

Forced Reverse Migration in Uttarakhand During the COVID-19 Outbreak: A Boon or a Bane?

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Abstract:

Significant changes in the way people work in India as a result of the national lock-down include the conversion of offices to virtual workspaces or the use of home offices by employees who are paid on a monthly basis and have access to sufficient resources. However, there is also concern regarding informal human resources who are paid on a daily wage basis. Despite being a worldwide problem, the corona virus outbreak has had some positive consequences on reverse migration in the state of Uttarakhand. Those who worked in the private and informal sectors have returned to their home towns as a result of the Covid-19. Although migration is a significant source of income, it has received little attention from development and policy measures. As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, the migratory worker is a crucial gear in the wheels of the national economy, yet it is unorganised and left to fend for itself. Large-scale emigration from Uttarakhand is due to the disparity in development and employment opportunities caused by regional variety. The majority of people who conducted the terrifying reverse migration caused by Covid-19 expressed a wish to go back to their original locations, indicating that the depressing conditions in the hill districts still exist. In this research paper, the researcher tries to gather information regarding reverse migration at the time and after the Covid-19 in ghost villages in Uttarakhand is blessing or curse.

Keywords: Reverse Migration, Covid-19, Ghost Villages, Rural Economy, Blessing or Curse

I. Introduction:

The difficult mountain topography and dispersed population of the mountain regions continue to be the principal obstacles to development and the eradication of poverty in Uttarakhand, where more than 66% of the population (more than 80% in the hill districts) lives in rural areas. Rural growth in the state's hill districts, which include Haridwar, Dehradun, and Udham Singh Nagar, has lagged behind that in the plain areas. The land holdings are

extremely few and distributed in the highland areas. Only 10% of the land is irrigated in hill districts. Most of the people who live in rural areas in the hills either migrate in pursuit of better job opportunities or rely on subsistence farming to survive.

Migrant human resources have faced many challenges during the COVID19 lockdown. Due to the lockdown that the prime minister declared on March 24, 2020, financial activities were basically shut down, leaving over 4 crore workers jobless. They had to deal with food shortages as well. While they experienced a sense of isolation in their homes at this same moment, they started to remember their loved ones. They then considered returning to their homes using whatever means of conveyance they had. Some of them acquired risky modes of transportation, such as trucks and lorries, and as a result, experienced a series of accidents while travelling to their residences.

II. Literature Review:

When many migrants who had left Uttarakhand in search of better prospects returned during the lockdown caused by COVID-19, the state government launched numerous initiatives to convince them to stay (verma 2020). The state and federal governments attempted to boost the economies of the poorest people through a number of socially focused welfare programmes including MGNREGA and Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna (PMGKY) plan. But the government faces a significant hurdle in effectively implementing such programmes (Jha 2020). A major obstacle to the economic growth of rural areas is the government's poor approach for the implementation of various government aid programmes (Singh 2019). Rural tourism presents a chance for the state government to create jobs and keep the returning labour force from leaving (Dobhal 2020).

S.No.	Title	Author	Source	Year	Objectives
1.	“OUTMIGRATION FROM HILL REGION OF UTTARAKHAND: Magnitude, Challenges and Policy Options”	Rajendra P. Mamgain and D.N. Reddy	National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, Rajendranagar Hyderabad	March 2015	The main source of information for the report was a pilot study on "Outmigration in Uttarakhand."
2.	“ANALYSIS OF SCHEMES AND PROGRAMMES IN THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT SECTOR AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE RURAL SOCIO-ECONOMY IN ORDER TO MITIGATE OUT-MIGRATION”	Dr.Sharad Singh Negi (VC)	RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND MIGRATION COMMISSION, UTTARAKHAND.	Sep. 2019	A comparison of census data from 2001 and 2011 reveals a slow decadal growth of population in the majority of the state's mountain districts, making the movement of people from rural to urban regions in Uttarakhand a significant challenge.
3.	“COVID-19: Uttarakhand wants to retain returning citizens”	Megha Prakash	www.downtoearth.org.in	April 2020	Following the implementation of a state-wide lockdown to halt the new coronavirus disease's

					spread, migrants relocated to the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. The Uttarakhand government is currently making numerous efforts to retain them there (COVID-19).
4.	“COVID-19 and Nepali Labour Migrants”	Jeevan Baniya and others	Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility, Nepal	Aug 2020	According to data from Nepali diplomatic missions abroad and the Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) ³ , as of June 18, 2020, there were 127 Nepalis residing abroad. Of the 17,792 Nepalis from 34 countries who tested positive for COVID-19, 12 other nations also experienced fatalities. Out of the 127 fatalities, 67 happened in the United Kingdom, 19 in the United Arab Emirates, 17 in the United States, 9 in Saudi Arabia, 7 in Qatar, 3 in Bahrain, and 1 in each of the following nations: Japan, Turkey, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Sweden.
5.	“Calling children back: Is it possible to initiate reverse migration in Uttarakhand?”	Yugal Joshi	www.firstpost.com	June 2022	There are around 16,500 villages in Uttarakhand, of which 1,048 are deserted (uninhabited) and 734 have become ghost villages.
6.	“In Covid-19 crisis, Uttarakhand sees ‘reverse migration’ opportunity”	Lalmani Verma	www.indianexpress.com	April 2020	52,216 people returned to 10 hill districts in Uttarakhand from cities like Gurugram, Faridabad, and Bengaluru as well as from nations like Dubai, Singapore, and Ireland, according to government records and

					officials.
7.	“45% of migrants will stay back in Uttarakhand, says CM Rawat”	Raju Sajwan	www.downtoearth.org.in	Aug. 2020	The commission has so far carefully examined five to six locations, paying close attention to each community. The recently established Frontier Area Development Fund of the Chief Minister will ensure that residents in border regions can find jobs in their community. Numerous additional programmes for immigrants have been announced in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak.
8.	“Calling children back: Is it possible to initiate reverse migration in Uttarakhand?”	Yugal Joshi	www.firstpost.com/opinion	June 2022	There are around 16,500 villages in Uttarakhand, of which 1,048 are deserted and 734 have become ghost villages.
9.	“Uttarakhand estimates two-thirds of migrants have returned to places of work”	Suparna Roy	www.hindustantimes.com	Oct. 2020	According to officials, the majority of opportunities include self-employment programmes, which carry a significant amount of risk that not everyone is ready to accept. According to SS Negi, vice chairperson of the Uttarakhand Rural Development and Migration Commission, many migrants are returning to their prior employment after arriving in the country.
10.	“Uttarakhand managed to absorb most migrants who returned home: Survey”	Vineet Upadhyay	www.newindianexpress.com	Nov. 2020	1,04,849 of the 3,57,536 migrants left for other cities and states, while 2,52,687 opted to remain in the state through

					September of this year.
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III. History of Uttarakhand Migration:

In Uttarakhand, migration has been a long-standing activity. The establishment of the Garhwal and Kumaon Army units under British control marked the first significant period of indigenous youngsters receiving permanent employment in the armed forces. Long-term out-migration from Uttarakhand began at this point. The initial exposure of the army personnel to the outside world had a significant impact on the development of acceptability of the livelihood-based movement of educated "pahadis." According to Atkinson's writings from the 1850s, Uttarakhand's only industry was education. With the rapid growth of the educated outflow, Uttarakhand's economy swiftly changed to a "money-order economy." Despite this continued migration, there were fewer migrants than in previous years.



After Shyam Prasad, the sole resident, relocated to a location with better amenities, the village of Baluni in the Indian state of Uttarakhand is now deserted. Image courtesy of 101 Reporters/Rahul Singh Shekhawat

Uttarakhand has a greater rate of out-migration than other states. Circular migration in other states differs from migration from Uttarakhand in that it is typically longer and restricted to big cities and towns. The National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRD), Hyderabad, conducted a study that found that three-fourths of out-migrants in Uttarakhand are long-term migrants. Nearly three-fourths of the out-migrants from Uttarakhand have paid job, which is a large part of the explanation for this. Their relatively higher educational levels have made it easier for them to find salaried employment, however most of them do not necessarily make a good living from these positions. 36 percent of migrants have degrees or above, and nearly half have upper secondary or high school education. A little over 16% of them work for the government on a salary. In contrast, only 30% of non-migrants in Uttarakhand have a high school or higher education, and only 8.5% have a degree. The state's trained personnel resources are being depleted by this massive outflow of recently graduated students.



Baluni in Uttarakhand (The ghost village) Image by 101 Reporters /Rahul Singh Shekhawat

IV. Assistance from Government:

They had not registered with government agencies, which is required in order to get benefits under various government schemes, which was one of the reasons they were unable to obtain such benefits. In accordance with the numerous immigration-related rules, it was also discovered that more than half (55%) of the migrants were not registered with the government. The condition of the migrants grew more challenging as a result of non-registration and the ensuing ineligibility for the anticipated advantages under government initiatives. The creation of job and livelihood plans for return migrants who are having trouble, however, may be based on the results of a skill mapping initiative that has been initiated for them.

It has been widely reported that governments, corporations, and organisations of the voluntary and civil society have stepped up to support migrant workers by offering them resources such as food, lodging, money, and transportation. Only 50.5% of the migrants who were stuck in Uttarakhand received aid from the authorities and nonprofit organisations. Rations made up the majority of the benefits that migrant workers received from government aid programmes (43%) and were either given away for free or at a large discount. Nearly 3% of migrants obtained temporary housing, while 7% of migrants received benefits from the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana and the Prime Minister Kisan Samman Nidhi.

It is obvious that the benefits of the government schemes did not significantly contribute to giving the migrants the aid they required. There were several reported reasons, including the ones listed below.

1. A few of them had little knowledge of the welfare programmes.
2. Neither the government nor any civil society organisations had someone who could offer guidance and help in obtaining benefits.
3. Because the money was to be transmitted to those accounts via the direct benefit transfer programme (DBT) mode, and many migrants lacked a bank account, the majority of the benefits were only available to those who had bank accounts. About three-fourths (76%) of the respondents claimed they were unaware of the programmes, and more than one-fifth (18%) said they did not have bank accounts.

The Uttarakhand government has developed an eco-tourism strategy to encourage conservation and provide a source of income for locals who move to cities in search of employment. Nearly all of the agro-geoclimatic zones are present in Uttarakhand, making floriculture and horticulture viable. According to the state's Vision 2030 plan, by 2030, the processing capacity of horticultural produce would increase from 7.5% to 15% of the overall horticulture production. Throughout the state, 175 unusual kinds of fragrant and therapeutic plants can be found.

In recent years, the infrastructure has expanded dramatically. Unprecedented advancements were made in the areas of roads, power, telephone service, water quality, and hygienic conditions. The state gives education a high priority, and its education budget is higher than the national average. The health sector has been deemed a priority sector and has a network of about 2,000 sub-centers, 305 primary health centres, 73 community health centres, 47 sub-district hospitals, and 21 district hospitals.

The state government has given information and communication technology (ICT) careful consideration and given it industrial status. Numerous initiatives have helped the ICT sector in Uttarakhand flourish. Additionally, the state contains well-established growth centres, information technology parks, and integrated industrial estates (IIEs) in a variety of conveniently accessible locations around Uttarakhand, including Haridwar, Pant Nagar, and Dehradun. In order to improve living conditions for its citizens, hasten social and economic advancement, guarantee decision-making is transparent, and boost IT adoption among various user segments, the Government of Uttarakhand is also making the most of ICT&E to the fullest extent possible.

The policy framework for the complete and commendable development of Uttarakhand hill area is extensive. There are attempts being made to close the gap between rural households' needs for productive employment and the government's efforts in this direction. In the hill region, horticulture and tourism are being exploited to their full potential. For local youngsters, this will result in a significant increase in work prospects and stop their distress-driven migration. Depending on the options and opportunities for such talents, the skill training measures are being created both generic and area-specific. The administration is committed to spreading the benefits of developmental programmes to underprivileged and disadvantaged groups in society with strong political resolve.

V. Is Reverse Migration Possible?

The state experienced temporary reverse migration throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Depending on the outcome, the state's reverse migration issue may be better understood. Many of the COVID-19 reverse migrants were people who had recently left, according to certain polls and research on the population. In the COVID-19 reverse migrants study, more than 80% had left their nation of origin little more than five years prior. Rarely are people who have permanently emigrated outside of their ancestral villages included in the concept of reverse migration. Additionally, the majority of reverse migrants were self-employed, including freelancers, small-business owners, street vendors, and petty entrepreneurs in addition to paid workers and wage earners. Construction labourers and temporary workers from the transportation sector returned. Workers on the side returned in the construction and transportation sectors. At small inns, restaurants, and dhabas, the salaried waiters, chefs, and clerks performed as well. Housekeepers, security guards, and employees of private enterprises and manufacturers were among the returns. As a result, those who returned to their native communities in large numbers were those who were most susceptible to shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The primary motive for the majority of reverse migrants was job loss, which was followed by pandemic fear and family pressure. Some persons displayed psychological and emotional drives to stick with friends and relatives.

VI. Findings and Discussion

[A]Challenges of Reverse Migration in Uttarakhand

The sudden influx of migrants into rural areas of Uttarakhand during the COVID-19 pandemic created multiple socio-economic and infrastructural challenges:

- **Loss of Income and Employment:**
Migrants who returned from urban centers were often unable to find suitable employment in their native villages. Many faced wage reductions or complete unemployment, leading to financial distress.
- **Pressure on Local Resources:**
The rural economy, primarily dependent on agriculture and limited local businesses, struggled to accommodate the additional workforce. Natural resources like water and arable land faced increased strain.
- **Healthcare System Overload:**
The pandemic exposed the fragility of Uttarakhand's healthcare infrastructure, especially in remote areas. The return of migrants added to the burden, with inadequate testing and quarantine facilities in many villages.
- **Social Challenges:**
Returnees often faced stigmatization due to fear of infection, causing social divisions within communities.

[B]Opportunities from Reverse Migration

Despite the challenges, reverse migration also presented some unexpected opportunities that could benefit Uttarakhand in the long run:

- **Skill Utilization:**
Many migrants brought back diverse skills acquired in urban areas, such as construction, mechanics, and small-scale entrepreneurship. These skills had the potential to enhance local economies if effectively harnessed.
- **Growth in Local Entrepreneurship:**
With limited employment opportunities, some returnees started small businesses, such as grocery shops, food processing units, and agricultural ventures. This contributed to local economic diversification.
- **Revival of Agriculture:**
Migrants contributed to a renewed focus on agriculture and allied activities. Traditional farming techniques were combined with modern knowledge to increase productivity in some areas.
- **Community and Cultural Strengthening:**
Families and communities witnessed greater cohesion as members returned home. The migration also brought back traditions, practices, and a sense of cultural revival.

[C]Policy Gaps and Challenges

Several systemic gaps hindered the effective integration of returnees into Uttarakhand's rural economy:

- **Inadequate Skill Development Programs:**
The absence of targeted policies to utilize migrants' skills left many struggling to find productive work.
- **Limited Rural Infrastructure:**
Roads, power supply, and internet connectivity in remote areas were insufficient to support the burgeoning population and entrepreneurial activities.
- **Neglected Healthcare Investment:**
Despite being critical during the pandemic, healthcare facilities remained underfunded and understaffed.

[D]Recommendations for Sustainable Development

To transform reverse migration into a long-term development opportunity, several steps are essential:

- **Skill Mapping and Training:**
Government and NGOs should conduct detailed assessments of returnees' skills and offer training programs to align them with local opportunities.
- **Promotion of Agro-based Industries:**
Initiatives to set up small-scale food processing units and cooperatives can help boost rural employment and income generation.
- **Improved Infrastructure:**
Investments in roads, digital connectivity, and public utilities are critical to sustaining economic activities in rural Uttarakhand.
- **Healthcare Enhancement:**
Strengthening rural healthcare infrastructure can mitigate future crises and improve overall community resilience.

[E]Long-term Implications

The paper concludes that while reverse migration posed significant short-term challenges, it also highlighted Uttarakhand's potential for rural revitalization. With strategic interventions, the phenomenon could serve as a turning point for the state's socio-economic development. The key lies in fostering policies that transform the challenges into opportunities for sustainable growth.

VII. Conclusion

As economic opportunities in the hills dried up over time, a sizable portion of the state's population went to the plains. Due to the widespread closure of hotels, businesses, and manufacturing sectors, the migrants are currently being forced to return. According to government records and officials, 52,216 people from places like Gurugram, Faridabad, and Bengaluru as well as from countries like Dubai, Singapore, and Ireland returned to 10 hill districts in Uttarakhand.

Reverse migration is a good opportunity for the Uttarakhand government if individuals who have returned can be persuaded to stay by providing better job opportunities, infrastructure amenities, improved means of subsistence, and education and health facilities. The Uttarakhand government must support the growth of vegetable agriculture, dairy production, goat rearing, and animal husbandry to create greater economic prospects for locals because

unemployment was the main factor pushing people out of rural areas. The state administration also wants to maintain the state's traditional crops and encourage traditional farming through enhanced irrigation systems in hilly areas. The Uttarakhand government should make an effort to urge reverse migrants to stay in their homes in the hills area after the shutdown by effectively implementing several government schemes for rural development and employment creation.

The Indian government launched a variety of measures and activities after the corona virus lockdown with the goal of preserving human resources in Uttarakhand and developing hilly areas. The state government is required to inform the villages of all of its welfare initiatives; thus, it must form a committee to review and study the plans in order to ascertain how those actions will impact emigration and the rural economy after the outbreak.

For people to create businesses in niches like eco-tourism or for smaller endeavours, the state government must establish interest-free loans, sizeable endowments, and free electricity. The Rural Development Department must also set up a new cell just for migrants, in addition to a helpline to assess their issues and an information base on their goals. In order to solve the issues that resulted in out-relocation, the commission is working to build new schools, vital healthcare facilities, and street networks wherever they are required. A further Rs 50 crore from the public authority is included in the state budget plan for implementation.

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