

Reverse Migration and Covid-19: A Study on Uttarakhand Govt. Initiatives on reverse migration

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The new corona virus disease now known as COVID-19, which emerged in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, spread to other countries over time and was declared a global epidemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. The Covid-19 is an international pandemic that has taken the world by storm (Heather Yan et.al (2020)). The Corona virus (Covid-19) has affected 219 countries and territories around the world (WHO, 2020). With stay-at-home orders, the global economy came to a screeching halt. India was no different as according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, over 122 million people in India lost their jobs in April 2020, a vast majority of them being small traders and wage-labourers. Tamil Nadu being among the worst hit states. Its estimated unemployment rate in April'2020 was the highest among states and labor participation rate among the lowest (The Hindu, May, 07, 2020). Migration in a developing country like India is generally a commonplace phenomenon which is caused when people travel to a new place or country, primarily towards the urban areas usually in order to find work and livelihood and end up living there temporarily or permanently. People migrate from the rural or less developed areas where resources are scarce and opportunities are limited. It's estimated that there are more than 200 million migrant workers in India (Bhagat, Sahoo et.al, 2020). This Migrants population has been the most severely affected by COVID-19 spreading and lockdown imposed across the country. With no food and no wages due to job loss the migrant population during the pandemic had no option but to head towards their native place. Thus, as a result of this pandemic and pandemic induced lockdowns, a huge Reverse Migration was noticed all over the country and an unprecedented exodus of 1.14 crore migrant workers took place from cities, back to their villages (Sahoo, Bhunia, 2021). This trend was more particularly seen in less developed states like Odisha (Behera, Mishra et.al.). As the large number of people were returning to their homes due to this pandemic so this mass reverse migration not only spread the virus to the hinterlands of the country but also created huge

challenges for the state governments in terms of managing quarantine and other basic facilities for their people who returned in mass numbers. The reverse migration makes many migrant workers unemployed, socially deprived and economically vulnerable (Sirasubramanian K & Raju V, 2021). In a study by Azim Premji University's Centre for sustainable employment, 80% of urban workers have lost employment, while farmers and self-employees in the non-farm field have been significantly reduced in their incomes. (Behera, Mishra et.al.)

On a brighter side in a study (Kumar Rajat, 2020) it was found that there was an improvement in the wages and number of days of work offered under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS) during the Covid-19 lockdown in Rajasthan. In May and June, return migration pushed up the demand for work under the MGNREGS to its highest level since 2013-14. Up to 24.2 million rural households were demanding work in August 2020, a 66% increase from August 2019 (Meghane, Padmini). It is not time to

worry about fiscal deficit cap at three per cent and on the contrary, there is an urgent need for expansionary government expenditure

on all existing welfare and employment generating schemes (Banerjee, Chakraborty). During this covid-19 pandemic reverse migration to the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand was noticed as a large number of people returned to their native villages. This reverse migration of people has brought life to the rural hilly areas forlorn for many years. Uttarakhand has been struggling with the problem of excessive migration since its formation in 2000. As a result of nation-wide lockdown, an estimated number of about 3.57 lakhs migrant workers have returned to their homes in the state till September 2020 (The New Indian Express, November 4th, 2020). As per the Uttarakhand Migration Commission report a total of 53,092 migrants have returned to Uttarakhand between April 1 to May 5, 2021. This can be a golden opportunity for the state to tap and bring back life to the 'ghost villages'. The government of Uttarakhand has initiated a number of actions to retain the long-awaited population. 'Major benefits received by the migrant workers are in the form of ration (43%) either free or subsidised, some benefits (7%) are also received from Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna and the Prime Minister Kisan Sanman Nidhi and nearly 3% migrants are provided temporary shelter. (Awasthi and Mehta 2020).

The article aims to study the reverse migration policies and recommendations, specifically by the state of Uttarakhand, and how do they plan to achieve it as the pandemic is slowly and gradually receding and the normal life is gaining pace day by day.

Review of literature : Behera, Mishra et.al. (2020) in their study investigated the labour supply and employment opportunity in rural areas due to Covid-19 led reverse migration and to examine the impact of covid-19 on employment status, income and livelihood of returned migrants in Odisha. Both primary and secondary data has been used. The study found that there was a sudden

rise in labour supply in the rural economy of Odisha. Job loss is the biggest problem faced by migrants followed by the income loss.

Choudhury, Joarder (2020) in their study found that the rural urban wage gap has been a major reason behind the migration from rural to urban areas. India has 25 out of 100 fastest growing cities worldwide and significant source of this growth is due to rural-to-urban migration, as an increasing number of people do not find sufficient economic opportunities in rural areas and hence move to towns and cities. Further the lack of basic amenities for the poor in urban areas has forced the migrants to stay in very unhygienic surroundings. The researchers in their study suggested that due to Covid-19 large number of migrants coming back to their native place and also possess some specific skills set which they have gathered during the period of their stay in the urban cities. So, the government in consultation with panchayats in rural areas can do a skill mapping of workers and try to generate employment opportunities related to that. The reverse migration should be considered as an opportunity as skill is coming back and the skill need to be utilized to develop the rural areas and the adjacent small cities.

Dandekar Ajay, Ghai Rahul (2020) in their article stated that the lockdown due to Covid-19 pandemic has hit the unskilled and semi-skilled migrant laborers the most. The pandemic has triggered a massive reverse migration from the 'destination' to 'source' in large part of country. The researchers also emphasized on the need of charter of the rights of the working population across the board that ensures the right to livelihood, food security and above all dignity of labour. Such a charter should become the guiding principle in the post-coronavirus phase of India's polity and economy.

Sirasubramanian K & Raju V (2021) in their paper study the impact of covid-19 pandemic on the unorganized workforce and also government initiatives to support the unorganized migrants' workers for their livelihood. The study is based on secondary data source gathered from government and non-government institutions such as the centre for Monetary Indian Economy, census of India, newspapers and magazines. The study found that the covid-19 pandemic and lockdown in India created unemployment problems among the migrant laborers in the unorganized sector in major urban areas. The unemployment rate increased up to 8.20% in August 2020. The researchers also suggest few policy measures to tap the reverse migrants. First central and state governments must provide free food grains to migrants irrespective of whether they hold BPL cards or ration cards. And second the government has to provide monetary support to migrants to retain them in destination state.

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 unorganized sectors in urban areas, expected to suffer long-term unemployment and a loss of their livelihoods.

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.

The MNREGA topped the list of the highest job provider with 38% of the people employed under its various projects followed by 33% who are engaged in agriculture, horticulture, cattle rearing along with dairy farming, 12% are self-employed and 17% are in other fields. According to state government estimates, more than 2.15 lakh workers returning to the hill state possessed a skill set ranging from software designing to plumbing and others.

Government Initiatives: The Uttarakhand Government, has been very particularly working for the reverse migration to be successful. Considering, the nature of socio-economic status of the rural inhabitants and the landscape of the migrants. There are a few steps acknowledged by the State Government and are constantly working to achieve the same.

The Uttarakhand State Government launched MukhyamantriSwarojgar Yojana in May 2020 to create employment opportunities for returning migrants. The scheme aimed to provide 15-25% investment subsidies to returning migrants who wanted to start new services, businesses, and micro industries for self-employment. However, despite the state government's initiative, more than one lakh (100,000) migrants returned to cities after the pandemic situation improved.

Further, it was also deliberated that every district of the state to have model villages. These model villages will comprise of all the basic amenities. Moreover, every person returning back the State will be provided with a suitable employment under various schemes being run by the Government.

It has always been observed that the policies with a good intent and noble thoughts have a longer life span. A long term and full proof plan that will satisfy all the basic tenets of a reformative is required and is under the consideration, the Uttarakhand Migration Commission suggested to the State Government that a minimum of 10 years to create a conducive environment for reverse migration to become successful.

Under the Chief Minister's Migration Control Scheme, 60 development blocks have been initiated in 12 districts comprising of 674 villages, where the migration rate has been more than 50%.

Uttarakhand KarmikSwarojgar Yojana' for skill development and self-employment in rural areas.

The Uttarakhand Government has prepared an eco-tourism policy to promote conservation and to ensure livelihood for the people who migrate to cities to work. As the state's geographical and geological location allows it have all the agro climatic zones, it gives the opportunity to convert the not so explored horticulture and floriculture to highly sustainable and profitable business in the state.

Over the years, the State has been witnessing to many infrastructure projects, roads, dams flyovers, hydropower, and sanitation. The State has also made several steps to improve on the financial and technical support for setting up their own business thus being self-reliant and thus helps reduce the migration to cities.

As per the Uttarakhand Rural Development Migration Commission (URMDC), a few recommendations have been made to ensure that the reverse migrant stay permanently.

- Skill development: Providing hands on trainings to local residents that can help in finding them better employment opportunities and earn a decent livelihood.

- Entrepreneurship: Providing the rural youth with entrepreneurship attitude creates job opportunities and awareness that self-help will helping others can build a working ecosystem. Thus, reducing migration to the cites.

- Agricultural development: Promoting and advocating sustainable agriculture is the need of the hour. Sensible agriculture practices while going along the modern approach is the thing to look after. This, helps reducing the migration by providing job to the rural youth and by enhancing the agricultural productivity.

- Promoting rural products: Marketing local products gives a sense of being a part of the brand that creates a value in the mind of customers. Advertising the local economy, branding of local arts, handicrafts, gives the pride to the local artisan to work for the best and remain a part of ecosystem, reducing the migration.

Impact of Reverse Migration

The impact of reverse migration can be observed in various ways:

1. Economic impact: As studied, the reverse migration can have a boost to the local economy. The increase in labor force raises the product efficiency and the market productivity. This also helps in increment of labor wages thus aiding in maintaining a decent lifestyle.
2. Social Implications: The reverse migration also helps in changing the social attitude of the people around, as the people coming back to their native place brings with them different and varied perspectives. Their experiences add to the value of the local products being marketed and promoted.
3. Cultural impact: The migrants coming back to their roots maintain the cultural, historical and geographical link, thus preserving the culture and heritage that is slowly losing its sheen and shine.

The basic aim is to increase job employment and create job opportunities to address the socio-economic status of the migrants, thus reducing the migration to urban areas. The government by doing this helps in maintaining a balance of the

resources divide between the rural and urban population considering their respective needs.

Discussion : The pandemic situation showed rather taught all of us that basic amenities must not be ignored at any cost. For survival, we have to be vocal for local and self-reliant. Reverse migration is an important issue to discuss and work for as it solves the imbalance condition between the rural and urban community. This can be done by implementing various initiatives including skill development, sustainable agricultural practices, marketing and promoting rural products, etc.

This would help in giving a balanced view in making a proper distribution of economic growth and improve the lives of migrant who leave their native places in search of job opportunities and better lifestyle.

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