



e-ISSN: 2319-8753 | p-ISSN: 2320-6710

IJIRSET

International Journal of Innovative Research in
SCIENCE | ENGINEERING | TECHNOLOGY

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INNOVATIVE RESEARCH

IN SCIENCE | ENGINEERING | TECHNOLOGY

Volume 9, Issue 12, December 2020

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

Impact Factor: 7.512

9940 572 462

6381 907 438

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Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Migrant Workers in Uttarakhand (India)

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ABSTRACT: Coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) was declared a “pandemic” by the World Health Organization (WHO) in early March 2020. This pandemic has spread over the whole world and compelled human society to maintain social distancing, wear mask, washing hand and practising good hygiene. Recently, India has experienced the severe second wave of COVID19. Healthcare facilities and staff across the country were struggling to cope with the surge in cases. The covid-19 dedicated hospitals have experienced a crippling shortage of hospital beds for people with severe cases, a shortage of oxygen supplies, and shortages of medicines being used to treat mild, moderate and severe forms of COVID-19. However, the Government of India has taken all necessary steps to ensure that we are prepared well to face the challenge and threat posed by the growing pandemic of COVID-19 the Corona Virus. As far as Uttarakhand state is concerned, the COVID-19 pandemic has had large scale ramifications. The strict lockdown enforced by the government to curb the spread of the virus in India precipitated a humanitarian and economic crisis. The imposition of a complete lockdown in March 2020 to prevent a rise in COVID-19 infections has had a substantial impact on the state’s economy and health. Over the past one and half year, a large proportion of people, mainly the socio-economically marginalised, have found it difficult to find jobs, feed their families and access basic healthcare. Consequently, the impact of coronavirus pandemic on Uttarakhand state has been largely disruptive in terms of economic activity as well as a loss of human lives. Almost all the sectors have been adversely affected as domestic demand and exports sharply plummeted with some notable exceptions where high growth was observed.

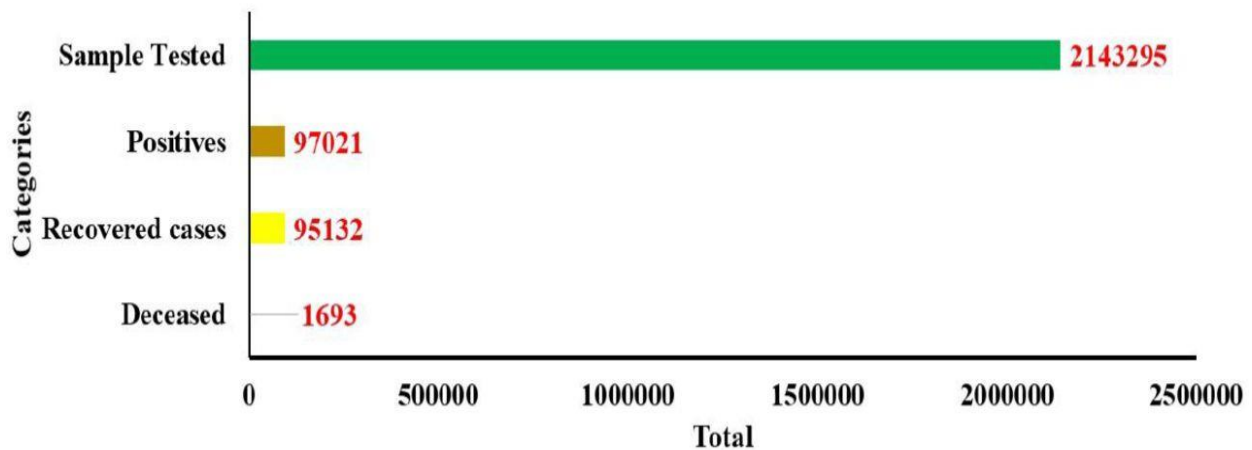
KEYWORDS: pandemic, covid-19, uttarakhand, workers, migrant, impact, marginal, boon, wave

I. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has affected people, essential services, education sector, economy and other services in the state of Uttarakhand. In the state of Uttarakhand there are various negative impacts of COVID-19 on tourism sector, transportation, manufacturing, supply chain of goods, employment etc. with the help of vaccination drive government is doing efforts to control the spread Covid-19. The second wave of COVID-19 was more deadly than the first wave. There was shortage of oxygen and medicines in hospitals. Various aspects of economic losses in Uttarakhand where the tax collections dropped. Tourism was the most hit sector where the footfall declined consequently impacting the livelihood of the residents. Further she added that the government of Uttarakhand did their best to mitigate the pain of locals however was not able to fully pacify the requirements of all people. However, coming back of migrant population can be a boon for the state.

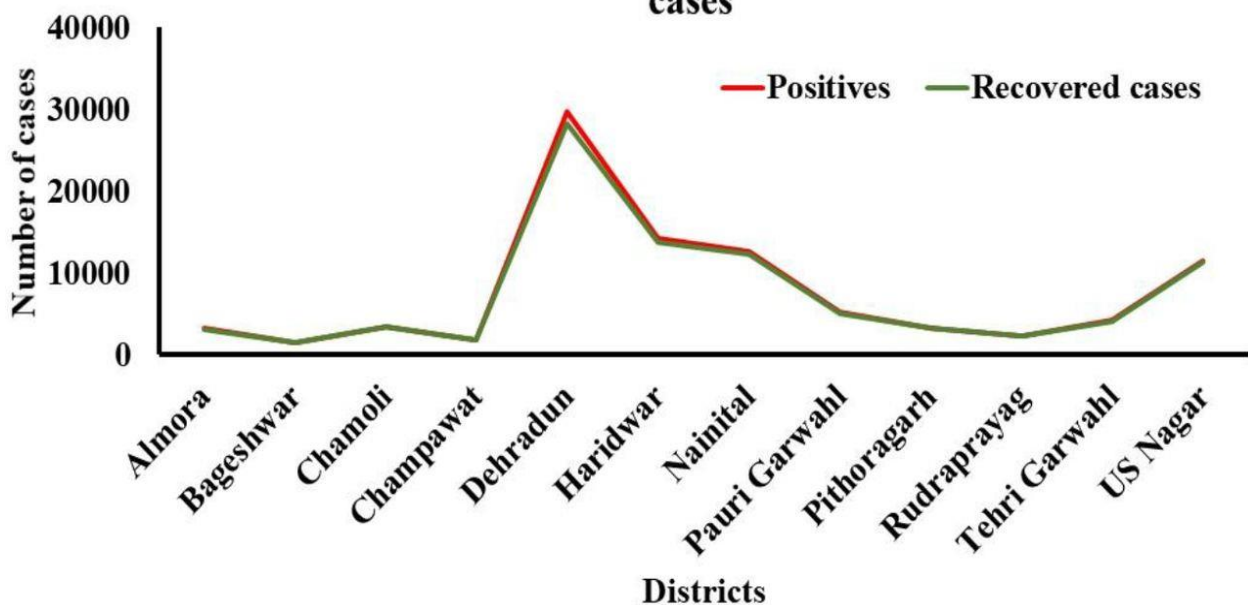
Corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic poses a grave health threat to the rural areas in Uttarakhand. These communities already experience poor access to healthcare, significantly higher rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases, lack of access to essential services, sanitation etc. The spread of animal generated viruses are inevitable and will keep threatening the human race.

Cumulative analysis of Covid-19 scenario in Uttarakhand during first wave



Animal Viruses generally spread due to either coming in the contact or consuming the animal products. The education system has become more flexible due to the online mode of learning. Online teaching facilitates learning from anywhere, anytime. One of the major stumbling blocks with regard to online learning is the lack of strong and stable internet connections, as the ones conventionally used at homes have either low bandwidth or have exhausted their limits. In villages, students face challenges to access the online courses conducted by their institutions mainly due to poor data connectivity, lack of access to laptops and smart phones, and power issues.

Correlation between weekly positive cases and recovery cases



Even if some rural areas in the state are blessed with good internet connectivity, not many families can afford digital devices which are imperative for online learning. Families which rely on the mid-day meal scheme to feed their children properly cannot afford to spend thousands of rupees on a smart phone, leave alone a desktop or laptop. In Uttarakhand state, COVID-19 has impacted the daily wages people associated with hospitality sector, education system, supply chain system, tourism sector and other sectors. There is need to provide work and amenities to the migrants. As they have worked in metropolitan cities having new skills and knowledge; the states can use their skills for overall development. In case of such pandemics, there is need to provide immediate support to the most affected communities like daily wagers, construction works and workers in tourism sector We can produce list of experts and

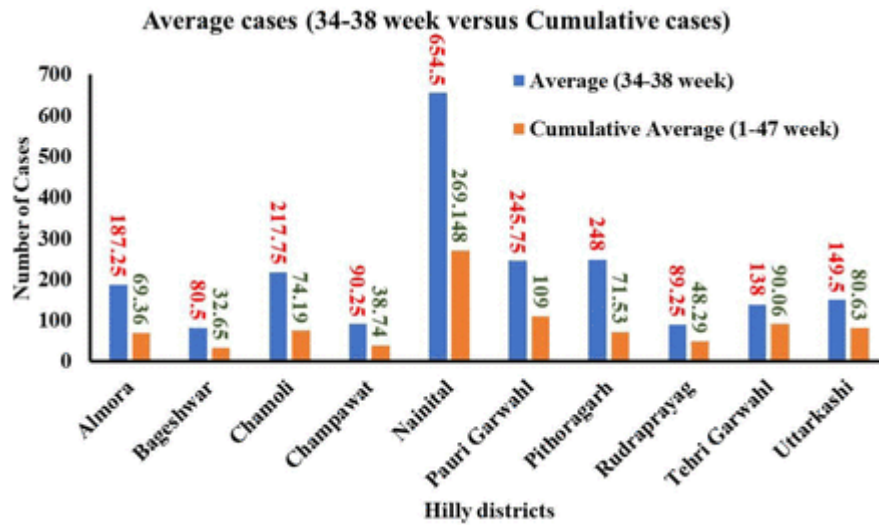
resource inventories, as a readymade resource guide so that we can use those in emergency situation. It is essential to strengthen health care infrastructure by increasing the health care expenditures. Also, there is need to emphasize on planning and preparedness in order to deal such pandemics in the future. During COVID-19 pandemic, tourism was the most hit sector in the state where the footfall declined consequently impacting the livelihood of the residents. Hence, there is need to diversify our economy from tourism to other sector like horticulture, agriculture and other sectors. The disaster management plans should also include the provisions for health care crisis.

II. DISCUSSION

Coronavirus disease 19 (Covid-19) is causing a dramatic impact on human life worldwide. As of June 11 2021, later one has attributed more than 174 million confirmed cases and over 3.5 million deaths globally.



Nonetheless, a World Bank Group flagship report features Covid-19 induced global crisis as the strongest post-recession since World WarII. Currently, all approved therapeutics or vaccines are strictly allowed for emergency use. Hence, in the absence of pharmaceutical interventions, it is vital to analyze data set covering the growth rates of positive human cases, number of recoveries, other factors, and future strategies to manage the growth of fatal Covid-19 effectively. The Uttarakhand state of India is snuggled in the lap of the Himalayas and occupies more people than Israel, Switzerland, Hong Kong, etc. This study analyzed state Covid-19 data, fetched from an authenticated government repository using Python 3.9 from April 1, 2020, to February 28, 2021. In the first wave, plain areas of Uttarakhand covering the districts Dehradun, Haridwar, Nainital, and U. S. Nagar were severely affected and reported peak positive cases during the 21st – 26th week. Other hands, the hilly terrains of Uttarakhand districts, including Chamoli, Pauri Garhwal, and Rudraprayag, reported a high number of positive cases between the 30th and 31st week, and other hilly districts reported an increase in Covid-19 cases during the 34th to 38th week. The highest recovery rate was attributed to the hilly district Rudraprayag. The analysis also revealed that a very high doubling rate was seen during the last week of May to the first week of Jun 2020. At last, based on this blueprint, we have suggested 6-points solutions for preventing the next pandemic.



The officials from Uttarakhand's Health and Family Welfare department said that return of migrant workers to the state may pose a new challenge for the state, with almost 84 per cent of the COVID-19 cases detected in the last 10 days. Also, it is reportedly said that the cases were earlier reported from plain areas, but the recent cases have been detected in hill districts. Many cases were detected and all of them have history of travel outside the state recently. Seven cases were reported from Nainital, three from Udham Singh Nagar, two each from Pauri Garhwal and Bageshwar and one from Chamoli. According to the official reports, as many as 43 COVID-19 cases were detected in the state in the past ten days. The total positive cases in Uttarakhand on May 10 was 68, 21 of them active. The doubling rate was 39 days. According to the Uttarakhand government data, about 1.11 lakh migrant workers returned to the state amid lockdown relaxation, and more than 85,659 of them returned in the last 10 days.

"A total of 53,092 migrants have returned to Uttarakhand between April 1 to May 5, 2021. The highest number of people have returned in Almora with 27.97% followed by Pauri (17.84%), Tehri (12.53%), Udham Singh Nagar (0.66%), Dehradun (0.29%) and Haridwar (0.11%)," said SS Negi, vice-chairman of the Uttarakhand Migration Commission.

Most of these people belong to the hospitality sector who have lost their jobs due to ongoing restrictions amid the raging pandemic.

Atleast 39.4% of people belong to the hospitality centre followed by students (12.9%), manual workers (11.1%) and any others from various fields. The state government had asked the commission to make a report to assess the unemployment situation to further address it.

Last year, till September 2020 more than 3.57 lakh migrants returned to the state. In May last year, the state government launched 'Mukhyamantri Swarojgar Yojana' to provide jobs for returning migrants. The scheme aimed to provide investment subsidy from 15-25% to those who want to start their own businesses such as restaurant, beauty parlour, pisciculture, dairy farm, bar and meat shop in the state.

With thousands of migrants who had left Uttarakhand for greener pastures returning amid the lockdown, the state government is trying to convince them to stay on and rebuild their lives there, offering interest-free loans, subsidies and free electricity to set up eco-tourism and micro-enterprises. The state government has also added an additional budget for employment-generating schemes such as the Veer Chandra Garhwali Yojana, which offers micro credit aimed to create sustainable employment opportunities in tourism and establish facilities to run taxis, buses, restaurants and tourism info centres.

III. RESULTS

Over the years, Uttarakhand has seen a large exodus of people to the plains, other parts of the country and abroad as poor development in the hills created few opportunities. Now, the widespread closure of manufacturing units, hotels and other businesses elsewhere has forced them to return.

As of April 23, 2020, a total of 59,360 people have returned to the 10 hill districts of Uttarakhand, according to government records and officials. Of these, 12,039 are from Pauri Garhwal and 9,303 from Almora, two districts most

affected by migration, according to an interim report released by the state's Rural Development and Migration Commission (RDMC) on April 23, 2020.

Around 350,000 residents were estimated to have migrated from the state between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, leaving 1,048 villages totally uninhabited. Of nearly 16,800 villages in Uttarakhand, as many as 734, mostly in the hilly areas, have become uninhabited after 2011. Such ghost villages with their houses lying in ruins and fields overgrown with vegetation abound in Pauri district, where 186 villages turned uninhabited since 2011. The return of the migrants has breathed fresh life into many abandoned villages in Pauri Garhwal, where district magistrate Dhiraj Singh Garbyal told IndiaSpend that villages are looking lively again as many have begun ploughing their fields to utilise their free time.

Of the sizeable number who have returned, 60-65% have come back states such as Haryana, Punjab, Chhattisgarh, Goa and Tamil Nadu; 25-30% from the urban pockets in Uttarakhand such as Dehradun, Haridwar and Udham Singh Nagar; and the remaining from other countries such as Dubai, Australia and Oman, the RDMC's April 2020 report said. Most of the returnees are 30-45 years old and work largely for the hospitality sector at low pay.

"Life is hard. It is very difficult to live in cramped one-room rented accommodation with three others," said Puran Bisht of Badait village, who works as a helper in a spice store in Dehradun. "I want to return to my parents, wife and children in the open and healthy environment of my village, for good, provided the state government helps me in earning a decent livelihood."

Though the out-migration has improved the sex ratio, with 1,037 women for every 1,000 men in the hills as against 900 in the plains and 963 across the state, according to an April 2018 RDMC report, researchers say that men's leaving only exchanges one form of oppression for another. "If the son migrates to the city, then his wife has to bear a higher workload to take care of his parents, children, land and cattle in the village," Shankar Gopalakrishnan, Uttarakhand-based researcher who conducted a comparative study on migration in 2016, told IndiaSpend, "If she accompanies her husband to the destination, she becomes much more dependent on him, lacking in the local support structure and partial independence that she was able to rely on in the hills."

The elderly, women and children left behind in the villages live without basic amenities such as healthcare, education, piped water, electricity and, most importantly, livelihood opportunities, said Aranya Ranjan, a social worker based in Khadi in Uttarakhand's Tehri district. They feel disinterested in taking up agriculture due to the problem of wildlife damaging their crops, Ranjan added. "Earlier, people would allow animals to eat away a part of their crops," said Mahendra Kunwar Singh, founder of Dehradun-based Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC) that works with several self-help groups to grow 89 types of organic produce for sale in smart packages in markets across the country. Monkeys were declared vermin in 2019, and wild boar in 2016 and 2018, allowing local authorities to cull these animals, which were ruining crops, reports show. Trepan Singh Chauhan and Gopalakrishnan are credited for launching "Ghasiari contest", a competition in Tehri Garhwal in 2016, in which the woman who proved fastest at cutting grass was awarded Rs 1 lakh prize money. The contest was aimed to impart dignity to the work of women who go out into the jungle to bring back fodder for the cattle and firewood for the kitchen. Besides the workload, women also face attacks by wild animals such as leopards and bears when they go out in the fields to graze cattle, Geeta Gairola, an activist from Bhatti village under Aswalsyun Patti of Pauri Garhwal, said. Women must battle on every front without the menfolk around to help, said Malti Devi, a resident of Badait village, "I urge the state government to facilitate employment for our men so that our families can reunite and we can work together to develop our hills."

IV. CONCLUSIONS

A report that recommends steps for the state's economic revival, such as rural job creation in the hills to stem out-migration and lure migrants to return, is due to be submitted this month, Indu Kumar Pandey, head of the state's Economic Revival Committee Post-Covid and chairperson of the Uttarakhand Finance Commission, told IndiaSpend.

"It is a great opportunity for the state government to reach out to thousands of its skilled and experienced migrants who have come home these days," Sharad Singh Negi, vice-chairperson of RDMC and finance secretary, told IndiaSpend. However, he said, "As of now, 70% of them have declined to stay back. Some have shown interest in starting their own small ventures."

Meanwhile, every district administration has prepared a profile of each migrant. The RDMC has submitted an interim report after conducting an online sample survey on April 23, 2020.

“After talking to migrants, I have made some recommendations to the state government in my interim report which include laying down provisions for interest-free loans, heavy subsidies and free electricity for people to set up new ventures in sectors like eco-tourism or for micro enterprises,” Negi said, “Additional budget for employment generating schemes like Vir Chader Gadhwal Yojana too have been suggested.”

The other recommendations of RDMC include setting up a new cell for migrants by the Rural Development Department, a helpline to resolve their problems and a database on their aspirations.

The commission is trying to fix the issues responsible for out-migration, as described in the RDMC’s interim report cited above. A new report with an action plan for 15 blocks under three districts, Pauri Garhwal, Almora and Pithoragarh, has been submitted to the state government, Negi said. The action plan includes establishing new schools, primary health centres and road networks wherever required. The government has allocated an additional Rs 50 crore in the state budget to implement this action report, Negi said, adding that the lockdown had temporarily halted the release of funds but it would be resumed soon.

Meanwhile, Chief Minister Trivender Singh Rawat too has called upon the migrants of Pauri Garhwal through an open letter on April 24, 2020--in an emotional message, he implored the migrants that the land their ancestors had cultivated through hard work to feed their families now lies barren and neglected.

“I have recommended one village-one cooperative culture, where all the small landholdings of one village are pooled to grow one kind of produce and sold through a smooth supply chain,” said Pandey of the finance commission. “We will encourage value addition for all our enterprises like agriculture, cultivation of herbs, dairy and poultry farming for the rural sector which will give a boost to the income of villagers. Decentralisation and micro-economy through self-help groups will be supported.”

Experts also agree that migration has damaged the rural economy and aspirations of the simple hill-dwelling family. Out-migration from villages along the international border “poses serious national security concerns”, according to the RDMC’s 2018 report, corroborated by reports of “territory marking” in Baharoti village in Joshimath. Anil Joshi, proponent of the Gaon Bachao (save villages) campaign, has recommended the development model of neighbouring Himachal Pradesh, which has a similar topography. “Himachal Pradesh has generated a booming economy with intense agriculture and horticulture,” Joshi said. “The same model if replicated in Uttarakhand, will not only generate employment but will also enrich the ecology.”

Farmers could do wonders with the fertile land and natural resources in the hills and the problem of wild animals would also disappear if people worked in the fields, said HARC’s Kunwar Singh.

The biggest chunk of people, 43.6%, work in the agriculture sector, followed by 32.2% in labour in Uttarakhand, according to the RDMC’s 2018 report. In Pauri and Garhwal, this figure is 38.8% and 38.7%, respectively, according to the RDMC report.

Life for most of the migrants working in low-paying jobs is no better than in the village, said Binod Khadria, director of Migration and Diaspora Studies Project in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. “Across the Himalayan belt in the world, the hill communities suffer the worst working and living conditions in the urban areas while working for low-paying jobs. So migration has its own side effects,” he said.

Khadria recommends that the state government form an advisory board of consultants and stakeholders to devise innovative solutions for reverse migration through sustainable development in the hills, where families live united and take care of their jungles and other natural resources.

Paramvir Rawat, 24, who has returned to Raidul village from Dubai on March 20, 2020, days before the nationwide lockdown was enforced, said he would wait for infrastructure to improve. “Livelihood and opportunities have to get better on the ground for us to return,” he said.

Over the last decade, Uttarakhand has also seen an influx of people from outside--many have left successful careers to settle in the serene and pollution-free life of the hills. Many have also fostered local communities. Roopesh Rai, 40, a top executive with a five-star hotel in Delhi, quit his job and turned abandoned houses into home-stays in many villages such as Raithal and Kanatal. He also set up the non-profit Green People. "The common tendency of red tape and intrusive approach to create hurdles in order to extract money from entrepreneurs needs to stop," he said, "Secondly, the government should focus on large dynamics like creating mega infrastructure for adventure tourism rather than targeting individuals through schemes."

Anand Sankar, 38, Bengaluru-based photojournalist, brought the nondescript Kalap village of Mori tehsil in Uttarkashi, situated at 7,800 feet, into prominence, after settling down there in 2003. With his Kalap Trust, he set up a school and hospital in the village, which had none. For short-term pragmatic measures to tide over the impending recession, he suggested: "As of now, the government can help in setting up food processing units in the hills for people to make pickles, spices, juices, etc. and growing vegetables and also stuff such as chillies and ginger which are not eaten by wild animals. In the winter, they can make warm apparel and woollen to sell, for which the government needs to take the marketing initiative. Hopefully, after that the religious tourism season pertaining to the Char Dham will pick up."

Some migrants are tempted to stay on. Pankaj Bisht, 26, a resident of Paidul in Pauri Garhwal, who works as a chef in a Delhi-based eatery, says his euphoria of being with family has been diluted with the concern of losing his income as he came home with just Rs 3,000. Given an opportunity and financial assistance, he would start a computer lab in his village as now he is wary that such a pandemic might recur, and he feels safer in his village than in the city.

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