

POLICY CONCERNS OF ‘REVERSE MIGRATION’ IN UTTARAKHAND DURING COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has adversely hit India and the whole world. The human cost of the corona virus is expected to be unimaginably high. The pandemic has shattered lives of millions of people across the world. The pandemic has also posed another challenge to the policy makers in India. Due to the lockdown and non-availability of means of livelihood in cities, millions of people were forced to return to their villages and native states. The panic situation triggered a massive reverse migration from the “urban” to “rural” areas in large parts of the country. The pandemic posed a challenge to the policymakers to create livelihood opportunities in the regions which have experienced huge in-migration.

A Case Study of Uttarakhand



The hilly state of Uttarakhand, over the years, has seen a mass exodus of people to the plains as opportunities dried up in the hills. The Himalayan state has been grappling with a migration problem for a long time – people leaving their native villages in pursuit of education and employment. This resulted in sparsely-populated ‘ghost villages’ in the state’s rural, hilly areas. These villages were dotted with locked houses and lacked good basic amenities. In 2017, Uttarakhand Government set up a migration commission to address the issue. The commission found that over 3.5 lakh people migrated from their home places from 2011 onwards in search of better livelihood opportunities, and education and health facilities. As many as 1,768 hamlets in the state had been categorised as “ghost villages.” Almora, in particular, experienced a negative annual growth in population at the rate of -0.13 during 2000-2011 (Mamgain and Reddy, 2015)¹.

Massive Reverse Migration

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





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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 nation-wide lockdown resulted in a reverse migration trend, where those who worked in the informal and unorganised sectors in urban areas, expected to suffer long-term unemployment and a loss of their livelihoods.

Response of 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)². 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 categorised under the minimum income group. 33 per cent 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 micro-enterprises. The government is also focusing on commercialising cultivation of local crops like black soyabean, horse gram, kidney beans, amaranthus 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 commercialise traditional crops as well (Prakash, *Down To Earth*, 28th April, 2020). The government is also planning to fix a Minimum Support Price (MSP) to commercialise the state's traditional crops and encourage traditional farming.

The author visited some parts of the Almora district recently and found that migrants are taking a number of initiatives to generate income. They are growing vegetables, starting dairies, goat rearing and animal husbandry. However, they felt a need of a local market and an efficient supply chain to promote their ventures. Due to the absence of an organized market, the middlemen in the state get the maximum profit. A comprehensive plan is urgently needed to rectify this issue by the Government. If the state is successful in creating a supply chain and organising the market, the rural economy of Uttarakhand can be revived.

Challenges to the Policy Makers

Despite the number of steps taken by the State Government, some of the hurdles are still left to address this issue. Many of the migrants lack access to house, productive land and cattle stock. Hence, the challenge before the Uttarakhand Government is to generate livelihood opportunities to ensure the provision of basic necessities to this recently returned population. If the Government succeeds on this front, the present crisis may prove to be a blessing in disguise for the State and its people. Moreover, the process of creating resources and opportunities within each state also fits in line with the motto of *Aatmanirbhar Bharat*³, announced recently by the Prime Minister of India.

The reverse situation has posed a challenge as well as an opportunity for the State. The challenge is the absence of basic infrastructure, employment, health and educational facilities in the hilly state which forced the native people to migrate to the urban cities. However, there seems to be an opportunity also if the Government succeeds in providing livelihood opportunities and basic facilities to the migrated people. Extensive policy research and studies are needed to explore and suggest viable strategies so that the situation of 'reverse migration' created by the pandemic COVID can be converted into an opportunity for the overall development of Uttarakhand.

Concluding Observations

The Corona pandemic has taught us a lesson that every country must possess basic amenities for self-survival. The crisis has not only challenged many assumptions and concepts like globalisation, outsourcing and Global village but also reinvented the significance of Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj (Village Republic). Gandhian concept of 'Gram Swaraj'-a self-reliant village system, can provide an alternative to out-sourcing and as a global leader in the post-COVID world order. Prime Minister, in his address to the nation during the lockdown period also emphasised on 'Gram Swaraj' to become self-reliant and suggested that every Indian must become "vocal for our local".

A comprehensive policy research is also needed to examine the factors which forced the people to migrate to the urban areas and to know the circumstances which led them to come back to their native villages. Now what are the possibilities and opportunities to retain these people in their native places? The need of the hour is to explore viable strategies to retain migrant people in their local communities in Uttarakhand. If the policy makers succeed in their efforts, it would assist the hill state to rectify its socio-economic imbalance and repopulate the deserted villages. It would also address the prolonged and unresolved issue of migration in the hilly state of Uttarakhand.

Note: This paper is based on the preliminary findings of an ongoing research project by the author sponsored by the ICSSR, New Delhi. ■

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Footnotes

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