

FLEEING THE MOUNTAINS

Downhill migration

With few job opportunities in the Garhwal hills and no other means of income, more and more people head downhill towards the big cities in search of a livelihood.

By Mahesh Uniyal

Time has stood still in Byasi's road side market ever since the first shops were set up in these mountains 60 years ago. Once the first

major halt for pilgrims headed for Hindu shrines high up in the Garhwal Himalaya of India, Byasi is a blur on the highway today, quickly bypassed



Nainital, India - Porters wait for business before dawn.

HIMAL/Sudhir Sharma

by the long-distance pilgrim buses that roar past, kicking up dust. Byasi has all the squalour and filth associated with a decaying market town.

For as far back as Inder Singh can recall, there has been no change along the 100-metre stretch of tea and food stalls in Byasi. They are the main source of livelihood for the 150 or so families who live here and in the nearby villages of Atali, Sintali and Kaudiyala.

The narrow rain-fed terrace farms carved out of the mountains near the

town yield a meagre harvest of wheat and coarse cereals. It is never enough. "Men and women work on the fields all day from five in the morning. It is backbreaking labour, but in the end there is nothing," says the 55-year-old peasant. If it were not for the bus stand market, most of the men would have left the villages to take up menial jobs in the big cities in the plains.

But even this source of income is now threatened. "Times have changed," points out 36-year-old Prem Singh Chauhan who earns about 30

Have Degree, Will Travel

A 1996 study of migration from selected villages in Pithoragarh and Tehri districts in the Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas by R.S. Bora of the Institute of Economic Growth found that nearly 60 percent of households had members who had left to seek a livelihood elsewhere. Most of them headed for Delhi or other big cities in the plains in Uttar Pradesh.

The bulk of migrants (97.8 percent) were men, 44 percent of them having read up to the fifth and eighth standards in school. Another 33 percent had passed either the tenth or twelfth grade and some 16 percent had a university degree. Only the highly educated women left the village, with all the 2.2 percent women migrants in the surveyed villages having university degrees.

In Garhwal and Kumaon, maximum migration takes place from the districts of Almora, Pithoragarh, Tehri and Pauri. The outward movement continues despite relatively high levels of education since additional qualifications have not translated into greater local job opportunities. According to 1991 Census figures, the Uttarakhand region, comprising Garhwal and Kumaon, had an overall literacy rate of 59.6 percent against the 41.6 percent average for Uttar Pradesh - India's most populous state and one of the most backward. Female literacy levels in Garhwal and Kumaon were 42.9 percent against the state average of 25.31 percent. Of the then eight districts in Garhwal and Kumaon, the highest literacy rate (69.5 percent) was in Dehradun, followed by Pauri (63.4 percent), Chamoli (61.1 percent), Pithoragarh (59.0 percent), Almora (58.7 percent), Nainital (56.5 percent), Tehri (48.4 percent) and Uttarkashi (47.2 percent). Male literacy levels are even higher (75.5 percent). Only four states in India - Goa, Kerala, Maharashtra and Mizoram, have higher male literacy levels.

All this points to a substantial potential for human resource in the region. But educational levels are not matched by job opportunities. According to Uttar Pradesh government figures, there has been marginal growth in private and public sector jobs in the region. The number of jobs in the public sector - the main employer - actually declined from 203,763 to 202,627 during the 1990-95 period, while private sector jobs grew slightly from 32,235 to 34,112 in these years.

rupees (70 US cents) a day from the tea shop started by his father. Fewer buses stop here and more pilgrims now travel in chartered vehicles and cook their own meals. "Byasi is losing its relevance. Our business is shrinking," says Jabar Singh, another shop-keeper.

The main natural resource of Byasi is the land and surrounding forests. But the forests are mostly state-owned and the river Ganga flowing past this settlement is too far down the hillside to be of use for irrigating the parched fields.

Less than one percent of the woods belong to the village *panchayat*, the rest is controlled by the forest department of the Uttar Pradesh government. Although some households keep cows, buffaloes and goats, the milk yield of the animals is low and not enough even for domestic consumption. One of the reasons is that there is little fodder around. Villagers are not allowed to graze their animals in government forests.

Hopes were raised when the authorities selected this area for promoting adventure tourism. The river rafting camp run by the state's Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam on the banks of the Ganga has put Kaudiyala on the national tourism map, but villagers complain there are no jobs in it for them. Nor has the luxury cottage/motel operated by a top corporate house at the larger settlement at Gular eight kilometres away offered much more. "What chance do we have of finding work there? It is a high-class place for foreigners," says Inder Singh. Baisakh Singh, 42, thinks the govern-

ment should instead be setting up factories to create jobs for the locals.

Villagers are pinning their hopes on the creation of the proposed new hill state of Uttarakhand. The people in the hills believe that the inequitable distribution of wealth, investments and opportunity between the hills and plains will disappear when a new state is carved out of Uttar Pradesh by separating the hill districts of Garhwal and Kumaon.

Till then, the locals see little livelihood options to migration. Generations of Garhwali and Kumaoni males in similar circumstances have left their villages to seek jobs in big cities in the plains. The extremely difficult conditions for farming and related economic



Going downhill - Cable car in Mussoorie, India.

HIMAL/Bikas Rauniyar

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Garhwali Towns

The number of towns in the Garhwal hills increased nearly four-fold between 1901 and 1981 to 36. The growth is attributed to migration from both within and outside the region, the improved road network and administrative restructuring. The religious pilgrimage centres also played a significant role in urbanisation. More than half of the urban population lives in the two biggest towns of Dehradun and Nainital in Garhwal and Kumaon respectively. But the region still has several settlements which function as trading and marketing centres that do not qualify as towns going by the minimum population norm of 5,000 set by the Census Commissioner of India.

Studies of the demographic pattern of urban settlements in the region throws up some interesting details. The 1981 census statistics show that the bulk of urban residents in Garhwal are under 60 years old. Children under 14 years of age make up the single largest chunk of the population (38.7 percent), and most towns of Garhwal and Kumaon are male-dominated. The skewed urban sex ratio in favour of males highlights the practice of male migrants leaving their women behind in villages. It is also a pointer to other factors such as the endemic shortage of housing in hill towns. But the improved sex ratio between 1971 and 1981 also indicates an increase in female migration into towns.

Migrants form only a small proportion of the population of Garhwal towns, except in Dehradun where nearly a third of the residents were born outside the district. The biggest lot of migrants in Dehradun came from Pakistan after the subcontinent's partition in 1947 and comprised a tenth of the 270,000 population of the district in 1971. Nepalis then constituted the second biggest group of foreigners (12,576). However, in other districts of Garhwal, immigrants constituted no more than a tenth of the population.

activities leave them with little choice.

"It is obvious that the people of the region, especially the youth, will continue to seek employment outside the region," says Dr B K Joshi, a former Vice-Chancellor of Kumaon University. He sees little hope for attempts to arrest migratory trends and, instead, suggests that prospective migrants be equipped with "more and qualitatively better education and better skills." This would boost their employment chances and incomes in the plains, he adds.

"It is time that a comprehensive plan for educational development in Uttarakhand is made...to provide front-line educational opportunities to the youth of the region in order to equip them to compete effectively in the liberalised economic environment," according to Joshi. He argues that given the difficult geography and environmental limitations, there is little scope for agricultural and industrial development in the region. Uttarakhand, he thinks, can be developed as a centre for higher education catering to the rest of the country. The two universities in Kumaon and Garhwal have already emerged as popular centres of higher education and attract students and academics from across India.

Not everyone agrees. "I do not accept the view that migration takes place because of lack of opportunities in the villages of Uttarakhand," says retired Major General B C Khanduri, a member of India's main ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who represents Pauri in the national Parliament.

He dismisses as "misconception" the view that there are no livelihood opportunities in the hills. There is, he thinks, "tremendous" potential of vegetable, fruit and flower farming. "Our youth should be motivated to live in the villages," he asserts. According to Khanduri, a major reason for the migration out of Garhwal and Kumaon villages is the lure of city life.

He suggests that commercial farm-related activities should be organised around a cluster of villages which should, in turn, be linked to strategically located "marketing hubs." He expects this process to naturally result in the creation of urban centres providing basic services to the villagers.

Khanduri's vision is echoed by experts at Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) who believe appropriate farm development in the hills can be married to desirable urbanisation strategies to bring about a socio-economic transformation in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. The Centre advocates the development of market centres and small towns in the mountains to slow downhill migration which continues to depopulate Himalayan villages. This will also help correct the skewed urbanisation pattern in the region which has seen the "concretisation" of large hill towns like Shimla, Mussorie and Shillong. These British-era "hill stations" are marked by collapsing civic services made worse by the large number of people from the surrounding rural areas flocking to these towns in search of work.

"Self-sufficiency in villages will lead to the natural development of small towns," insists Khanduri. The second-term lawmaker expects things to improve when the proposed new hill state of Uttarakhand is set up. The BJP has actively campaigned for the new state and the proposal has received the backing of all major political parties in India. Khanduri is confident that the new hill state can be a "self-sufficient and surplus" province within a decade.

Regional Congregations

A survey of the urban map of the Hindu Kush-Himalaya region reveals a picture of sharp contrasts. The urbanisation level ranges from a low of 6.4 percent in Bhutan to 46.1 percent in India's northeastern state of Mizoram.

In China, the levels of urbanisation range from 8.8 percent in Western Yunnan to 12.7 percent in Tibet and 16.4 percent in Western Sichuan, according to 1990 estimates.

The least urbanised section in the Indian Himalayas, according to 1991 Census figures, is in Himachal Pradesh (8.79 percent), followed by Sikkim (9.1), Assam (11.1), Arunachal Pradesh (12.8), Uttar Pradesh (17.7), West Bengal (27.5), Manipur (27.5) and Mizoram (46.1).

In Burma (Myanmar), urbanisation in the mountain region varied from 14.6 and 14.8 percent in the states of Chin and Rakhain, to 22.1 percent and 22.3 percent in Kachin and Shan.

In Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP), Balochistan and in the Hindu Kush region of Afghanistan, the level of urbanisation was estimated to be below 20 percent.

One Large Village - Urbanisation of the Northeast

The 1991 Census recorded the highest urbanisation levels in northeastern India. Between 1981 and 1991, against the average urban growth of 36.09 percent in India, the seven northeastern states notched 49.79 percent, despite the relative backwardness of the region in terms of economic growth, communication and health services. The most spectacular growth was in Mizoram where the urban population has almost doubled and the number of towns almost quadrupled from six to 22 during this period. This is surely remarkable for a state where most of the 700,000 people are tribals – an estimated 93.55 percent. The explanation is simple. During the 1980s, the federal government carried out a large-scale administrative re-organisation of the districts of Mizoram as part of a bid to sharpen counter-insurgency operations. This saw several villages being regrouped into urban centres.

However, the benefits of urbanisation seem to have bypassed the indigenous population of northeastern India. According to figures compiled by the New Delhi-based National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA) from the 1981 Census, barring Mizoram, non-tribal people dominate the towns in the region. Nearly 90 percent of the urban population of Mizoram is tribal. The demographic transition in northeastern India is unique in that it was brought about by settlement policies begun by the colonial British rulers in the last century which has seen the northeastern states swamped by “outsiders.”

From less than one million people 150 years ago, northeast India's population had swelled to nearly 30 million by 1981. All this is closely linked to the political problems in the region. The most dramatic transformation was in Tripura where the tribal people had shrunk from 64 percent of the population in 1874 to 29 percent in 1981. “The impact of this phenomenon on the society, polity and economy of the region has naturally been very significant. The migrant communities have gained control over land and secondary sources of livelihood,” writes India's former Home Secretary B.P. Singh in his study of the region where he has worked extensively as an administrator for several decades.

“The widespread identity crisis in northeast India as been caused by large-scale migration of population from outside the region during the past one hundred years,” he adds.

Many scoff at the idea of the mainly subsistence farming Garhwal-Kumaon region attaining self-sufficiency and say the new state would have to survive on federal largesse. But some independent experts believe that this is indeed possible. All that is needed are intelligent farm and agribusiness development initiatives tailored to local conditions, coupled with the creation of small urban centres to help market the produce of such

activities. The latter will also help counter the pull of the big cities, thereby arresting migration and acting as marketing hubs for the produce of agribusiness ventures in the hills.

For the agribusiness-marketing hub connection to work, however, there is a need to recognise the special characteristics of the region. ICIMOD farm expert, Dr N S Jodha, stresses that agricultural development in the Himalaya needs a “mountain perspec-

Capital Decay

Well-planned hill towns can also "stagnate" because of their proximity to big urban centres. This can be seen in the case of Narendranagar, a former royal capital. Named after the ruler of the princely state of Tehri, Narendranagar has about 5,000 residents today. Only about 100 families live permanently, the rest being a "fluctual population", according to Shakti Dangwal, one of the former. Most people living in the town are employees of various Tehri district administration offices and their families.

Narendranagar was built during the 1920s by the then Garhwal ruler, Narendra Shah. Its centre-piece is the sprawling palace built in 1924 on a ridge with a scenic view of Rishikesh 12 km downhill. It is one of the few planned towns in the Garhwal Himalayas with its neat rows of houses, shops, piped water, electricity supply, a municipal hall and public library. Narendranagar became the seat of government of Tehri Garhwal in 1928 when the King moved his capital from the old Tehri town, 80 km to the north. A period of rapid growth followed the merger of the former princely state with Uttar Pradesh after independence in 1947. Between 1951 and 1981, the decennial population growths recorded were 26.71, 46.45 and 50.25 percent. But its decline began once the Uttar Pradesh state government decided to move the administrative headquarters of Tehri to New Tehri which has been developed to resettle the old Tehri town to be submerged by the Tehri dam on the Bhagirathi river.

tive" which takes into account the specific conditions of mountain regions, like their inaccessibility and the fragility of the environment.

Experts believe that development of farming and agribusiness in the mountains will remain incomplete unless linked to an alternative model of urbanisation. A recent ICIMOD study examines the role of market centres and small towns as alternative models of urbanisation in the mountains. "In conditions of relative inaccessibility and dispersed settlements, market centres and small towns can be the location for the provision of basic and essential central services such as education, health, and extension for the rural hinterland and, as such, act as instruments for alleviating poverty," the study concludes.

If the location is right, the market centre will generate off-farm employment and attract potential migrants who would otherwise flock to large cities. They will also act as buffers between villages and cities and discourage the growth of large urban agglomerations. However, this strategy does not yet feature prominently in the development agenda of any of the mountain areas of the Himalayan arc.

ICIMOD recommends the example of China where "policy changes have brought about a new dynamism in market town activities." In the 1980s, the Chinese government initiated policies to check the growth of big cities and encourage the development of small towns. "An important aspect of these policies was to develop the mar-



Packed houses - Almora, India.

HIMAL/Bikas Rauniyar

ket towns in rural areas. These policies also encouraged households to undertake specialised production activities, accelerating agricultural growth. The market became active again. Private and collective groups were not only allowed to run local enterprises but also given preferential loans and tax privileges. As a result, many township enterprises were established. This encouraged the concentration of township enterprises in designated locations by developing public infrastructure."

Governments and local authorities must learn from the mistakes of the past while encouraging new townships to act as market/service centres. Both the rush of permanent migrants from rural areas as well as increased domestic tourism have contributed to

the haphazard urban growth in the Himalaya. Once quiet, quaint hill stations display all the signs of the typical third world urban nightmares. The burgeoning population and unplanned construction in these urban centres have been accompanied by a severe strain on civic services.

In India, the Supreme Court has banned construction in the popular hill resort towns of Mussoorie and Nainital. Other urbanising towns in the Indian Himalaya are Shillong and Aizawl in the northeast. Shillong, which used to be a scenic hill station till 20 years ago, has seen the construction of ugly concrete structures with the commercial exploitation of coal mines in the nearby Jaintia hills. Although Shillong is located near the wettest spot on earth, Cherrapunji, the town faces a chronic water shortage. In Aizawl, unchecked construction activity is triggering landslides. The one-road town now has the highest motor vehicle density in India.

The cause of haphazard growth in the major towns in the Himalayan region is obvious – lack of urban planning. "We don't really have a policy on urbanisation. Only certain parts of the Himalaya are covered by what I could call urban planning," says Dr Joshi. In Garhwal and Kumaon districts, Dehradun and Nainital, the two largest towns, are the only ones with urban regulatory authorities. "There is absolutely no regulation elsewhere and no attempt at any kind of planning for urbanisation in this region," he adds.

Dr T S Papola of ICIMOD agrees. "By and large, past experience tells us

that the growth of large towns in the Hindu Kush and Himalaya has been dysfunctional," he points out. Be it Shimla, Mussoorie or Kathmandu, urban planners are preoccupied with the civic problems facing the large towns in the mountains. "Resources also get diverted to solving these problems. This is not wrong, but the whole question of linking well developed market towns to the hinterland, doesn't seem to get much attention," says Papola.

Boom or bust

Although experts and politicians like Khanduri see hope for the region, times have changed for Prem Singh Chauhan in Byasi. The highway that once offered hope of a better life has not only not brought benefits, it has actually destroyed his once self-sufficient lifestyle. Prem Singh has learnt the hard way that not all development is good.

Up the mountain, 45 km away on the Rishikesh-Badrinath highway lies the ancient pilgrimage centre of Devprayag where the holy Alaknanda and Bhagirathi rivers merge to form the Ganga. Devprayag was once an important halt on the pilgrimage route. Till the early 1940s, pilgrims had no choice as the metalled road ended at Devprayag. But the decline began

when the road was extended beyond Devprayag. Pilgrims now head straight for Srinagar, 30km away. A similar case of a hill settlement bypassed by roads is that of Bandipur on the Kathmandu-Pokhara road in Nepal.

Some places are luckier. Seventy year-old Tehri resident and journalist Sachhidanand Painuli recalls the dramatic change in the hills after the government embarked on a massive road construction programme in Garhwal in the 1960s following the Sino-Indian conflict. "Small villages grew into big urban centres." An example is Chamba, a tiny village with a single roadside eatery in 1947, it is now one of the largest urban centres in Garhwal. Similar urban growths in places like Mugling and Itahari in Nepal show how roads can bring economic boom.

This does not happen in the plains where roads radiate from market towns, unlike in the hills where the linkages to the roadhead are up and down. Says ICIMOD's Papola: "Although people of the hinterland are getting the benefit of the road network, a situation may arise when a vibrant town suddenly starts decaying." The people of Byasi, Bandipur and Devprayag know it only too well.

*Adapted from Down to Earth,
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