

Rural Labour Exodus from Assam: Exploring the Trends and its Causes

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Abstract:

Migration is not a new process in Assam; as it has been recorded since the dawn of the history. From the pre-colonial period to this time, labour migration into the state shows different contextual streams mostly after the British annexure, which has brought changes in almost every sphere in the state. But in last two and half decades, the labour exodus from Assam has been evident to other states of the country. In this light, the paper focuses on the socio-economic characters of the migrants hailing from Assam to make an understanding of who do migrate. It also seeks to examine the directions and causes of this long-distance migration from the research areas. This paper is based on qualitative data collected primarily in three districts of Assam considering 90 respondents through purposive sampling. The exodus of labourers from Assam caused by various factors such as unavailability of diverse employment, low wages, poor livelihood, natural calamities, socio- psychological tensions and others.

Keywords: Migrant labourer, out-migration, employment, livelihood.

Introduction:

Labour migration in India has been witnessing from rural areas to its urban based destinations happens in search of better employment opportunities and a better life (Ashok & Thomas, 2014; Mitra & Murayama, 2011). Both push and pull factors are related to migration depending on its nature and types. So, it is important to know that whether the migrant labourers are migrating due to compelling factors of the native place or they are lured by the influencing factors of the destination. Especially in case of temporary migration, the depth of poverty, land holding, indebtedness, low wages and seasonal nature of employment even underemployment as push factors and better job with higher pay in destination places as pull factors play the triggering role in out-migration of labourers (Keshri & Bhagat, 2012; Kundu & Sarangi, 2007). In case of its nature, it can be considered as a process which may govern individually, by family or a group of families; be permanent, temporary or seasonal; may be initiated by economic, social, psychological or religious concern and may be local or distant (Patil & Trivedi, 2000).

Most of out-migration, especially of males to other states within the country occurs in Bihar, Jharkhand & West Bengal; whereas Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka experienced more in-migration (Ashok & Thomas, 2014). From Assam too, an exodus of labourers has been reported in different times to other states of the country as well as across the country. Initially the out-migration from Assam was concentrated among the Assamese middle-class people in educational purpose and later on business (Choudhury, 1996). Studies (Sarkar, 2015; Muktiar, 2018; Muktiar & Sharma, 2019) show the trend of labour out-migration in search of work have projected migrant labourers hailing from this region

working in cities of other states.

In light of the labour out-migration, the paper focuses on the socio-economic characters of the migrants and their households from the rural Assam to make an understanding of who are the migrant labourers. It seeks to examine the causes or motivations of this long-distance migration stream from the research areas.

Methods:

The study is conducted in three districts of Assam namely Dhemaji, Majuli and Golaghat. With the help of district administrations, pockets were identified namely Gamariguri, Kakodonga, Dhansiri and Tengani from Golaghat; Sissiborgaon and Bordoloni from Dhemaji; Jengraimukh and Fuloni from Majuli based on from where an exodus of labourers have been experiencing to other states. By employing purposive sampling, a total of 90 migrant labourers were interviewed for collection of data through semi-structured interview schedule.

Results and Discussion:

Profile of the migrants

Migrant labourers are found mostly from the young age groups, where 78 out of 90 respondents belong to the age group of 20-35 years. Among the respondents 35 had no income and 33 had below 5000 rupees per month, which shows an insufficient economic position of them before the migration. Educational attainment of the respondents reflected that migrant labourers have attended a minimum of formal education, where mostly high school and senior secondary school attendant were found.

Table: 1 Socio-economic profile of the migrants

Age group (years)	Number of respondents		
	Male	Female	Total
20-25	18 (20%)	1 (1.11%)	19 (21.11%)
25-30	20 (22.22%)	3 (3.33%)	23 (25.56%)
30-35	34 (37.78%)	2 (2.22%)	36 (40%)
35-40	11 (12.22%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (12.22%)
Monthly income before migration			
No income	33 (36.67%)	2 (2.22%)	35 (38.89%)
Below 5000	30 (33.33%)	3 (3.33%)	33 (36.67%)
5000-10000	18 (20%)	1 (1.11%)	19 (21.11%)
10000-15000	3 (3.33%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (3.33%)
Educational attainments			
Attended lower primary	7 (7.79%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (7.79%)
Attended upper primary	11 (12.22%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (12.22%)
Under matriculation	22 (24.44%)	0 (0.0%)	22 (24.44%)
HSLC passed	22 (24.44%)	0 (0.0%)	22 (24.44%)
HS passed	20 (22.22%)	5 (5.56%)	25 (27.78%)
Graduation	2 (2.22%)	1 (1.11%)	3 (3.33%)

Source: Primary data

Table: 2 Family set up of the respondents

Types of family	Size of family			Total number of respondents
	Below 5	5-10	More than 10	
Nuclear family	9 (10%)	14 (15.56%)	0 (0.0%)	23 (25.56%)
Joint family	1 (1.11%)	54 (60%)	12 (13.33%)	67 (74.44%)
Total respondents	10 (11.11%)	68 (75.56%)	12 (13.33%)	90 (100%)

Source: Primary data

Most of the respondents (74.44%) in the study are found from joint family setup and majority of them came from large family having 5-10 members. The study also shows that respondents belonging to OBC have highest share (50%) followed by ST (40%) among the migrant labourers. Among the total respondents, most are found unmarried (72.22%).

The economic status of labourers at the native place is found significant that compelled them to take the decision of migration to find other income generating sources. Also, the larger family size and the marital status of migrants are found important that impacts on the migration process.

Direction of out flow of labourers

Kundu & Sarangi (2007) found high rate of movement from rural to urban based destination in search of alternative livelihood beyond cultivation. Labour out-migration from the selected districts also characterized with a direction of flow more towards urban based destinations such as Chennai, Goa, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Mumbai and others.

Table: 3 Nature of the destination places

Categorisation of destination place	Number of respondents
Rural	7 (7.78%)
Urban	52 (57.78%)
Industrial	31 (34.44%)
Total respondents	90 (100%)

Source: Primary data

The present study finds the high momentum of urban based migration and industrial sites among the respondents. Also, respondents are found engaging in construction and manufacturing work along with security provider in urban and industrial based places. It was found in the study that urban places have better work opportunities and living arrangements which attract labourers more in numbers than its rural counterparts.

Push factors of labour out-migration

Push factors generally arise in the place of origin. Mainly agricultural labourers compelled themselves to migrate out due to the lack of irrigational facilities and other infrastructural constraints, low land holdings, and also because of unemployment, low wages, poverty and indebtedness at the place of origin (Keshri & Bhagat 2012). Other important factors noted as lack of appropriate development policies for non-farm employment generation, land development activities, integration of industry and agriculture, crop

insurance scheme in flood affected areas, transportation and marketing facilities for crop output; social tensions such as family feuds, caste discrimination which compelled people to move out (Kumar & Sidhu 2005, Kumar & Barman 2018).

The research areas are primarily dominated by cultivation and people engage themselves in agriculture-based occupations and wage-earning activities in the village. Before the migration respondents were mainly unemployed or engaged as agricultural labourers, daily wage earners and self-employed. Also, the economic condition of the migrant’s households is at subsistence level and the average income of the family members shows at a low level. The earning status of the migrants before their migration was in a negligible state as most of them had no income before their migration.

Table: 4 Economic engagements of respondents prior to migration

Economic engagement of respondents prior to migration	Number of respondents		
	Male	Female	Total
No economic engagement/Unemployed	33 (36.67%)	2 (2.22%)	35 (38.89%)
Daily wage earner	23 (25.56%)	3 (3.33%)	26 (28.89%)
Farmer	4 (4.44%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (4.44%)
Agricultural labourer	22 (24.44%)	0 (0.0%)	22 (24.44%)
Self-employed	2 (2.22%)	1 (1.11%)	3 (3.33%)
Total respondents	84 (93.33%)	6 (6.67%)	90 (100%)

Source: Primary data

Table: 5 Household wise monthly incomes of respondents from all sources

Household income of the respondents	Number of respondents		
	Joint family	Nuclear family	Total
Below 10000	1 (1.11%)	3 (3.33%)	4 (4.44%)
10000-20000	35 (38.89%)	18 (20%)	53 (58.89%)
20000-30000	24 (26.67%)	2 (2.22%)	26 (28.89%)
30000-40000	7 (7.78%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (7.78%)
Total respondents	67 (74.44%)	23 (25.56%)	90 (100%)

Source: Primary data

The wage rate at the native place shows that male workers get 250-300 rupees as a daily wage earner and 200-250 rupees as an agricultural labourer, whereas female workers get 150-200 as daily wage earner and agricultural labourer. Also, the daily wage earners get low wages even in an irregular mode. In case of rural areas, there is also less availability of works on daily basis for wage earners. In this case respondents admitted their less engagement in work under MNREGA due to irregular payment and insufficient working days to fulfil their daily needs of livelihood. As one of the respondents said- “We seldom get to work by using our job card. Sometimes we go for cleaning public pond or stream and work on embankment; but it is like once or twice in a month. For the payment too we have to wait for a long.” Thus, the wage rate at the place of origin triggers rural labourers to migrate out of their native place in search of better job opportunities with high pay.

Table: 6 Cultivable land holding of respondents

Land holding in bighas*	Number of respondents		
	Joint family	Nuclear family	Total
No cultivable land	1 (1.11%)	3 (3.33%)	4 (4.44%)
Less than 5 bighas	10 (11.11%)	18 (20%)	28 (31.11%)
5 to 10 bighas	42 (46.67%)	2 (2.22%)	44 (48.89%)
10 to 15 bighas	11 (12.22%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (12.22%)
Above 15 bighas	3 (3.33%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (3.33%)
Total respondents	67 (74.44%)	23 (25.56%)	90 (100%)

Source: Primary data, *1 Bigha= 0.13387 Hectares

Majority of migrant labourers have considerably low land holding than other members of the village. Only 3 (3.33%) respondents have land holding above 15 bighas but belong to joint family and 44 (48.89%) respondents reported their holding of land between 5-10 bighas. Significantly 4 (4.44%) respondents have reported no holding of cultivable land.

In Assam the cropping pattern is mainly dominated by the cultivation of winter paddy, autumn paddy and summer paddy based on rain fed. Mostly the Brahmaputra valley of Assam is susceptible to floods as it hits every year a large amount of areas causing extreme damage to crops, lives and properties. Most of the time, the frequent floods destroy crops, create waterlogging and soil erosion in cropping areas. These factors cause low yield and low growth of agriculture sector in the state (Mandal, 2010). With the less amount of cultivable land, the agricultural practices among the villagers still remain in the traditional way of cultivation without any facilities of irrigation, high variety seeds and fertilizers in the field. The crop rotation system is not performed in the study areas, where only the rice cultivation is performed that starts in monsoon season and reaps in winter. Only in the river bank areas, cultivation of rabi crops and vegetables are found; but due to unavailability of land among the households of migrants near the river bank, they are unable to do so. This insufficiency of land results in low productivity and only provides a subsistence level of livelihood. Due to subsistence productivity, the marketization of production has not developed properly in the study areas. Although it is observed in the study areas that nearest market facilities are there within the distance of 5kms, but due to the lack of surplus production, marketization of food grains happens in a minimal way.

Respondents of river bank pockets of Majuli and Dhemaji stated that they have experienced the loss of production due to the yearly flood and the loss of cultivable land near the river bank due to the land erosion. As one migrant stated- “Although we have less amount of cultivable land but we manage to practice paddy cultivation during its season. But every year we face some loss either caused by flood or land erosion. Even sometimes we could not start the process of cultivation on time due to over water logging in the field.”

In contrary, respondents of pockets of Golaghat stated that they have experienced the loss in paddy cultivation due to the drought at the time of initiation of the process. As one of them stated- “This time we could not even start ploughing on most of our fields due to insufficient rain during the season. Though some have managed to plant but later it got affected by the drought and could not reaped anything from the field.”

The existence of societal tension like family feuds, poor economic conditions, caste discrimination etc. can force an individual to migrate out of the origin place (Kumar & Sidhu 2005, Kumar & Barman 2018).

It is found that respondents having no prior economic involvement had to face a social tension of living a life with no earning sources at the origin place. As a 26-year-old respondent stated- “Now a days, living without any income can give very discomfort as we need money to buy our necessary things. Even at this age I don’t feel good to ask money from parents every time I need something to buy. People in the village also use to ask repeatedly whenever they meet me that whether I am economically engaging or not.”

Also, respondents from the age group of 20-25 years old were found immediate secondary school or college dropouts, who tend to migrate more to avoid the no work situation. Due to the dissatisfactory performance and the lack of motive to pursue higher studies, respondents of 20-25 years age group reported their discontinuation of formal education. Also, they find prior migrants from their place as reference group after seeing their socio-economic well-being after migration, which motivates them to migrate out to mitigate their no work situation at the native place. In addition, the lack of co-ordination and co-operation between the family members may impact the decision of migration. As a 21-year-old female migrant stated- “I lost my parents in my childhood and I live with my elder brother and sister-in-law. I did not find support and co-ordination from my sister-in-law to continue my study. Due to financial problem, I dropped out from the college and took a training of hotel management under Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana at free of cost. After completing a three-month course, I got the chance to go to Gujarat for work. Initially I did not get approval from my family members and relatives, but I approached them and got the permission to go there. I had no other alternative at that time, so I decided better to move out for work instead of passing my days at home hearing harsh words.”

The rural employment generation in Assam by the government over the years can be noticed as not sufficient that job card is issued to 4588555 people, where only 42362 households were provided 100 days of employment. Even the financial targets and achievements of various schemes and programmes during 2015-16 were not up to the mark (Statistical Hand Book of Assam, 2016). Despite of implementing extensive plans and policies by the government soon after independence for poverty alleviation and employment generation, it did not work as it were supposed to be; where the limited funds for development, poor connectivity and lack of awareness among people, insufficiency of necessary financial institutions created hurdles for its success (Krishna 2009). With high incidences of poverty and deficiencies in the delivery system, Assam has also showed unsatisfactory performance of Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (Reddy 2013). The report of Fifth Annual Employment-Unemployment Survey (2015-16) has also addressed the unemployment rate per 1000 person, where Assam has recorded 61 in total. Thus, the lack of diversity in occupation at the place of origin has come up as important determinant of labour out-migration. Apart from farming activities, availability of non-farm activities and industrial work setups are few in the villages; for which labourers do not avail alternative livelihood sources at the native places.

Pull factors of labour migration

In case of host places, migrant labourers get attracted towards mostly urban based destinations due to its employment opportunities and higher wages, better living conditions than rural areas (Mitra and Murayama 2009; Kumar & Sidhu 2005). Along with these factors at the place of destination, Kumar & Sidhu (2005) again added factors that fulfil self-aspirations such as freedom of nuclear family and better living conditions as influencing pull factors.

Table: 7 Occupation after migration of respondents

Categorisation of occupations at destination	Number of respondents		
	Male	Female	Total
Supervisor/In-charge	6 (6.67%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (6.67%)
Fabricator/Welder	3 (3.33%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (3.33%)
Security Guard	24 (26.67%)	0 (0.0%)	24 (26.67%)
Construction Workers	10 (11.11%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (11.11%)
Manufacturing workers	12 (13.33%)	3 (3.33%)	15 (16.66%)
Cook/Caterer	8 (8.89%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (8.89%)
Hotel Attendant/Housekeeper	10 (11.11%)	2 (2.22%)	12 (13.33%)
Daily Wage Earner	5 (5.56%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (5.56%)
Others	6 (6.67%)	1 (1.11%)	7 (7.78%)
Total respondents	84 (93.33%)	6 (6.67%)	90 (100%)

Source: Primary data

The variant of job occupancy among the respondents at the host place differs from their engagement at the native place. It shows the availability of employment opportunities and its diversification at the destination places which has influenced the unemployed and under-employed labourers from rural Assam. In this case, educational qualification helps the migrants to get a better job at the place of destinations. Mostly respondents who have completed their HS and Graduation have availed supervisor and hospitality services. Those have qualified matriculation have availed security personnel, manufacturing workers and caterer jobs. Respondents attended high school level have availed security guard, construction and manufacturing workers, and cook. Those have attended upper primary level have availed jobs in construction sectors and other helpers at unorganised sectors; whereas those have attended only the lower level of education have availed jobs as manufacturing workers and daily wage earners at the place of destinations. A respondent worked as a supervisor in a company stated- “People can get many works there as are available and if one has studied more, he will get good job with good salary. One having qualified HS or Graduation can easily get a salary above 20000 by engaging as supervisor or in-charge in any company. Also, they pay more if we have more work experiences.”

Migrants also stated that at the place of destination they received 300-700 rupees of daily wages, which was satisfactory to them than that of the wages they had received at the place of origin before migration. Also, they received extra remuneration for extra hours of works at the work place. Respondents stated that the employers look after the payment of salaries regularly as daily, semi-monthly and monthly basis. This system of high and regular payment at the host states attracts labourers from Assam as it provides an economic security to them.

In our study, respondents admitted that the opportunities available at the destination place provide a motivation to migrate there as they availed information about the host place from the prior migrants of their place of origin. The prior migrants use to work as a reference group for the aspirant migrants by providing both material and informational assistances. Migrant labourers are attracted towards the standard of living received at the place of destination. They also avail accommodation with food free of cost provided by the employers. As one respondent stated- “To be honest I moved to work to fulfil my wish to travel out of the state. We got attracted by hearing about the livelihood at the place of host states from our co-villagers who have migrated before. They only provided us the information such as

availability of jobs and salaries, facilities of good accommodation and transportation etc. We cultured a desire to get the opportunities available at the host places which are not here at our own place and we do migrate along with our co-villagers.”

Migrants at the place of destination have experienced a freedom of living and better accommodation arrangement than their earlier days at the native place. Migrants have availed free accommodation and food, a shift wise working duty between 6 to 10 hours a day in a favourable working setup, health check-up and treatment free of cost provided by the employers at the place of migration. Labourers engaged in construction and manufacturing sectors also availed transportation facilities to go to their working site daily from the living site. Thus, the better way of living at destinations came up as an influencing factor of migration among the labourers.

Conclusion:

The process of labour out-migration from the rural Assam has identified certain push factors associated with the place of origin that compels labourers to migrate. The lack of diverse employment opportunities, low wage rate, inappropriate management of employment generation schemes, flood and land erosion, low productivity of agriculture etc. have acted as major factors of labour out-migration. Labourers tend to migrate out mostly to urban based destinations to maximize their income and livelihood condition of the households. Due to the social network with the prior migrants of the same locality, rural labourers are able to avail information about the destination places and also get monetary assistance along with the information in the process of migration that creates a nature of chain migration.

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