

## **POVERTY, HUNGER AND EMERGING CHALLENGES TO HUMAN SECURITY UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC PERIOD: A CASE STUDY ON THE DALIT RAJBANGSHI STONE CRUSHERS OF BALASAN RIVER BED**

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*In the perspective of Indian economy, majority of the workers are in the unorganized occupational sectors. COVID-19 pandemic emerged very suddenly across the world and made a severe impact on the economic and livelihood aspects. In Indian context although COVID-19 came in much later period but along with COVID-19 lockdown became an additional consequence. As a result, economic sectors had faced a number of suddenly emerged obstacles. In this regard, the unorganized occupational sectors suffered a major setback. In this regard, the present study has been done on the Dalit Rajbangshi stone crushers of Balasan river bed. The Rajbangshis are the numerically dominant Scheduled Caste group of entire North Bengal and second largest Scheduled Caste group in West Bengal. A large section of them were settled in several other states of India like Assam, Tripura, even in Bangladesh too.*

*During the period of 1971, due to political turmoil in Bangladesh, the concerned people and their ancestors were forced to get displaced from their traditional caste based agricultural occupation, ancestral land and settlement. They became totally roofless and almost resourceless in condition. In search of minimum livelihood requirements they got settled in Balasan River bed and gradually became involved in the stone based occupation. In this way, they have completely lost their caste based traditional occupation and got affiliated to an unorganized occupational sector. Moreover, to the neighbourhood societies, identity of the concerned people are as an occupational group only. The base of their economy is totally related to demand and supply of stone and sand based raw materials for construction works. However, due to pandemic related restrictions and total lock down, the entire system has faced a severe crisis. Naturally it has directly affected on their economy, survival and compelled them to face a new*

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*challenge in every aspect of livelihood. It is primarily focused to know about the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on the economy and livelihood of the studied people. It is based on primary data collected through field work, during the post lock down period.*

**Key words:** Dalit, Rajbangshi, Displacement, Economy, Lockdown, Survival

## INTRODUCTION

The economic organization is treated as a link between the material base to culture and social structure. Economic order in one form or another is a functional prerequisite to societal survival and continuity (Hoebel-Frost,1976:247). From the anthropological point of view economy is believed as a system of managing the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services in a society. Piddington (1952) says “economic system is designated to satisfy material wants of the people to organise production, to control distribution and to determine the rights and claims of ownership within the community (see Dash, 2004:123).” Actually, the economic system of any people quickly reveals that behaviours relating to production, exchange, property and consumption all tie in functionally with social organization and with the political, legal, religious and aesthetic behaviours (Kessing, 1958:223).

In the process of biocultural evolution of man, pandemic is not a new phenomenon. Man became human being through the process of cultural evolution and gradual stages of development related to economic organization. In this process there developed are the man animal association and consequently different zoonotic diseases spreaded to the human ancestors. Obviously there were environmental response and allied supportive mechanism from the nature which ultimately made the human ancestors victorious over time to time pandemics and our livelihood continued. In this sequence at the present day the most talked about phenomenon is the COVID-19 pandemic. Its impact is markedly different from the earlier ones because it has taken place in the post globalization period where economy, culture, business, politics are internationally depended to one another both through the digital way and through the physical movement of human individual.

In the contemporary world the Gross Domestic Product of a nation is directly related with the accessibility of resources and its marketization. At the large scale such products have social and cultural value along with their economic value. In a Nation GDP is directly associated with the working force or the human resource. It is worthy to mention that primarily this human resource is the young generation of any Nation, who are technologically and digitally skilled enough to represent the local resources on front of Global market. Obviously due to COVID-19 pandemic several restrictions have been imposed by the Government upon the citizen. One such restriction is the movement of people and limited transportation of essential goods only. In this consequence trade and business along with organized and unorganized occupational sectors have been seriously affected. Such issues have ultimately generated depression and unrest among the youth globally as well as in India.

#### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Majority of the world's population are subject to anxiety or depression-causing circumstances and more than a third are uncertain of their future career prospects due to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a survey by the International Labour Organization. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every aspect of our lives. Even before the onset of the crisis, the social and economic integration of young people was an ongoing challenge. Now, unless urgent action is taken, young people are likely to suffer severe and long-lasting impacts from the pandemic. The ILO survey aimed to capture the immediate effects of the pandemic on the lives of youths (aged 18 to 29 years) with regard to employment, education, mental health, rights and social activism. Over 12,000 responses were received from 112 countries, with a large proportion coming from educated youths with access to the Internet. The survey found that one in two (i.e., 50 per cent) young people across the world are possibly subject to anxiety or depression, while 17 per cent are probably affected by it. Severe disruption to learning and working, compounded by the health crisis, has seen a deterioration in young people's mental well-being," the survey said. Mental well-being is lowest for young women and younger youths between the ages of 18

and 24 years. Among those who thought that their education would be delayed or might fail, 22 per cent were likely to be affected by anxiety or depression, compared to 12 per cent of students whose education remained on track. According to the report, 38 per cent of young people are uncertain of their future career prospects, with the COVID-19 crisis expected to create more obstacles in the labour market and to lengthen the transition from school to work. The coronavirus, which first emerged in China's Wuhan city, has claimed over 7.4 lakh lives with more than 20 million confirmed cases across the world so far. The ILO survey said some youths have already felt the direct impact of the pandemic, with one in six youths having to stop work since the virus outbreak. Many young workers are employed in highly-affected sectors, such as support, services or sales-related work, making them more vulnerable to the economic consequences of the pandemic. The coronavirus has left one in eight young people (13 per cent) without any access to courses, teaching or training -- a situation particularly acute among the youth in low-income countries and one that serves to underline the sharp digital divide that exists between regions. It added that despite the best efforts of schools and training institutions to provide continuity through online delivery, 65 per cent of the young people reported having learnt less since the pandemic began. Fifty-one per cent believe their education will be delayed, and nine per cent fear their education would suffer and might even fail. One in six young people (17 per cent) who were employed before the outbreak, stopped working altogether, most notably younger workers aged 18 to 24 years, and those in clerical support, services, sales, crafts and related trades. Working hours among the employed youths fell by nearly a quarter (i.e. by an average of two hours a day) and two out of five young people (42 per cent) reported a reduction in their income. Young people in low-income countries are the most exposed to reductions in working hours and the resultant contraction in income, the survey said. Despite the setbacks, the youth have continued to mobilise and speak out about the crisis. According to the survey, a quarter of the young people have done some kind of volunteer work during the pandemic. Despite the setbacks, the youth have continued to mobilise and speak out about the crisis. According to the survey, a

quarter of the young people have done some kind of volunteer work during the pandemic. Ensuring that their voices are heard is critical for a more inclusive COVID-19 response, the ILO said, adding that giving youth a chance to articulate their needs and ideas during the decision-making procedures improves effectiveness of policies and programmes (Economic Times, 12/08/2020).

According to the recent report of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, from April to July 2020, near about 1 crore and 80 lakh, salaried employee, mainly the youths have lost their jobs totally. Only in the month of July 2020 near about 50 lakh employee have lost their job. Out of the total job sectors of India, 21 percent belongs to the organized sectors. It can be noted that, during the lock down period, the rapid increase of unemployment has not been compensated enough, through the scope of re-employment in the unlock period (ABP, 19/08/2020).

#### **THE PRESENT STUDY, OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY:**

The present study has been done on the Rajbangshi stone of Balasan River bed, located near Siliguri urban center of West Bengal. The Rajbangshis are the numerically dominant Scheduled Caste of North Bengal. The study has been conducted on 347 families with a total population of 1637, from October to December 2020. Case studies, structured interviews, focused group discussion were applied to collect the primary data related to the study. The prime objective of the study was to know in detail about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, followed by continuous lockdown, on the socio-economic condition and livelihood consequences of the studied people.

#### **MAJOR FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The stone crushers on Balasan river bed were all the Rajbangshi which is the dominant schedule caste group of North Bengal. Earlier, they were settled agriculturist in Bangladesh and after Political turmoil during the period of 1970's in the then East Pakistan, followed by the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, they got forced to migrate. It was not only their displacement from the ancestral land and settlement but it completely ruined their traditional agricultural economy. It can

be noted that from the DalitRajbangshi group land and crop were the only property in their hand. Once it was lost it meant that their entire economic backbone is about to face a serious challenge, which exactly happened due to their displacement followed by migration during the said period and afterwards.

The studied people when came to the Balasan riverbed during the period of 1972, they were totally roofless and resource less. They got settled on Balasan river bed due to two major factors.

1. It gave them the much required homestead without any financial burden to purchase it. Only with locally available bamboo bushes and soil of the river bed, they were able to construct small huts, side by side only through local adjustments.
2. The natural resources of Balsanriver provided them a new opportunity of much needed earning only through their own manual labour and without any financial burden.

In this way the DalitRajbangshi group who were settled in earlier emerged with a new local identity as the stone crushers on Balasan river bed. With the passage of time more and more people gradually came to the Balasan river bed and got settled down. Their entire settlement is known as Balasan colony as a whole.

#### **A BRIEF NOTE ON THE STONE CRUSHING OCCUPATION**

During the formative period of the Balasan colony, Siliguri gradually started to become a rapidly growing urban Centre of West Bengal to its immensely important geographical location both nationally and internationally. It is the gateway of North East India through the chicken neck corridor, as well as it is sharing an international border with the countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh primarily. The state border of Bihar, Sikkim, Assam are much nearer from Siliguri in comparison to the state capital of Kolkata. Such relevant geographical location became the triggering force of diversified communication, New railway construction in the entire region. Related to such constructional development, the prime raw material were varieties of stone chips, sand and boulder. The Balasanriver is an abundant resources of such raw materials. The stone crushers

used to collect such resources from the river throughout the entire year (except during rainy flooded season and the Urban contractors used to transport such resources in neighbouring districts and states primarily. It is to be mentioned here that from the side of the tenders are being called to collect such resources and as per official protocol this raw material. Such authorized person used to engage a few people to monitor over the day by day regular work, who are locally termed as Sardars. Such a sardar used to engage different people under him to conduct regular work smoothly. In this way, the entire Balasan river bed are locally subdivided into a number of orally demarcated plots by the sardars themselves as a whole almost every people of Balasan colony are engaged in the stone based occupation. They used to collect the stone and sand from the river manually. Further they used to break up the stones in different shapes and sizes manually with iron implements like hammer, pestle, according to the demand and requirement. This is the primary source of income for the concerned people and their entire family even including the children and aged in most of the cases works as a production unit. According to the view of the studied people more involvements of working hands per day, can accumulate more natural resources and simultaneously better income opportunities. It is to be noted here that the entire settlement is struggling on their natural resources only for their survival. The urban contractors used to communicate with the lease holders for their raw materials. According the lease holders instruct any sardar for the needful and the work is conducted by the labourers under the sardars. Collectively by stone crushing occupations we mean the collection of stones, sands and boulders from the river, breaking them into different pieces and loading them to the vehicles. It is worthy to mention that the work needs very arduous manual labour from the very beginning. It can be noted that on an average per day more than fifty big trucks are to get loaded with such raw materials. Unfortunately inspite of blood, sweat manual labour the economic condition of the concerned people are very poor in condition. Most of the families could earn less than Rs. 5000/- a month. Proper settlement scientific sewage and drainage system within the colony, availability of safe drinking water, electricity are still a day dream for most of the studied families. Poverty is the prime factor of child labour here and as a result educational dropout is a

regular phenomenon. Meanwhile, ever since the beginning most of their settlements are undocumented. Several occupational injuries including permanent damage of eyes and fingers through stone chips and iron implements are quite common. Even the problem of tuberculosis is well noticeable and cases of silicosis also recorded. Thus, the stone crushers of Balasan river bed were deprived of their fundamental rights related to authorized settlement adequate shelter, proper livelihood condition, safe drinking water, education and so on. By birth a child use to see poverty and hunger here and it continues till his last breadth almost. Their only scope to earn a square meal directly depends upon smooth and regular conduction of the occupation, demands from outside and parallel supply to them.

In this context the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on their occupation and livelihood is analyzed here in detail.

- 1. Discontinuation of constructions:** Immediately due to the announcement of lockdown by the ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India from 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020, all sorts of ongoing Urban Constructions and new plans for constructions became totally stopped. As a result the supply of raw materials from Balasan river bed became totally stopped. Even the orders of raw materials which were contracted in earlier got immediately cancelled. Thus the demand and supply chain of the raw materials in between the Balasan river bed and neighbouring district states got totally collapsed.
- 2. Discontinuation over the supply of raw materials:** As a result of discontinuation of constructions the immediate effect was noticed on the supply of raw materials. It can be noted that these natural raw materials are the life line for the studied people. It provides them the raw material for their economy as a whole. Due to immediate lockdown and total prohibition on surface communication, even it was not possible for them to supply the raw material to the stone throwing Urban Centre of Siliguri. Meanwhile even in Siliguri also a series of under construction works became stagnant because due to sudden announcement of lockdown the engaged construction labours got dispersed into several



places and became untraceable. It can be noted that even under the current unlock phase still the labourers are not available and as a series of such works are incomplete. Even such cases are in many numbers in adjacent districts and states as well. Ultimately it had seized the opportunity towards the supply of raw materials from Balasan river bed. Naturally the earning of the studied people related to stone based occupation are facing a severe crisis.

3. **Impact on economy of the studied people:** The result of COVID-19 related lockdown had created a major impact on the income of the stone based people. It can be noted that during the rainy season, mostly the concerned were unable to conduct the stone based works. However the concerned females used to work as house keepers in neighbouring areas, whereas the males used to work temporarily in different local shops. Unfortunately during the period of COVID-19 and due to lockdown the markets and shops were hardly open. Definitely there was no opportunity for the concerned people to find any alternative. On the other hand, due to the strictness over physical distancing no one was interested to allow any outsider in their home or in their shops. Thus, the concerned people got totally stuck to find any minimum earning opportunity during the said period. It can be noted that the stone crushers based occupations is an unorganized occupation. As a result the concerned workers had no minimum opportunity to get covered under any labour law or allied benefits. Day by day, as lockdown continued, similarly their misery, poverty, hunger got worsen.
4. **Impact on daily livelihood:** It is worthy to mention that due to COVID-19 related lockdown suddenly a huge economic crisis came on the shoulders of the concerned working families. Immediately due to lockdown a number of grocers and shopkeepers increased their market rates. The concerned poor families whatever they had minimum savings in their hand drained it completely to sustain for a week or two. However soon they became totally out of cash and what next? They approached to the local grocers for lending. Initially

it was entertained by the grocers. But soon they refused to do it. What next? The parents who had arranged a few jewelries items against their blood and sweat related to the marriage of their daughter or working woman who were able to prepare a few such against their hard earning became compelled to sell those few for some meager amount to earn a fold of rice. Ultimately in this way they have lost their last minimum savings also and as on date really nothing is left in their own hand.

5. **Impact on education:**The economic crisis of the stone crushing people at the very beginning seized on the opportunity of education of these children. Although the schools were closed but online classes were on full swing. Unfortunately it is indeed a bad joke to think about that the hungry stomach could arrange any smart classroom device for their children. On the other hand they had no opportunity to arrange private tutors for their children due to fragile economic condition. Collectively such issues had ultimately seized every opportunity related to the education of their children.
6. **Labourers became stranded:**Related to previous contracts of supply before lockdown, a few labours went to some other districts and states. The sudden lockdown made them immediately stranded. Unfortunately, in their own families they had not made any necessary arrangements related to lockdown. Worsen to the condition soon their families lost every contract with them due to their inability of communication recharge from both sides. The condition of such families became bizarre like anything. Even they were not in a position to approach to the local grocers for some lend. Such women sold their meager ornaments and even their square meals became difficult to get managed.
7. **Impact on health:** Among the studied people occupational injuries are very common. Due to COVID-19 related lockdown and prohibition of public transport, their treatment even to the nearest PHC became seriously violated, it had been reported that two pregnant women gave birth to their

child during this period in their home only because they had no opportunity to go to the nearest PHC or hospital. In one such case it became critical and unfortunately they were unable to save the new born. Related to COVID-19 protocol, maintenance of physical distance, wearing mask, use of sanitizer and soap frequently are the prime requisite but for the concerned people, due to lockdown and total economic blockade, managing a fold of rice is a big challenge thus purchasing of masks, sanitizers etc frequently for the family members is a luxury to them. Meanwhile, gradually with the unlock phases the stone based occupation got started to some extent. However movement of the outsiders to the locality is the prime need of this occupation. It is never possible to maintain this occupation with physical distancing thus the concerned people, to earn a fold of rice are taking a lot of health risks under the current pandemic situation.

In this regard two case studies can be mentioned

**Case Study – 1:** Biren Barman aged 52 years is engaged with this stone based occupation from his early age 10-12 years. According to him stone based work is the lifeline of the entire people and locality, immediately after lockdown the entire economic system of the locality became totally stopped. The first question came to his mind was of food. He has his wife, two son: the elder one got married two years ago and accordingly Biren is now the grandfather of an eight month old girl child. He told that whatever the minimum money he had in his hand he purchased rice, pulse and potato as best as possible. They decided to take a bit lesser amount of per day food so it can run for few more days. However, after around twenty days the food items were about to get finished. The local grocer was his good friend before the lockdown. Biren approached to him to get some food items on lend but the grocer was not so much interested and he told that within one month it must be returned. The lockdown continued and accordingly the crisis of Biren started to get increased day by day. It became a big challenge for him to repay the loan to the grocer and having no other option he took some mere jewelries of his wife and sold it. Afterwards he sold his two domesticated

goats as well even further he had taken a debt of Rs. 5000 from a local money lender against very high rate of interest at present the work has been restarted to certain extent but it is not regular and the earnings is lesser too. Biren told that he is spending sleepless nights and getting afraid of the future consequences.

**Case Study- 2:** MrsSujata Barman aged 32 years lives with her husband and 5 years old son. During the early phase of COVID-19, one day her husband went with the stones to Alipurduar district as a loading labour. Unfortunately, before he could return the lockdown was announced. Sujata came under big trouble because her husband had made no arrangements for such issues. She accumulated the minimum cash in her hand and purchased the minimum grocery. Even she had no scope to go to her parental home in Jalpaiguri district due to lack of transportation. She approached to a few neighbours for some money on loan but in the crisis situation all of them refused to co-operate her. By humble request to their local grocer she purchased a few food items, but soon it became consumed. Afterwards she had approached to a local money lender and took a public loan of Rs. 4000/- on a high rate of interest. Under this crisis twice her son became sick and she took her to the local traditional healer for treatment because due to transport distortion related to lockdown, she had no scope to go to local PHC. After about one and half months her husband Satish somehow managed to come back to home she told that, lockdown has ruined their economy because they have a poor amount of cash in hand as well as they are under huge economic burden.

#### **CONCLUDING REMARKS:**

From the above all discussion it can be summarized that the Dalit stone crushers of Balasan river bed are struggling for their fundamental rights to livelihood from the very beginning. Still they had managed to earn a fold of rice somehow through their occupation. However, the COVID-19-19 pandemic came as a disaster in their life. At the very beginning it had totally stopped their occupation as a result immediately their scope of earning got collapsed. As all of them were in a similar sort of condition so, there was no scope to support each other economically. Meanwhile, as

they were under the unorganized occupational sector there was no scope to get protected under any form of labour law. Day by day the crisis has become more critical to them. Even most of the families became compelled to sold out their valuable belongings related to the marriage of their children. Although in the unlock phases transportation has started but still the works in Balasan river bed are yet to get the early momentum. Obviously, its impacts are directly on the concerned workers, for whom the river bed is the prime source of livelihood. Political turmoil of 1971 had created lots of uncertainty to them. Still they got resettled and survived against their manual labour. Unfortunately, this time the COVID-19 pandemic had snatched every scope even to exercise their own manual labour for earning. The studied people are really in front of a more critical and uncertain future once again.

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