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## COVID-19 and Beyond: The role of migrant workers in achieving a self-reliant economy with special emphasis on Assam.

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**Abstract:** Covid-19 has brought along widespread economic distress and health crisis that the world had never experienced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, India, with its vast population is dealing with economic, health and migrant crisis – all at the same time. While the world economies are coming up with their relief packages and policies to revive their economy, India has brought to the table its idea of self reliance in the form of an Atma-Nirbhar Bharat Campaign . This research paper begins by discussing about the idea of self-reliant India in a substantive manner and moves on to elaborate its applicability in a practical manner, especially for the benefit of migrant workers. Then it brings to light the man-power opportunities that India can exploit post Covid-19 and also discusses the hurdles India needs to overcome in order to realise a self-reliant economy. The paper is concluded by putting forwards various suggestions and the importance to establish a strong supply chain.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, self-reliance, economy, opportunities, India, migrant workers.

### I. INTRODUCTION

With the Covid-19 outbreak, along with the challenges faced by the economic and health sector, India has witnessed its toughest migrant workers crisis in the present day. This has brought into light various setbacks and loopholes in the labour laws of our country. The economic disparity between the rich and poor has never been so crystal clear.<sup>[2]</sup> However, on the on-set of this humanitarian crisis, the Government of India has come about with the optimistic approach of an economic package known as AtmaNirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (Self reliant India Campaign) to look beyond Covid-19 while addressing the migrant crisis at the same time. With over 90% of the population working in the

informal economy, International Labour Organisation has predicted that as a result of the crisis and subsequent lockdown, about 400 million Indian workers will fall deeper into poverty while forcing many of them to return to their places of origin in the rural areas. The challenge for India is to now build back the economy with a human-centred approach at its core. This is where the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan shall play its role in the long economic run.

The Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan (ANBA) policy announcements are important moves in meeting Gandhi's vision of individual self-reliance and recognising poverty as the worst form of violence. It aims at supporting oneself and the world. ANBA has brought about a 20 lac crore economic-relief package for migrants and farmes but most importantly, it has sent a message to every Indian citizen to cultivate a habit of self-reliance. For the first time, the approach to growth has truly turned towards internal strength with the slogan 'Vocal for Local to make it Global', which should not be misconstrued as protectionism.<sup>[12]</sup> A demand based economy system, which is self-producing and self-consuming should be constructed with the strength of the demographic dividend of India.

Post-Covid revival strategies give a major thrust to agriculture and MSMEs. The government now looks forward to create a unified market in agricultural commodities, pushing investment in agriculture supply chain through the Agriculture Infrastructure Fund, better price realisation for farmers and bringing modern technology in agriculture. Income generation through agriculture and allied activities is expected to support

the MSME sector along with preference for our local products and government procurement. The economic relief for the migrant workers and farmers are addressed with the increase in MGNREGS.

## II. OBJECTIVE

- To study the prospects of a self-reliant India post COVID-19 outbreak.
- To study the role of migrant workers of Assam in achieving a self-reliant economy.

## III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

A. The term 'self-reliance' was coined by Ralph Waldo Emerson(1841) who stressed the trust in one's present thoughts, skills, originality, belief in own capabilities and genius and living from within. Gandhi expanded this concept to incorporate simple lifestyle asserting that nature produces enough for himself/herself and nothing more (Kriplani, 1965). Nawaz Sharif(1999) <sup>[15]</sup> has found 'compromise' as the next best option after 'consensus' to find a formula for decision-making that is acceptable to all parties, stressing on the need for a culture of empowerment that promotes self-management opportunity with adequate safeguard against biases. Setting an example for others, the state of Sikkim has already started its quest for a self-reliant economy which Anjan Chakrabarty (2009) <sup>[4]</sup> brings to light Sikkim's quest for a self-reliant economy which reveal that the growth is more in sectors where government is playing a direct role. Udeshna Buragohain (2020) <sup>[3]</sup> in her study has shown a relationship between organic farming and Sikkim's rural areas. Findings from these studies can be applied to Assam as well as other states of North-east India in order to boost tourism, farming and economy.

However, a paper by Dipankar Dey (2016)<sup>[6]</sup> points out major issues which hinders self reliance and sustainability of Indian economy that include a virtual brain drain, disconnect between the traditional knowledge system and post Renaissance European knowledge . The paper suggests an alternative to the free market economy has to be explored. These issues need to be addressed at the earliest.

B. The concept of migration is very old and the first theory of migration was put forward by Ravenstein(1885)<sup>[13]</sup>. Ravenstein in his theory had concluded that migration is governed by

“push-pull” factors based on empirical migration data. Unfavourable conditions in one place (oppressive laws, heavy taxation, etc.) “Push” people out, and favourable conditions in an external location “pull” them out. Everett Lee (1966)<sup>[9-10]</sup> reformulated Ravenstein's theory to give more emphasis to internal (or push) factors at both the supply and demand side of migration. But when looked from Gandhi's view of a self-reliant economy, Kazuya Ishi (2001)<sup>[8]</sup> concludes that Gandhian style of development have persistently furnished a critique of modern ways of thinking and presented alternative visions of socio-economic development.

Ramesh (2012)<sup>[14]</sup> have analyzed the dynamic and unique character of migration of youth from North Eastern states of India to urban centres. The increased presence of youth from NER in urban centres has more to do with the backwardness of the source regions in terms of economic development, facilities for higher education and availability of gainful employment opportunities. Arjaan de Haan (2011)<sup>[7]</sup> discusses the relationship between labour migration and poverty in India during a period rapidly growing inequalities. Prof Shruthi Ashok and Prof Neena Thomas (2014)<sup>[1]</sup> highlights on housing, environmental & socio- economic issues of interstate migrant labourers working in construction sector and belonging to Economically Weaker Section (EWS) or Lower Income Group (LIG) in India. Jugal Kumar Deka(2019)<sup>[5]</sup> has discussed about the factors responsible for out-migration in Assam.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in this study is outlined below:

**Research Design:** In this research study, the descriptive type of research design has been used to study the role of migrant workers in re-building the economy.

**Sampling unit:** The researcher has drawn 55 respondents who have been released from the different quarantine centres of Guwahati.

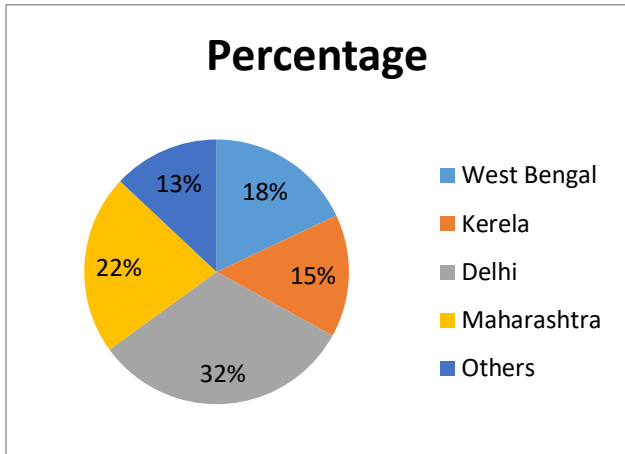
**Sampling Technique:** Under this research, the researcher has used convenience and judgmental sampling method.

**Sources of data:** The researcher has used both primary and secondary sources of data to gather information. The researcher adopted schedules and personal interview method to collect primary data while adopting the safety measures of government.

However, the secondary data are collected from different journals, books and internet.

**Data analysis:** The data collected through questionnaire and interviews. For effective presentation and utilisation of data, Pie Charts are used.

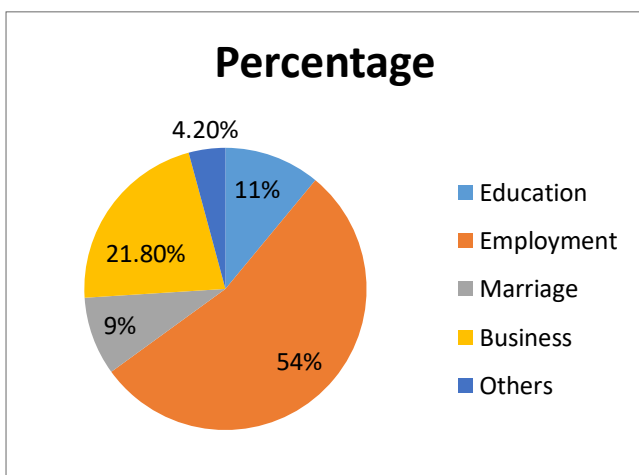
**V. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**



Source: Field survey

**Figure 1: Percentage of incoming migrants in Assam from various metropolitan states of India.**

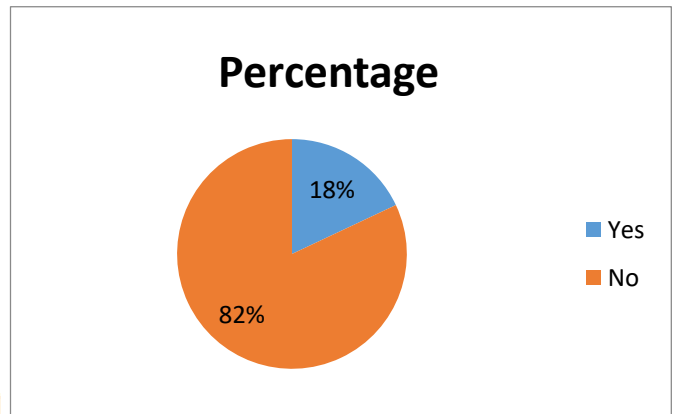
Analysis: After conducting the field survey, the researcher has found that majority i.e 32% of the migrant labourers of Assam have returned from Delhi, followed by 22% of workers who have returned from Maharashtra, 18% of workers have returned from West Bengal, 15% of the workers have returned from Kerela and the lowest is 9% of worker who have returned from other states across India. Thus, majority of the workers have returned from States that have higher state GDP than Assam and better infrastructure.



Source: Field Survey

**Figure 2: Reasons for out-migration.**

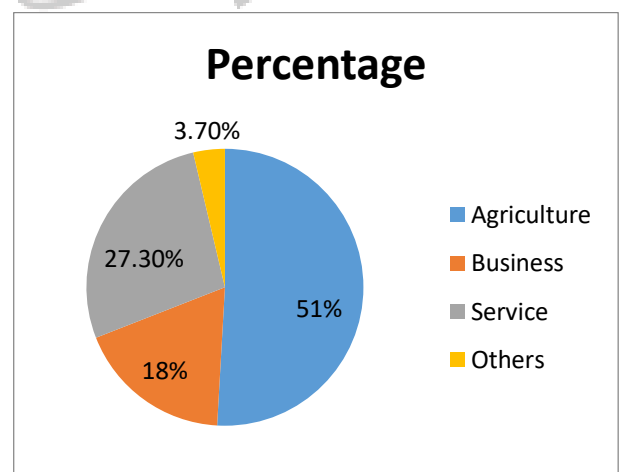
Analysis: It has been found through this research that majorly 54% of the respondents decided to out-migrate in search of employment opportunities, 21.8% migrated to other states for business purposes, 11% moved out for educational purpose, 9% stated marriage as a reason for migration and lastly 4.2% has chosen other reasons.



Source: Field Survey

**Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who are likely and not likely to stay back in Assam.**

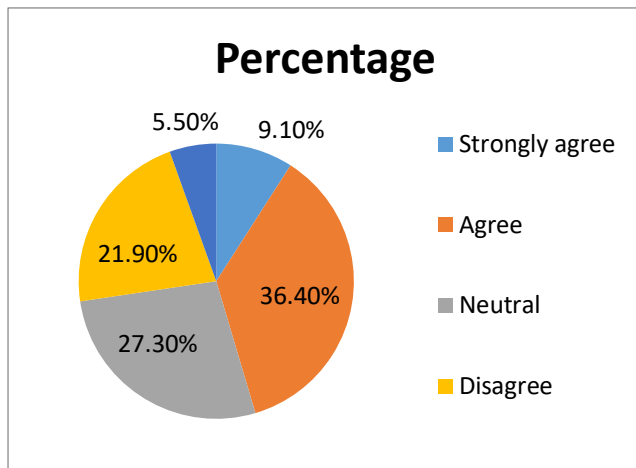
Analysis: It has been found that majority of the respondents are willing to look for sources of income locally in Assam now. 82% of the respondents want to stay back in Assam while the remaining 18% want to go back when the situation normalises and business accelerates.



Source: Field Survey

**Figure 4: Percentage of respondents regarding alternative employment opportunities they want to explore in Assam.**

Analysis: Through the field survey conducted, when asked about the Alternative sources of Income that the respondents would opt for in their home state of Assam, it was found that majorly 51% of the migrant workers are to take part in the agriculture sector, a close 27.30% of workers are likely to search for jobs in the service sector of Assam, 18% of the workers want to start a business in order to survive and the remaining 3.7% have stated other reasons.



Source: Field survey

**Figure 5: Percentage of respondents who agree that they are going to play a crucial role in making India self-reliant.**

Analysis: With the help of the data collected through field survey, it has been found that 36.40% of the respondents agree that India can reach its goal of self-reliance, 27.30% have taken a neutral stand, 21.90% of respondents have disagreed, 9.10% strongly agree to the possibility of self-reliance and 5.50% strongly disagree to the same.

## VI. FINDINGS

After an extensive field survey, it has been found that majority of the migrants in Assam have returned from Delhi. A fair percentage of the respondents migrated out of Assam in search of employment opportunities. This clearly points towards the dearth of employment opportunities in the state. More than 80% of the respondents want to stay back in Assam now and majority of them want to start working in the agricultural sector. Lastly when asked about their role in the establishment of a self reliant India, a marginal number of the respondents have acknowledged their indispensable role in the construction of Atmanirbhar Bharat while others have either disagreed or are doubtful about the same. This brings into focus the lack of confidence among the migrant workers which can only be met

with adequate help from the government and local entrepreneurs.

## VII. SUGGESTIONS

- The Assam government has already announced economic packages under the purview of Central Government to support the migrant worker, farmers and street hawkers. However, a systematic and transparent supply mechanism of the funds and benefits should also be ensured.
- Assam with its abundant natural resources needs to plan out various 6 months short term skill-based training programs for the workers. This can be initiated from the MGNREGA workers itself. Big corporate houses can be invited for a public-private partnership to give advanced training to workers.
- Social Entrepreneurship is the tomorrow for rural Assam. Post Covid-19, entrepreneurship can be introduced as a compulsory subject in all government and private schools of Assam. Gone is the time where rote-learning was promoted. This Pandemic has made us realise the value of practical applicability of knowledge.
- Since most of the migrant workers lack confidence in their capacity, skill and contribution towards the building of an economy, a fundamental change in their mindset is needed. Data can be collected from worker regarding their educational qualifications and interest. Based on this data, the workers can be put in clusters with an assigned mentor. A right mentor can influence the thought process of these workers. Once their mindset is positively moulded, they can be sent to special vocational training centres. In this way, a worker shall be placed as per his interest which will lead to increase in productivity and efficiency. For instance: A worker who has an aptitude for mechanics can never perform his best as a farmer. This can lead a path where the right human resources are tapped by local entrepreneurs in the right way.
- India obtains 67.565 Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients(API) from China which meets 90% of all API requirements from imports. Assam is blessed with more than 952 identified species of plants which are used in medicinal practices. But there exists only 20 pharmaceutical manufacturing units in Assam. This

leaves most of the demand to be fulfilled by supply from outside the region. This serves an opportunity for Pharmaceutical manufacturing companies to set up units in Assam to serve both local markets and API markets in Bangladesh.<sup>[11]</sup>

- Food processing is one sector where the human resource of Assam can be put to use. The empty Pran litchi drink bottles observed outside one of the quarantine centre of Assam, brought this to notice. The Pran Group, a Private company from Bangladesh has captured the huge market of North-East India and also is providing employment to many workers across Tripura and Assam. This is where one is bound to reflect on the question if there are not enough people in Assam to start a local company as such where everything is produced and sold by our own people. With the immense response of migrant workers collected through this research, there surely lies a way ahead in the generation of local ideas and local food items.
- Local self government together with the financial institutions should be assigned with the responsibility of spreading the idea of self-reliance among farmers, migrant workers, women and youth.
- The country should make its supply chain stronger to become self-reliant. Textile industries should be scaled up. A country that was earlier dependent on China for Personal Protective Equipments(PPE) has now started producing 400,000 PPEs per day.<sup>[16]</sup>  
This shows that India can gradually start producing its raw materials with the help of migrant worker.
- India has a huge market but stringent laws and a highly formalised bureaucratic system. To appear as a manufacturing hub that not only produces for it but also exports to other countries while maintaining a global economic outlook. India has to come up with laws that are business friendly.
- A competitive federalism is required in long run, but Post COVID-19, the country has to ensure a common playing field with a more aware, consistent and cohesive framework achieved through collaboration among the various layers of government.

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The pursuit for Atmanirbhar sows the seeds of a new course of long-term development for India. It is based on the Swadeshi philosophy and could serve as the pivot in which India can emerge as a hub for manufacturing and investment. Incentivising the production facilities in not only Assam but in the entire country is critical, not just for assembly, but for raw materials too. The government should consider moving away from broad-stroke international policies and shift to a country to country model. The focus should remain on a bilateral trade agreement which ensure a balance of payments as well as technology sharing. The government should forge partnership or alliance models with other countries and companies, especially in areas where indigenous capabilities do not exist. The already operational Act East Policy and ASEAN agreements, Assam and North-east will be further benefited if a strong framework for collaboration and financing infrastructure projects are established.

While many states across India have started working on the revival plans of their economy, Assam may not have to do the same. Assam's industry contributes only around INR 1.58k crore to its GDP. This means that there is nothing much to revive when it comes to Assam's industrial economy. With the large number of incoming migrant workers, Assam can put all its might in developing local entrepreneurship and thereby utilising its huge man-power resources. A new world will emerge post COVID and it can be turned into a golden opportunity for less developed states like Assam with bold measures in land, labour and law areas.

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