

RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Title: Arunachal Pradesh's response to migrant workers during COVID-19 lockdown: A case study in Itanagar.

Arunachal Pradesh is the largest state in North East India in terms of area (83,743 Sq Km) with a population of approximately 13 lakh. According to Lusome and Bhagat (2020), Arunachal Pradesh is the only North East state with a higher percentage of migrants than the country average with about 45 percent of population as migrants.

Of this, about 28 percent of the migrants move to Arunachal Pradesh for work after acquiring documentation, such as an Inner Line Permit (ILP). An ILP is required for any non-Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribe (APST) person to visit, work or reside in the state.

As per the data available with the state's Labour and Employment Department, only 282 migrant workers were registered with the department from 2017 to 2020.

The Arunachal Pradesh Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board has 46, 448 registered workers. However, there is no segregation of migrant and local workers.

Several other low-income migrant workers remain undocumented and unaccounted for.

While Arunachal Pradesh is dependent on the migrant workforce, the small indigenous communities carry within them the apprehension of being marginalised in their own state, which often leads to hostility between the 'APSTs' and the 'non-APSTs'.

Movements led by pressure groups, such as the Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU), to clear the state of "illegal" migrants and immigrants are evidence of it.

When Assam published its final draft of the National Register of Citizens on 30 July, 2018, the AAPSU on 1 August, 2018, had set a 15-day deadline for all illegal migrants/ immigrants to leave the state.

Some NGOs and members of the public have also raised concerns regarding crimes committed by low-income level migrant workers and sought their extradition. However, these claims have not been substantiated by documents, data or statistics.

The Covid situation escalated the unjustified fears of the local population.

This was further heightened when the state recorded its first Covid positive case on 2 April, 2020 in a 31-year-old migrant labour, who had returned to Tezu in Lohit district from the Tablighi Jamaat at Nizamuddin, Delhi.

With test reports and photos of the asymptomatic man's family going viral on social media, the state's health department unwittingly became part of the popular narrative that people from certain religions are 'super spreaders'.

The migrant workers were soon perceived as bringing the disease to the state and on 28 July 2020, a video emerged on social media where 21 labourers of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) – undergoing tests for Covid-19 before entry into the state at the Banderdewa check gate- were being threatened by the videographer himself.

The workers turned back after the threats.

The FCI's Food Storage Depot Technical Assistant, N Borah had then informed that it would affect the food supply schemes in the state, such as the Antyodaya Anna Yojana, the supply of primary and general household commodities, and the free rice distribution under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana.

Owing to lack of local workforce population, the migrant workers were among the first to get relaxation on movement, and the state brought the workers back.

Even with tensions prevailing between the indigenous population and migrant workers, the pandemic was evidence that the locals are more tolerant than they are given credit for.

Several NGOs and individuals came out to extend their support to the migrant population through medical camps, distribution of essential items.

While the state government was not prepared for a pandemic, it activated the administration of its 25 districts to take initiative and in the Itanagar-Capital Region (ICR) 7,050 stranded migrant labourers, along with poor and needy public were provided basic relief ration at their places of stay.

At least 277 stranded migrant workers who wished to return to their hometowns were assisted by the ICR administration.

Objective:

The current study proposes to understand the indigenous population's perception towards migrant workers, especially those in the unorganised sector and low-income level, in and around the state capital, Itanagar under Papum Pare district.

It aims to examine whether the acts of solidarity during Covid lockdown made any valuable difference to pre-existing conditions of migrant workers.

It will also evaluate the government's preparedness on handling future similar catastrophe that affects migrants-its most vulnerable workforce.

Interviews will be held with stakeholders.