)

Up till now, total of 2,194,143,525 numbers of individuals have administered two doses of COVID vaccine. Even many people have received the booster dose till date (<http://covid19.who/int>.) It is a splendid effort on the part of Govt. of India and all state Government as regards to vaccine drive for citizen of the country. Regarding infectivity rate to all States, Maharashtra ranks first with 7972474 number of positive cases. Dharavi—the largest slum in Asia became the hotspot for rapid transmission of disease. Moreover, the Union Health Ministry had identified 130 districts with in the country as hotspot zones. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) Government of India had identified a particular district as hotspot zone or red zone if the district had reported to contain over 15 number of positive COVID cases. The district having below 15 numbers of cases was declared as orange zone where as the district with no cases as green zones. In India 319 number of districts were declared as green zone. Regarding the infectivity rate, the state of Maharashtra was followed by Kerala with 6634722 numbers of cases; Karnataka had 3968395 numbers of reported cases. Delhi was reported to have 1934009 numbers of infective cases. Assam had as many as 724788 numbers of cases. In Assam Guwahati city ranked top in the state hierarchy ([indiastat.com](http://indiastat.com) 2022). Government of India data states Assam witnessed 746034 number of cases with 8035 number of death (mohfw,2020)

The Union Government had resorted to complete lockdown across the country. The lockdown was declared on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic as well as to rein in its outspread. However, imposition of lockdown had jeopardized the normal life and daily routine of all sections of people. As an obvious reason, it was a great menace for all the people to tackle meeting economic crisis during lockdown of the country, causing disastrous effect on all sections of the people particularly the poor and marginal working class, who were rendered to a major financial crisis (Chander; *et.al.*2020). Many workers lost their jobs in the unorganized sector. Amongst the populace, daily wage workers were worst sufferers. The unorganized sector covers 93 percent of workforce as per the latest India report published in 2020 publication (Business Today.in, 10.9.2022). Their livelihood came to a drastic halt and completely languished which confronted with acute starvation and were incapable to meet their own daily need as well as need of their family members. Amongst the daily wage workers, the migrant workers were the worst sufferers. It is not only amongst daily wage earner but also amongst all other sections of people in the society. All types of transport systems were suspended and migrant workers working in different cities and small towns were trapped in. They wished to return to their native homes and to be with their family members during the days of crisis but their desperate effort was failed as most of the State Government failed to manage even a bare minimum transportation and transit system for them during the crucial period of the migrant labourers. The more sorry plight of migrant labourers in India during lockdown has reflected a gloomy scenario and was moved in fault lines in both social and economic sphere. A total mismanagement and an unprecedented crisis prevailed all around as regards to treatment of under-privileged sections of the society. The situation pushed the poor in to further poverty entrapment in India. India has an estimated 139 million migrant labourers in the country, according to 2011 census (Singh,2020). The pandemic worsened the condition of migrant labourers in India and brought forth less avenues and severe challenges to this poor migrant labourers due to imposition of prolong lock down.

The lockdown put the migrant labourers stranded away from their native home, with no job and earnings in their work places. The sorry plight of migrant workers in India was a bizarre. They had to face numerous hardships. Concept of social distancing brought more pressing problem for them and they faced persistence insecurity of food and shelter. Therefore, health issue turned in to an acute economic issues which again turned up in to the health and psychological issues and trapped them in to vicious circle of innumerable sufferings. Backlashes of lockdown include loss of income, food shortages and uncertain and unpredicted future. Many of them remained ill-fed and ill-clad including their family members. They desperately attempted to travel on foot for long distances and returned to their native home, as all systems of communications were put to on halt. Although the Central Government as well as State Government arranged various measures to bring back them to their native places but it was barely insufficient. Over hundreds of migrant workers were reported to lost their lives on road accident owing to huge rush in all modes of transportations (ibid,2020).

Lakhs of migrant workers lost their livelihoods when all the factories and business establishments where they worked in were shut down, and in absence of daily wages, the workers started leaving for their homes in far flung villages, mostly on foot (ibid,2021). To check further aggravation of pandemic 2020 and precarious situation of migrant workers, the International labour organisation (ILO) had to intervene with some specific recommendations to safeguard their rights of migrant workers which were:

- Include migrant workers in all COVID-related health care and recovery packages and services.
- Implement Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) measures on the basis of equality of treatment with nationals, and ensure protection from gender-based violence and harassment at workplace.
- Ensure that all migrant workers, including those who are in adverse situations, have access to free or affordable grievance and other dispute resolution mechanisms.
- Review and enhance bilateral agreements so as to they contain the effective mechanisms to protect migrant workers affected by sudden economic shocks, and to facilitate their safe return.
- Extend equality of treatment with nationals and to ensure non-discrimination.
- Ensure that migrant workers should not pay recruitment fees or related costs (including those related to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), testing, vaccination, vaccination certification, quarantine etc.), in line with the General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment and Convention No. 181 .
- Introduce guidelines for recruitment associations on monitoring and supporting and coordinating migrant workers during a pandemic (or similar crisis).
- Increase inspection and government oversight of recruitment practices.
- Ensure that recruitment associations disseminate information about health and safety protocol to all the migrant labour (ILO News, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2021. www.ILO.org)

However, the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, issued a guideline across the country including the state of Assam to safeguard the rights of migrant workers, which included:

- i. Adequate arrangements for temporary shelter, provisions of food for poor and needy people including migrant labour stranded due to lockdown in their respective areas.
- ii. The migrant people who used to move out to reach to their home must be kept in quarantine in for 14 days to ensure standard health protocol.
- iii. All the workers should be given their daily wages in due date without deducting any single penny.
- iv. Landlords, where migrant workers or workers are staying should not demand rent from their tenant.
- v. If any tenant was compelled to vacate their rented shelter to workers or students then they will be liable for punishment as per prevailing law. (Anonymous,2020)

Review of Literature: Azeez.E.P.et al (2020) narrated worst experience of Indian women during COVID-19 19 pandemic. They did compare their lives and capacity and burden of responsibility. The study brings to light emotional condition of women in different geographical situations of the world and insufficient support of government and other source.

Linkage between COVID-19 and Indian economy was discussed by Singh (2020).He uphold the view that Indian health infrastructure is poor. He discussed about the issues and challenge in agricultural sector in India posed by Covid19.He also pointed out the upcoming challenges in agriculture and suggested policies adopted as remedial measures.

COVID-19 brought forth global recession. This important issue was pointed out by Khanna (2020) in his study on the effect of epidemic like COVID-19 on migrant labour was pointed out. Especially impact of recession on workforce owing to covid19 was discussed.

Rajan (2021) highlighted impact of Covid19 on migrant labourers in India and China.The paper compares plight of migrant labour in both India and China in current pandemic situation. It aimed to contextualize the causes of the miseries in the broader frame of land reform and capability to engage them in rural economy in both the countries.

Sahil and Rawal (2020) brought to light the response of Government during COVID-19 in India. He pointed out sorry plight of migrant workers in India particularly in rural India. He also pointed out the poverty profile of rural people in India. Impact of COVID- 19 on migrant labour in rural India and the Government response to tackle the situation was discussed.

Migration in search of employment is a common phenomenon and all most all the states in India experiences inflows of both immigration and out migration. The 1979 law---labour law/migrant defines, “*a migrant worker as one who is recruited by or through a licensed contractor in one state for employment in an establishment in another state.*” (Chatarjee,2021)

It also defined an ‘*Inter-state migrant workers ‘as any person who is recruited by an employer or a contractor in one state for employment in an establishment in another state’.*

Then on 20 July, the panel further recommended inclusion of self-employed “Migrant workers under Modi Government’s new definition”, The definition expanded and redefined as of ‘inter-state migrant workers’ to ensure that no one should be deprived of social security paradigm in future.

The new definition will now include all workers whose monthly family income is less than Rs 18000 and who is shifted to another state and get directly employed or self-employed.

State wise data reveals that Chhattisgarh has the highest number of such workers followed by Kerala and Maharashtra. Mizoram has the lowest numbers of migrant workers.(<http://labourbureau.gov.in>).The Ministry of Labour and Employment data states that in Assam 25969 number of migrant workers are working in different sections. Migrant workers in Assam have influxed from states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Uttarpradesh. They are primarily working in unorganized sectors. In Assam all most all the town areas are inhabited by such poor migrant workers who are doing the jobs of porter, wooden cart puller, street food vendors etc. In the above backdrop the present study aims to make a survey on socio-economic crisis faced by the migrant labourers in Karimganj town of Assam. Karimganj is a district town situated in the Southern part of Assam bordering Bangladesh. Many migrants’ workers from Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh are the inhabitants of the town since time immemorial as the Karimganj was famous for many business potential and opportunities. They are engaged in various markets for carrying goods on pull-cart and even manually carry heavy loads in the vicinity of the market areas. The study intends to examine the crisis by such migrant labourers of Karimganj town area COVID-19 lockdown period and the ways and measures they adopted for managing their livelihood during this risk-prone prolonged lockdown period.

As regard to risk management Ulrich Beck (1992) defines “risk as systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization”. He defines risk as characteristics of modern society. In modern society risk is man-made and worldwide phenomenon, according to Beck. He distinguished risk in pre-industrial and industrial society from risk in modern society. To him in pre-industrial society risks and dangers were largely natural and beyond man’s control like flood, famine, plague etc. But in industrial society man systematically started to master over all these. In post-modern society man not only exerts his power and supremacy over the nature, he had sought to gain control of nature itself and in doing so he has also put his universe at the risk of total destruction. He exemplified it by himself with the invention of nuclear energy was followed by nuclear weapon led risk. Further, man’s excessive use of energy and fuel has bring forth global warming and climate change. Man’s possession of more and more control of the universe so paradoxically enhanced the risk of life on the planet earth. The risk is equally reflected in social structure too. In modern society people became independent and free than pre-industrial and industrial society. In pre-industrial social structure institutions like church, or religion, community, the family even the class structure of modern western society also provided people with a sense of belongingness, identity and purpose within appeared to be in stable social order. On the contrary, in modern society, the individual is increasingly living in his or her own ways, isolated and without any protection. Social crisis appears as individual crisis and social problems are perceived as individual problem rather than a collective problem or issue.

According to Ulrich Beck’s Thesis of Risk and His belief, the post modern society is a risk society has proved to be a major contribution to the debate about the nature of society today. To him, risk is a major factor of modern society. The world today seems even risk-prone than yesterday. Nothing is sacred and secure in the emerging world. He said people are risk conscious. Their reflection on risk has risen to forefront and new heights as people throughout the globe started to reassess the risk of travelling, communicating their posts. Any technology can be turned out to be destructive weapon which was already proved by the incidents of the world trade center. In Beck’s terminology people are moving in to a new world order, adhering to second order of modernity. The central issue of modernity was creation of wealth and its production, distribution and control. Safety and security were primary political goal which has been replaced by equality and freedom. Risk has no limitations and boundaries of poor and rich. Third world countries are more vulnerable to risk. Thus, to survive in a chaotic world the modern individual need to adopt self-conscious in all sphere of life of self-reliant. The modern organizations and corporations have to plan for risk reduction and integrate risk management structure.

He termed modern society as “world risk society”, a modernity in which progress cannot be assumed and in which every movement produces its own set of risks, its danger as well as darkside. Be it in terms of medical science, in travelling or any other technology. He termed the member of modern society as “*new breed of social citizen, aware and capable of “reflecting” on and assessing such risks, and making individual decision accordingly.* Poor are at the top of the in the hierarchy of risk prone classes. They cannot afford to be in safety and are at expose to risk even if they cannot avoid it.

Methodology: study was conducted with phenomenological approach. The qualitative approach for study was conducted to assess the in-depth meaning people give to events. Phenomenological approach is used to understand how participants make meaning of phenomena. There are over 1500 migrant labours in Karimganj town. An interview with structured questionnaire was conducted from amongst 20 number of labourers selected with purposive random sampling method to understand and evaluate their opinions and views about COVID-19.

Main objectives of the paper is to

- (i) Assess the meaning of COVID-19 and situation led by it arose during the days of lockdown.
- (ii) The way they managed the situation economically, physically and psychologically.

## **II. Findings:**

The study was conducted in a small town of Assam named karimganj. It is situated on the bank of river Kushiara bordering Bangladesh. Karimganj town is the district head quarter of the district Karimganj. The small town was a potent market place since colonial period. The word *ganj* means market area so it is named as Karimganj. Since Karimganj town has a tradition of trading activities migrant labour from Bihar started to settle down here to work in the business establishment as cart puller, business good porter etc. They serve the job of porter, pull the wooden puller, etc. all other hard pressed manual jobs as per the need to whole sale market of hard labour. They are mostly wage labour. They are engaged in carrying load and unload the goods from trucks, draw wooden puller, carry loaded furniture etc. hazardous jobs which require heavy muscle power and energy. A few of them, who cannot afford to this heavy workload, sell *phuchka* and many other street foods as vendors.

All the respondents are from Bihar. They stay in rented house of slum areas. Many migrants who are 60 years or more they are staying in this town since last 40/45 years. “Do you believe that disease” corona exists really? In response to this question all the respondents have replied that yes they believe corona as disease. They construct the phenomena as disease because it is believed by all. And a respondent of 60 years old states “*Jisko hor log manta hey isko mannai porega .....iye to kuchh na kuchh hai.*” “What do you do during these days” in response to this question all the respondents reply we used to take all precautions like using sanitiser, wearing masks, washing hands frequently keeping distances from each other etc. In their statement these are the preventive measures of COVID-19 was saying by everybody. They opined that in TV, radio and social media everywhere these measures are publicized again and again. So we did the practice because we want to remain in safe from infection. We were alone here and so there is no body to take care of us, families are residing far away from our work place. They also use to drink tea made of holy basil (Tulsi), ginger, black peeper, clove and cardamom popularly known as *Karha* in order to prevent the infection of COVID-19. All most all the respondents underwent COVID-19 testing when door to door campaign was launched by the Government health workers. They are vaccinated also. They took both doses of vaccine for many reasons because without vaccination certificate they could not board the train for going back to home, then also they believe that since everybody both medicos and non-medicos have emphasised on vaccination to prevent the disease and so they must follow health protocols.

There was no work during those days. Markets were completely shut down, transport system was totally suspended and they became jobless in this situation of risk. From their saved money they had to manage their bread and butter. Since all types of transportation were suspended, there was no way to return home. Even, there was no arrangement of transportation made by the Government to assist them to reach to their home. A few of them contended to move on foot. They made desperate effort to reach home on foot. Some of them even contacted deputy commissioner’s office because they gathered information that some arrangements of vehicle were made by local administration in order to facilitate their transit, but this attempt too went in vein.

During the days of lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic there was hubbub of distribution of relief item to poor and needy people on the part of both government and non-government agencies. Many NGOs, corporators, associations even individually many people came forward to provide relief. Even on that occasion, the migrant labourers of Karimganj town did not receive any help and co-operation from any corners of the society. They had to manage livelihood from their own hard earned meager savings during those black days. In their own language they passed their lockdown days in extreme crisis and miseries. In some days they had to manage bare a single meal instead of sufficient meal which they consume normally. To their view the prevailing situation seemed to be unknown and they were very much frightened to find their ways and means to lead their

lives in a very calculative manner during those disastrous days. All the respondents contended proudly that no one amongst them had even tested COVID-19 positive and get infected by virus. Though they were not suffered physically, yet psychologically they were in utmost agony and bewildering to recover the crisis at the earliest.

From above discussions it reveals the actual fact that the poor migrant labourer who are barely primary educate, they gathered enough experiences and feedback and take the meaning of COVID-19 scientifically. Though they do not know the scientific pros and cons of the disease and the meaning of virus also not known to them, however they believe that common symptoms of like fever, running nose, headache, diarrhoea which usually attack anybody may be typified as COVID-19 during those days. Further, for them health is not a metaphor. It is a means to work and to earn for economic survival of themselves and their family members.

### **III. Conclusion:**

The most important fact that has revealed from the study is that the under- privileged section of people get prepare for risk at all point of time. They can assume that risk may arise at any time. In this context it can be presumed that the India is moving towards modernity, as opined by Beck, risk is a feature of modern society and this poor people are socialized to encounter risk through their day to day interaction. They are well acquainted with the fact that since they are migrant workers and do not possess ration card, and even their names are not enlisted in voter registered and so they are not entitle to get any benefit from government sector. During the lockdown period, the Government of India made some special provision of relief under National Food Security Act, 2019(NFSA). Under the scheme, 5 Kilograms of food grains and 1kilogram of pulse is given to poor people consecutively for two months. The migrant labour had not received any thing under the preview of scheme for want of valid documents need to avail any subsidy from department food and civil supply. Which took in to grant and did not approached to any body and do not held any one responsible for that.

Government in India took various measures to restore the loss owing to lockdown. Many measures are taken for migrant labour also. Apart of distribution of food stuffs at subsidized rate many provisions for employment generation have also been made. Bizarre is that all these are allotted to those migrants labourer that come back to their native place. Those who could not return to home no concern was felt for them by any agency. Ulrich Beck has already contented that in modern society there is no protective agency like community, religious organization or any institution. The fact is reveals from behavior of migrant labourer.

Hence, to conclude, following recommendations may be suggested:

Since risk is unavoidable in modern society and in the prevailing unequal economic condition of Indian society migration is unavoidable, so some measures can be taken to provide them security at pan Indian level like:

- i) Provision of ration card,
- (ii) Arrangement of proper shelter
- iii) Provision may be made to provide government assistance to all devoid of all formalities and regulations in case of any emergency.

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