

Urban Street Vendors and Rural Urban Migration of Assam with Special Reference to Covid -19

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Abstract

Street traders have been rendering a significant role in the economy of Assam over the decades. The informal sector has been facing various challenges whereas government policies for the street traders are inadequate and insufficient. The magnitude of street vendors has been rising in urban and semi-urban areas of Assam in the post globalisation era which poses an emerging threat to the district administrators, town planners and public. A sample of 400 street vendors of sample cities of Guwahati, Tezpur and Jorhat of Assam have been analysed with respect to rural-urban migration. This study attempts to explore certain aspects of street vendors of the state in relation to Covid-19. It endeavours to highlight the changes in the way of life of migrant street vendors, their economic habits and government's measures to rehabilitate them in eking out their livelihood and reduce their economic crisis arising out of Covid-19.

Keywords: Street Vendors, Informal Sector, Covid-19, Globalization.

INTRODUCTION

Migration traditionally formed an integral part of rural livelihoods, often represents a calculated strategy by rural households to improve their lives (Choithani and Roshania, 2020). The Big Push theory of economic growth demonstrates that higher income earning people of rural areas tend migrate to live in urban area and earn more wealth whereas rural poor and lower middle class also migrate to urban areas to earn basic livelihoods and get rid of poverty and unemployment (Taneja and Myer, 2007). The migrant workers in unorganized sector tend to move towards better off places due to improved and modern infrastructure and good connectivity facilitates in providing information regarding availability of employment opportunities which leads to greater mobility of workers (NCEUS, 2007). According to Census of India (2001), the total migrant population of India was 314.5 million. The NSSO Reports and Census of India revealed that the migration rate is increased remarkably in India during post reform era which was increased to about 450

million in 2011 (Census of India, 2011) and 90 percent of these total migrants have been primarily engaged in informal sector. Over last two decades, there have been continuous high rate of organized migration in unorganized sector more particularly in construction industry where the workers are mostly recruited through contractors. The Census of India, 2011 reveals that more than four-fifth of total employment in India constitutes informal sector employment. At present, there are more than 2 crore urban street vendors including mobile vendors and almost 2 crore street vendors in rural areas in India. Urban street vendors, also known as urban micro trading class, are perhaps the most visible in urban informal economy.

According to National Urban Livelihood Mission (NULM) source, the numbers of street vendors in the major cities of Assam have been tremendously increasing over recent years which are more than 30,000 occupying the street, pavements and other open urban space. At present, more than 45,000 street vendors are operating their business in the city of Guwahati.

If we add the traders who come to sell products and services at the weekly, bi-weekly or other market, the figure would increase further. Most of the rural unemployed from various districts of Assam, other neighbouring states like West Bengal, Meghalaya, Bihar and neighbouring countries like Bangladesh easily flow to the state for livelihood.

Objective:

The twin objectives of the study are a) to analyse the relation between street vending activities and rural-urban migration and b) to analyse the lockdown effects of Covid-19 upon street vendors of Assam and government's measures to rehabilitate the street traders.

Hypothesis:

The street vending activities have no relation with rural-urban migration.

Methodology:

The study is basically an empirical research based on primary data in which 400 samples have been interviewed from three sample municipal cities of Assam i.e. Guwahati, Tezpur and Jorhat. Sample urban street vendors are categorised into eight distinct categories as shown in Table-1 which encompasses both stationary as well as mobile vendors. Table-1 depicts the sample framing of the study and it reveals the category of work performed by the sample urban street traders. In each category of vendors, both male and

Table-1: Sample framing (Number of sample urban street traders according to working category)

Sample Vendors	Vegetable	Fruit	Fish	Meat	Stationary	Food	Garment	Service	Total
Number	79	52	53	28	46	88	37	17	400
Percentage	19.75	13	13.25	7	11.5	22	9.25	4.25	100

female vendors are taken into account. Convenience sampling and descriptive statistics have been applied for the analysis to test the hypothesis and achieve the objectives of the study. For this study, 200 sample urban street vendors from Guwahati, 100 samples each from Tezpur and Jorhat municipal cities of Assam have been selected.

Review of Literature:

Migrants street traders are visible almost all the cities across the globe. For instance, more than four-fifth of the vendors in Bangkok are migrants. Many of the street traders in Bangkok were previously engaged in other occupations like farming, manual labour and monthly wage work (Nirathorn, 2006). Street vending has been prevailing in India for last few centuries. Although most of the small street traders were local people, there were also those who came from far off places like Afghanistan, Tibet and even China (Bhowmik, 2010).

Street trading has been mounting up in various cities in India with increasing urbanisation as well as due to influx of rural poor to the cities for livelihood (Bhattacharya and De, 1987). Besides cross border migration, there are inter-state movements, urban transfer and influx of refugees at different spells from neighbouring countries to cities like Kolkata, Imphal, Guwahati and so on. In Kashmir, most of the street vendors were immigrants from Tibet, Bihar and other parts of India. In Nepal, peasants and conflict affected families searching for work as well as safe place to live migrated to urban areas and to sustain their livelihood (Timalsina, 2012). Displaced labour from rural sector, often non-remunerative farming and lack of sustained income earning source at rural areas, unemployment and poverty in rural areas also lead to migration of people to urban areas in search of a better existence (Bhat and Nengroo, 2013; Dendukuri, 2014).

Results and findings:

The study reveals that 65% of the total sample urban street vendors of the state have adopted street vending as first occupation as a source of livelihood whereas 35% of the total samples have chosen street vending as a source of

livelihood who worked in other occupations before entering into street trade. In other words, more than two-third of the sample street traders of the state have undertaken street vending as first occupation to sustain livelihood and support their family. It can be shown with the help of following figure-1.

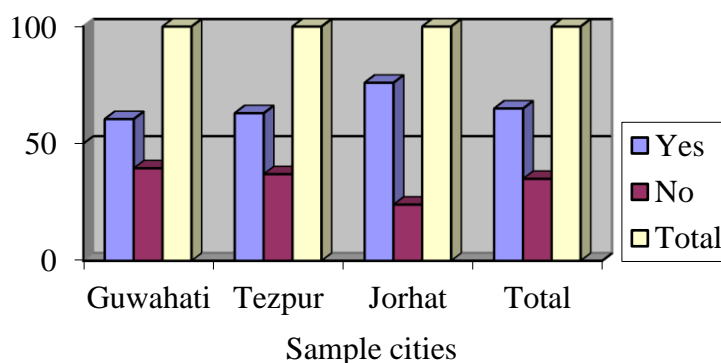


Figure-1: *Sample street vendors according to street trading as first occupation*

As depicted in table-2, almost 70% of the total surveyed urban street vendors of Assam worked as agricultural labourer and wage earner prior to taking street trading as a source of sustenance. It means they are mostly migrated from rural farm

sector. On the other hand, only 4.3% of the total street traders were remaining underemployed and 26% of the sample street vendors were student and self-employed before adopting street trade.

Table-2: *Distribution of sample street traders according to nature of previous occupation*

Previous occupation	Guwahati		Tezpur		Jorhat		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Agricultural labourer	24	30	13	35.1	12	50.0	49	35.0
Wage earner	26	32	17	45.9	5	20.8	48	34.3
Student	17	21	2	5.4	0	0	19	13.6
Underemployed	4	5	0	0	2	8.3	6	4.3
Self-employed	8	10	5	13.5	5	20.8	18	12.9
Total	79	100	37	100	24	100	140	100

Source: Field Survey, 2018-19

It is revealed in the fig.2 that 66.5% of the total sample urban street vendors of the state come from rural areas and only 33.5% of the total samples hails from urban areas itself. In other

words, own house of the two-third of total sample urban street traders is located at rural areas.

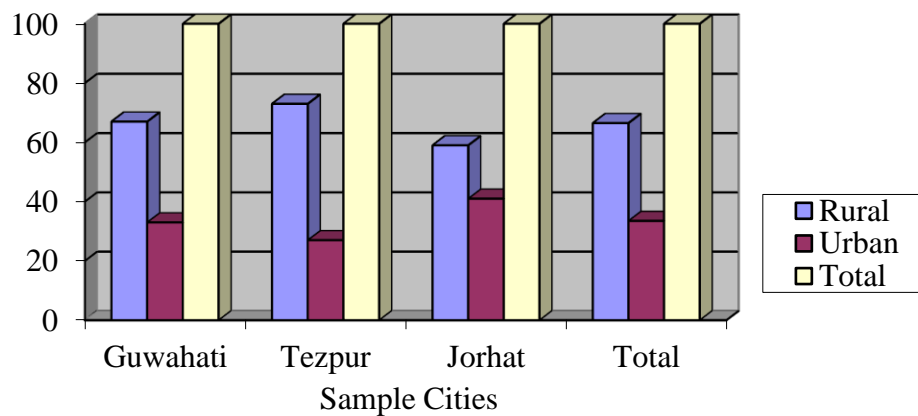


Figure-2: Sample street vendors according to location of own house

In this study, migrated from native place implies people who are migrated from their home place either from different parts of Assam or from various states of India and abroad. Figure-3 reveals that more than half of the total sample urban street traders of Assam are migrated

from native place. In regard to the flow of people from rural to urban areas, more than 81.5%

sample urban street traders of the state are found to be migrated from their native place to Guwahati to render street trade business. The study reveals that most of the surveyed urban street vendors of the state are basically from Assam, 87.5% of the total sample are permanent inhabitants of Assam whereas 12.5% are migrants from rest of India (10.2% of them are from the state of Bihar).

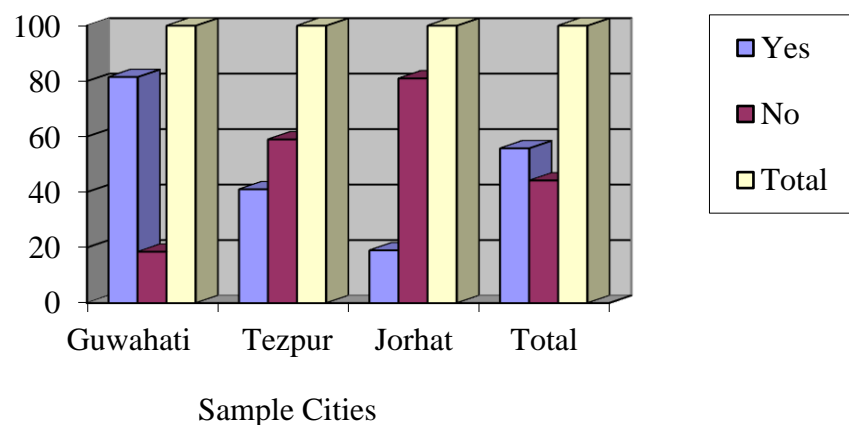


Figure-3: Sample street vendors according to migration status

Table 3: Calculation of Pearson Chi-Square

Causes of street vending		Migration status			Pearson Chi-Square df = 1, 1, 1
		Migrated	Non-migrated	Total	
Easy option of earnings	Yes	152	100	252	$X^2 = .029$

		(63.3)	(62.5)	(63.0)	P =.866
	No	88 (36.7)	60 (37.5)	148 (37.0)	
Avoidance of Govt. norms	Yes	30 (12.5)	31 (19.4)	61 (15.2)	X ² = 3.511 P=.061
	No	210 (87.5)	129 (80.6)	339 (84.8)	
Profitable business	Yes	45 (18.8)	42 (26.2)	87 (21.8)	X ² = 3.173 P= .075
	No	195 (81.2)	118 (73.8)	313 (78.2)	
Less capital required	Yes	108 (45.0)	66 (41.2)	174 (43.5)	X ² = .549 P= .459
	No	132 (55.0)	94 (58.8)	226 (56.5)	
Sale own product	Yes	20 (8.3)	15 (9.4)	35 (8.8)	X ² = .130 P= .718
	No	220 (91.7)	145 (90.6)	365 (91.2)	
Only option for livelihood	Yes	139 (57.9)	91 (56.9)	230 (57.5)	X ² = .043 P= .836
	No	101 (42.1)	69 (43.1)	170 (42.5)	

The migration status of the sample urban street traders of Assam reveals that 240 sample urban street traders of the total sample traders of Assam are migrated from their native place. In other words, 60 % of the total surveyed urban street traders of the three sample municipal cities of Assam have been migrated from their native place. In analyzing the causes of street vending among the migrant sample urban street traders of the state, the study has highlighted upon six main causes of urban street trade. The causes of street vending are stated as easy option of earning, scope of avoiding government norms, street vending as profitable business, requirement of less capital, to sale own or

domestically produced goods and street trading as only source of livelihood.

As revealed in the table-3, the study has revealed that street vending as the only source of livelihood among the migrated sample urban street vendors in which the Chi-square value is .043 and it is less than 0.05. It shows that migration status of the sample urban street traders are not associated with the street trading business (there is no association between the street vending business and rural urban migration). Thus the hypothesis stating that the street vending activities have no relation with rural-urban migration can be accepted. In other words, we can conclude that rural-urban

migration has no relation with street trading activities at urban areas.

Economic effects of lockdown on migrants due to Covid-19: The pandemic of Covid-19 has posed various threats to the human civilization causing many disturbances in the living pattern of people. In India, the central government issued some guidelines regarding social distancing and millions of urban poor found it difficult to maintain. Street vendors are one of the visible segments of the urban poor and rural migrant poor who do not have adequate space to reside in cities and there is no social security measures to survive and protect their life. In Covid-19 crisis, it becomes impossible for the street vendor's community to obey social distancing and sustain their livelihood.

Sudden declaration of lockdown left millions of migrants and informal sector employees stranded with no work and insufficient money. Millions of internal migrants in India have been suffering from acute distress due to the pandemic. Initially, India has fully failed to aid stranded internal migrants and later on accommodated many special trains to bring the stranded migrants back to their native places. The central government succeeded to bring back more than 60 lakh migrant workers to their native place.

In Assam, after the declaration of lockdown, thousands of migrants and workers of informal sector such as wage earners, casual workers moved back to their native villages and some street vendors remained in Guwahati mostly in rented houses and few on shared basis. There is a possibility of spreading the infection of Covid-19 in the reverse migration of street vendors from urban areas to their native villages of various districts of Assam. The reverse migration would aggravate rural unemployment and poverty. The government of Assam has brought back thousands of migrant labourers to their native places by maintaining Covid protocol through roadways and railways.

Most of the families of urban street vendors live in dense neighbourhood in the metropolitan cities of our country. They live with unreliable and often shared access to basic services like water, electricity, sanitation and so on. Covid-19 pandemic would further aggravate the worsening condition of the living pattern of thousands of urban street traders in the sample

cities of Assam. Moreover, majority of the urban street vendors are not able to avail any social security measures like insurance policy. Mostly being unskilled and uneducated, they have no other employment opportunity and government treat their activities as illegal. The families of urban street traders are required to prepare for the worst and to violate the lockdown rules. They have to face food insecurity. Under this circumstance, street traders need to choose two alternatives i.e. bear the punishment for violating the lockdown rules or accept starvation death if there is no sufficient government support measures.

Walter Fernandez (2020) in the context of pandemic era has rightly remarked, "The pandemic has not wrecked the system but has exposed the weaknesses existing in it already." Most of the migrant workers including urban street traders who lost their present job live in hazardous areas. During Covid-19, street traders are facing serious difficulties to earn income and unable to feed their families and consequently they would face trouble in retaining the rent room in the city. It compels them to go back to their native places. Thus reverse migration would further aggravate rural unemployment, rural poverty, income inequality and regional imbalances.

Governments measures to rehabilitate the street traders:

The Union Cabinet on 1st June, 2020 launched a special micro-credit facility scheme 'Prime Minister Street Vendors Atma Nirbhar Nidhi' (PMSVA Nidhi) for providing affordable loans to the street traders to sustain their livelihoods amidst the pandemic era. The Centre has unveiled Rs.5000 crore special credit facility for street vendors to fight against the adverse impact on their livelihood due to nationwide lockdown. Economic stimulus package of 20 lakh crore announced in second tranche of lockdown is likely to benefit 50 lakh cash strapped street vendors (N. Sitharaman, Finance Minister, Govt.of India, 2020). The Union Finance Minister has assured that the initial working capital loan of Rs. 10000 would be provided to each street vendor which is repayable in monthly instalments in one year. Moreover, timely/early repayment of the loan, an interest subsidy @ 7% per annum will be credited to the bank account of the beneficiaries through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) on half-yearly basis. This is for

the first time in independent India the street vendors from semi-urban or rural areas would become beneficiaries of an urban livelihood programme. Moreover, a digital platform with web portal/mobile app is being developed to administer the novel scheme properly with an end to end solution which would help to integrate the vendors into the formal financial system. Since, most of the street traders live near subsistence level who have neither savings nor confidence to borrow, therefore, 'measures like cash transfer is the need of the hour' says Arvind Singh, coordinator, National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI). Liquidity support, interest free loans and provision of MUDRA loans with subsidies are some relevant relief measures undertaken by the government in this regard.

Suggestions and Conclusion:

To overcome and to rehabilitate the migrants from the worse situations arising out of Covid 19 pandemic and reduce the rural urban migration of workforce in an economy like India, we should extend and implement 'Vocal for Local' policy which emphasizes highly on protecting and exploring the local resources. It would rebuild and strengthen the resource base which in turn would help in reducing floods and droughts. Formation of more self-help groups (SHGs) and other organized groups among the migrants will help to replant the forests, replenish water sources and revive the land which has been remaining infertile by natural calamities. Similarly, rural agro-based industrial units should be set up and expanded by using local technology. Government should improve the existing institutional mechanism like marketing, finance etc. in the unbanked areas in order to accelerate agro-processing and agro-marketing activities. It would help in absorbing the surplus migrants including urban street traders. Moreover, the MGNREGA schemes (2006) should be strengthened and duly monitored. Government can emphasize on income generation scheme through on-farm and off-farm opportunities (this was one goal of Rajasthan State Agricultural Policy, 2013). Adequate economic response with long term effects is need of the hour in this pandemic era.

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