

COVID-19 CRISIS AND PERIPHERAL CASES IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY IN ASSAM

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Abstract

The world has been convulsed by the COVID- 19 pandemic. The virus has caused untold misery both directly and indirectly to people around the world and its effect on societies and economies globally has been catastrophic. In this paper we discuss about COVID-19 crisis in context of Assam, India and its socio political and economic impact. This article analyses the management or responses by the government of India as well as Assam to bring back normalcy.

Key words: Covid-19, Impact, State Response, Assam

Introduction

Corona virus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered corona virus (SARS-CoV-2) which has spread rapidly throughout the world. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak as pandemic. The pandemic has severely ravaged health systems, economic and social progress globally. From a few thousand confirmed COVID-19 cases in January, cases continue to grow globally. As of 4 December 2020 there have been 6,46,03,428 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 15,00,614 deaths. The most common sign of infection with COVID-19 include fever, dry, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing and tiredness or fatigue. Most people experience mild disease and recover without requiring hospitalization. In India 1,01,46,845 confirmed COVID-19 cases and over 1,47,092 deaths have been reported as of 25 December 2020. While strong measures were adopted and some progress was made in containing the spread through better public health interventions, diagnostics and treatments, scientists across the world have accelerated the process to develop a safe and effective vaccine that will break the chain of transmission.

COVID-19 Crisis:

COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire world. It led to loss of human life and presented a unprecedented challenge to health, food systems and work. Global work force lost their jobs and livelihood. Without the means to earn income during lockdowns, many are unable to feed themselves and their families. For most, no income means no food.

Towards the end of March, India observed an unprecedented shutdown of whole country. Prime minister appealed for Janata Curfew, urged the people to stay indoors to check the spread of coronavirus. The public transport, from passenger train to air carriers were suspended and also all the markets and shops except those dealing in essential items. Other activities like suspending regular prayers in shrines of faith including Sunday mass to disallowing jail inmates from meeting their families, organization and institutions in every spheres have announced restrictions.

The first positive case of corona virus was a 52 year old man from karimganj with hitherto undisclosed travel history. All the infected person and contact trail of infected with whom they came in contact were quarantined or kept isolation. Another fear of spread of epicenter of deadly virus was at Nizamuddin, Delhi where Tablighi Jamaat was held. Thousands of people participated in a huge religious congregation and

thousands of participants are known to return home in every state including Telengana, West Bengal, Karnataka and Gujarat. Many reported covid-19 cases were linked to the Tablighi Jamaat.

In countries like India, the quantum of internal migrants far exceeds the stock of international migrants. Complete lockdown and restrictions and confinement have been preventing farmers to access markets thus disrupting domestic and international food chains. Everyday people were losing jobs, hospitality services dependent on tourism had empty hotels and deserted beaches. The international labour organization estimates that 400 million jobs could be lost. The first impact of covid -19 led to immediate unemployment, including paycuts and temporary layoffs. With sudden lockdown mode the imposed curfews prevented people from seeking and arranging for alternatives in survival.

Consequently the panic stricken, ill informed and resource poor migrants' decided to return home when all the transport arrangements and other services were all closed. This led to situation of 'stranded migrants' in the host regions and en route to their native places. Other categories of people stranded are the ones who went as tourists and for some other works.

Socio Political and Economic Impact:

According to UN's Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to the COVID 19 Crisis is that "The COVID-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis: it is affecting societies and economies at their core. While the impact of the pandemic will vary from country to country, it will most likely increase poverty and inequalities at a global scale, making achievement of SDGs even more urgent.¹ During the current pandemic, the economic downturn has greatly affected people from the lower socio-economic stratum. The distressing media visuals of migrant labourers going to their native places from the cities on foot during the lockdown have been critically debated. Remittance of money to the home country, which many migrant Indian workers popularly do, is another way of poverty reduction, economic development and increase in GDP². The World Economic Forum states that in the current pandemic situation, migrants stuck abroad trying to cope with the exigencies will compromise to the adverse circumstances, by taking up low wage jobs, live in poor working conditions, restrict spending and thus, risk exposure to infections like the coronavirus.³ The scenario among the internal migrant workers (intra- and inter-state) in India is equally grim. In March around 10,000 people from Assam were stranded in Mumbai and the offices of Assam Bhawan were flooded with distress calls as some of the landlords have asked them to vacate houses. Covid-19 pandemic had a huge impact on day to day daily of people in every spheres. Many people lost their lives during their return journeys due to hunger, dehydration, cardiac arrest and in accidents. In an incident happened in Aurangabad, 16 migrants, who were on their return journey to their native places in Madhya Pradesh were run over by a train as these exhausted migrants were sleeping on railway track, thinking that there will not be any trains running during the lockdown period. The economic impact of pandemic is likely to increase poverty, worsen socio economic inequality and etc.

During the lockdown movement of people were strictly prohibited. Under the guidelines given by the Assam government, female employees both public and private with children below 5 years of age were not allowed to attend office. Person above 65 years of age with comorbidity, pregnant women and children below the age of ten years had to stay indoor except for essential and health purposes. Wearing face mask is compulsory in public and work places.

Hotels, restaurants and other hospitality services other than those used for housing health/ police/government officials/health care workers, stranded person including those used for quarantine facilities

¹Covid -19 socio economic impact, UNDP. Accessed on December 27, 2020

<https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/covid-19-pandemic-response/socio-economic-impact-of-covid-19.html>

² Gopalan, Hema. S. & Misra, Anoop. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic and challenges for socio-economic issues, healthcare and National Health Programs in India, Diabetes & Metabolic Syndrome: Clinical Research & Reviews. Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dsx.2020.05.041>

³ ibid

remained closed. All the cinema halls, shopping malls, gymnasiums, swimming pools, entertainment parks, theaters, bars and auditorium and similar places remained closed. Not more than 50 person for marriage and not more than 20 persons for funerals were allowed. Religious congregations and other gatherings have been banned. Shops ensured minimum 6 feet distance among customers and cannot allow more 5 more person at a time. Barber shops, salon and parlors continued to remain close. Haats and bazaars including weekly markets were closed throughout the state.

This COVID-19 has significantly disrupted the education sector, which is an economic future of the country. A large number of Indian students prefer to study in universities abroad; if this pandemic situation persists it may lead to a decline in the demand for international education. Online classes were taken. However there were also problem in taking online classes because the poor section of the people could not buy a mobile phone. There were also disruption in teaching and learning because of network issues. No primary classes were held in school this year. Assam state government has decided to reopen hostels for class 10, 12, engineering final year, degree final year from December 15, 2020.

Loss of daily wages has forced a large segment of society to struggle with hunger unless a relief measure is provided to them. Coronavirus has eroded wealth and corroded confidence, slowed down private consumption and investment, disrupted work places and distorted markets. India had an ambitious plan to promote exports of network products, to integrate into Make in India and create 40 million jobs by realizing the aspiration of 5 trillion economy by 2025.

Covid-19 crisis management in context of Assam:

The Indian government started with issuing recommendations regarding social distancing measures and initiated travel and entry restrictions⁴ also announced compulsory screening of all the international passengers arriving in the airports, borders in Nepal. Country began shutting down schools, colleges, public facilities such as malls, cinema halls, and other public places to contain the spread. Government divided the entire nation into three zone; Red (Hotspots), Orange(Non-Hotspots) and Green zones are without confirmed cases or without cases in last 21 days⁵.

There has been a rapid response by the Government of India and other Authorities or government administration officials to the pandemic of COVID-19. With several initiatives taken, to avoid the mistake of confusing right information with knowledge and services thus the Government of India (GOI) launched the coronavirus chatbot which includes- a) Necessary precaution information-valid information, comforting information, perplexing information, b) Symptoms of the COVID-19-from mild to moderate and severe. C) Helpline numbers-for central, states and UT, Central Helpline Number for corona-virus in India is +91-11-23978046 d) Affected no of cases in the regions (A coronavirus tracker App)-the chatbot APP in India called Aarogya setu app helps in tracking the coronavirus infection by using smartphones and GPS with more accuracy and effectivity, also helps the user to deal with misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic. Moreover, Wikipedia is showing COVID-19 information in nine Indian languages with the help of Swastha and WikiProject Medicine. Twitter is banning and Facebook is curbing those who are spreading false and misleading information regarding COVID-19. Apple and Google have removed hoax coronavirus applications from app stores Many telecommunication brands such as Airtel, BSNL, and Reliance Jio have changed their caller tunes, these caller tunes eventually start with a coughing sound and highlight the preventive measure of coronavirus.

Supreme Court asked the centre to prevent migration of people due to coronavirus and ordered to set up within 24 hours a portal for disseminating real time information on the pandemic to counter the panic being spread through fake news. The Assam government chalked out comprehensive plan to provide job cards under

⁴ Indian Government response to Covid-19 pandemic.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_government_response_to_the_COVID-19_pandemic. Accessed on January 29, 2021.

⁵ ibid

the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to five lakh workers who will be returning to the state in view of country wide lockdown and to those person migrating from cities and towns within the state to rural areas. More than 6000 job cards were issued to migrants. The state government and national health mission assam have spent Rs 1,032.49 crore for various expenses related to covid-19 cases in Assam so far.

The Food Corporation of India recently allotted 12.96 lakh metric tonnes of food grains under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojna (PMGKAY) as an initiative of Government of India in its fight against the COVID19⁶.

Conclusion:

India needs to rethink its development paradigm. Equal access to health and education is an important condition for equitable development. An important lesson that pandemic has taught is to provide greater impetus to sector which make better allocation of resources and income inequalities. The pandemic has necessitated the need for attention to the underserved and marginalized populations, to prevent long-lasting adverse health outcomes. Pandemic has taught that population should rely on farm sector. Strict preventive measure should be taken by the industries in order to safeguard the health of workers.

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