

REVERSE MIGRATION CHALLENGES IN UTTARAKHAND: A COMPARISON OF DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE POST-COVID ECONOMY

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Abstract

High levels of unemployment, fierce labor market competition, and better opportunities for a better life in different states or countries are major factors that contribute to both internal and international migration in India. Nevertheless, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent imposition of a nationwide lockdown resulted in a reverse migration trend, with 'inter-state' and 'international borders' being sealed to contain the spread of the virus. This sudden interruption highlights the need for coordinated actions between the central and state governments to support the return of informal migrant workers and ensure their seamless reintegration into the post-pandemic economy.

This research paper focuses on inter-state migrants within India and returnee migrants from different countries, representing the majority of Indian migrants abroad. Through a comparative analysis, the study examines the Indian government's approach to reverse migration, repatriation, and reintegration after the announcement of the lockdown. In-depth interviews with migrants and social workers provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by both internal and international migrant workers during these stages. The paper also discusses the diverse responses of the Indian government towards repatriation, highlighting the varying strategies employed. Additionally, it analyzes the obstacles encountered by these migrants in their economic reintegration process. This analysis aims to inform the formulation of appropriate welfare policies that address the specific needs of the Indian migrant community.

By examining the experiences of internal and international migrants during reverse migration and repatriation, this study sheds light on the distinct challenges faced by these two groups. It also emphasizes the importance of tailored governmental responses and support mechanisms to ensure a successful reintegration into the economy for both categories of migrants. Ultimately, this research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of reverse migration and offers recommendations for effective policies and interventions that can support the reintegration process for internal and international migrants in India.

Key words: #Reversemigration #postcoveconomy #Uttarakhand #Challenges

Introduction

Reverse migration refers to the phenomenon of people returning to their place of origin from the place where they were previously employed or settled. Uttarakhand, a hilly state in northern India, witnessed a large-scale reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many migrant workers, both domestic and foreign, returned to their homes due to job losses and fear of contracting the virus. In the post-COVID economy, reverse migration poses several challenges for both domestic and foreign migrant workers in Uttarakhand. Some of these challenges are discussed below:

1. **Job loss and unemployment:** One of the primary challenges faced by both domestic and foreign migrant workers in Uttarakhand is the lack of employment opportunities. With the pandemic

severely impacting the economy, many industries have shut down or scaled back their operations, resulting in job losses and unemployment. This has made it difficult for workers to find suitable jobs and earn a livelihood.

2. **Financial instability:** The loss of income has led to financial instability for many migrant workers, both domestic and foreign. They are struggling to make ends meet and meet their daily expenses, which has further exacerbated their economic woes.
3. **Lack of social security:** Migrant workers often do not have access to social security benefits such as healthcare, education, and housing. The pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of this population and highlighted the need for policies that protect their rights and ensure their well-being.
4. **Discrimination and stigmatization:** Foreign migrant workers in Uttarakhand often face discrimination and stigmatization due to their nationality or ethnicity. The pandemic has further amplified these biases and prejudices, making it difficult for them to integrate into the local community and find employment.
5. **Psychological distress:** The pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of migrant workers, both domestic and foreign. The stress of losing jobs, financial insecurity, and social isolation has taken a toll on their mental well-being, leading to depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

Over time, when opportunities dried up in the hills, a large number of individuals from the hilly state of Uttarakhand moved to the plains, seeking better opportunities. People abandoning their home villages in search of education and jobs has been a long-standing issue in the Himalayan state. In the state's rural, hilly sections, this led to the development of thinly populated "ghost villages." These settlements lacked decent basic services and were peppered with locked residences, these houses were locked for years. According to the commission's assessment, the Uttarakhand government established a migration committee in 2017 to address the issue. (Rural development and migration prevention commission) discovered that more than 3.5 lakh people left their homes starting in 2011 in quest of better employment possibilities, educational chances, and healthcare services. According to the latest records 1783 villages from total 16,793 villages of Uttarakhand State have no inhabitants with many more villages in single digit inhabitants. 825 new ghost villages have been added to the list between 2011 to 2019. And 825 out of these 1783 uninhabited villages are situated in three hill districts of the state: Pauri, Almora and Tehri alone have 517 out of the total 1783 uninhabited villages.

However, COVID-19 pandemic created a unique phenomenon. Due to lockdown, thousands of people lost their employment and were forced to migrate to their native home towns. The hilly state of Uttarakhand also saw a tremendous reverse migration during the lockdown period. The widespread closure of manufacturing units, hotels, and other business establishments in the cities, in which majority of the hilly people were engaged, forced the migrants to return to their villages and home towns. According to the data released by the Uttarakhand migration commission in July, 2020, over 2.15 lakh people had returned to their homes in Uttarakhand during the Covid-19 epidemic from cities such as Gurugram, Faridabad and Bengaluru, as well as countries like Dubai, Singapore, and Ireland (Roy, 2020). The nationwide lockdown resulted in a reverse migration trend, where those who worked in the informal and unorganized sectors in urban areas, expected to suffer long-term unemployment and a loss of their livelihoods.

In conclusion, the challenges faced by migrant workers in Uttarakhand are complex and multifaceted. It is important for policymakers to recognize and address these challenges to ensure the well-being and economic stability of this vulnerable population.

Challenges faced by the state government

The Uttarakhand Government took several steps to retain migrants who returned to the Himalayan state. The government arranged transport for its residents to return to their native, 'ghost villages' across the state, after the Union government called for a nationwide lockdown on March 25, 2020, to curb the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. According to an interim report released by the state's Rural Development and Migration Commission on April 23, 2020, a total of 59,360 migrants returned to 10 districts — excluding Dehradun, Haridwar and Udham Singh Nagar.

Sharad Singh Negi, the vice-chairman of the Uttarakhand migration commission said that this may be a short-term reverse migration (M.Prakash, Down To Earth, 28th April,2020). The government looks at this as an opportunity to retain its youth by apprising them of schemes and gainfully employing them. The government also conducted an online survey to understand the socio-economic status of the migrants. In the survey it was revealed that 60 per cent of those who have returned, however, were unwilling to work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Only 30 per cent can be categorized under the minimum income group. 33% of the migrants visited their families living in villages at least twice a year. Most of the migrants were employed in hospitality sector and as drivers or electricians. The others, however, were blue-collared migrants — highly skilled with several years of experience in different sectors. Most of the migrants — with an average age of 30 to 40 years — ventured to other districts within Uttarakhand, across the country and in some cases, abroad, in the search for employment and higher education. **The state government has drawn up an action plan to better engage with these blue-collared migrants and revive the state's rural economy.**

According to Sharad Singh Negi, one of the many suggestions proposed by the commission is to focus on key sectors like horticulture, dairy, animal husbandry, goat rearing, eco-tourism, homestays and other microenterprises. The government is also focusing on commercializing cultivation of local crops like black soyabean, horse gram, kidney beans, and finger millets. The Government also declared subsidies to promote agriculture — with 90 per cent subsidy on farm machines, 80 per cent to build poly houses, 80 per cent for honey production and 50 per cent for mushroom cultivation. The agro-produce from the state is well-received in international markets, so there is a good scope to commercialize traditional crops as well (Prakash, Down To Earth,28th April,2020). The government is also planning to fix a Minimum Support Price (MSP) to commercialize the state's traditional crops and encourage traditional farming.

(Behera et al., 2021) in his research article entitled "The COVID-19-Led Reverse Migration on Labour Supply in Rural Economy: Challenges, Opportunities and Road Ahead in Odisha" stated that there were many people who were working as labour and migrated to their home towns with a prospective that their home town would be the best place but they faced a lot of challenges looking forward to various opportunities for their survival during the phase.

Case of Uttarakhand Region

Over the years, the hilly state of Uttarakhand has witnessed a significant migration of its population to the plains due to the scarcity of opportunities in the hills. This migration problem has persisted for a long time, with people leaving their native villages in search of education and employment, resulting in sparsely-populated "ghost villages" in the rural and hilly areas of the state. These abandoned villages often lacked basic amenities and were dotted with locked houses. To address this issue, the Uttarakhand Government established a migration commission in 2017. The commission discovered that since 2011, over 3.5 lakh people had migrated from their homes in search of better livelihood opportunities, education, and health facilities. Furthermore, as many as 1,768 hamlets in the state were classified as "ghost villages."

The district of Almora, in particular, experienced a negative annual population growth rate of -0.13% during the period of 2000-2011 (Mamgain and Reddy, 2015).



Source: - Policy Concerns of 'reverse migration' in Uttarakhand during COVID-19

Response from the Government

The state government took various measures to address the issue of reverse migration and retain those who returned to Uttarakhand during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the actions taken was to provide transport facilities for migrants to return to their native villages across the state. The government saw this as an opportunity to engage the youth by informing them of various schemes and offering them employment.

An online survey was conducted to understand the socio-economic status of the returning migrants. The survey revealed that the majority of the migrants were unwilling to work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and only a few were in the minimum income group. Many of the migrants were employed in the hospitality and transportation sectors, while some were skilled workers with years of experience. The government devised an action plan to better engage with these blue-collared migrants and revive the state's rural economy.

The government proposed several suggestions to focus on key sectors such as horticulture, dairy, animal husbandry, eco-tourism, homestays, and other micro-enterprises. The state government is also concentrating on promoting the cultivation of local crops and has declared subsidies to promote agriculture. The government also plans to commercialize the state's traditional crops and establish a Minimum Support Price (MSP) to encourage traditional farming.

The author observed that the returning migrants are taking initiatives such as growing vegetables, starting dairies, and animal husbandry to generate income. However, they felt the need for a local market and a well-organized supply chain to promote their ventures. The government needs to create a comprehensive plan to address this issue and organize the market to revive the rural economy of Uttarakhand.

People after returning to their hometowns many of them are growing vegetables with the latest techniques of organic farming and have futurist plans to export their products and have further proposed to the Uttarakhand Government.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a wake-up call for nations worldwide to ensure that they have basic amenities for self-sufficiency. This crisis has challenged pre-existing concepts like globalization and outsourcing, and has highlighted the importance of Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj or a self-reliant village system. The emphasis on this concept can lead India to become a global leader in the post-COVID world order. The Prime Minister's call to every Indian to become "vocal for our local" highlights the importance of this concept.

To ensure the success of this concept, there needs to be comprehensive policy research that examines the factors that led people to migrate to urban areas and return to their native villages. Policymakers must explore viable strategies to retain migrant people in their local communities in Uttarakhand. If successful, this will assist the hill state in rectifying its socio-economic imbalance and repopulating deserted villages. It will also address the long-standing issue of migration in Uttarakhand.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that self-sufficiency and self-reliance are crucial for survival. The revival of Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj can be the answer to the challenges posed by the pandemic and a path towards a sustainable future. It is time for policymakers to take action and implement strategies that will retain people in their local communities, thus reviving the rural economy and ensuring the prosperity of the nation.

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