



SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES OF RETURNEE MIGRANTS IN POST-COVID UTTARAKHAND

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Abstract

This study undertakes the ethnographic work to understand the experiences of Uttarakhand migrants who returned to their villages after the COVID-19 pandemic. It attempts to look at the balance of recovery, analysing the rest of the economy. The study aims at the changes in employment and income earning opportunities of returnee migrants, their living standards, and the pertinent skills, infrastructure, government programs, and political context that determine their access to sustainable employment and residing in Almora and Champawat where 705 returnee migrants were interviewed and surveyed.

The findings show that the employment opportunities in the region are scarce and access to work is limited to highly seasonal, and discriminatory employment, both gender and caste. Many migrants, even though they are unskilled, have the drive to learn. The lack of subsidized loans and government assistance makes the ability to establish any sustainable employment or business even more difficult. In spite of these daily challenges, migrants have not given up their hope and aspire to a 'better' future, one that is meaningful, reasonably paid work, and supported by the community.

This work proposes policies that combine social welfare and the economies of the region to assist both migrants and local people of Uttarakhand region.

Keywords: COVID-19, Reverse Migration, Rural Employment, Livelihoods, Uttarakhand, Socio-economic Vulnerability, Skill Mismatch, Financial Inclusion.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted livelihoods across the globe, with migrant populations experiencing some of the most severe disruptions. In the context of Uttarakhand, a state characterized by its rugged Himalayan terrain and a long history of outmigration, the pandemic triggered an unprecedented return of thousands of migrants from cities and abroad back to their native hill villages. This sudden reverse migration brought both hope and challenges, as many returnees sought to rebuild their lives through agriculture, small businesses, and local enterprises but faced significant obstacles such as limited infrastructure, unstable incomes, and inadequate social services. The pandemic not only exposed the vulnerabilities of migrant livelihoods but also highlighted the urgent need for sustainable, community-centered development strategies that can support economic resilience, social inclusion, and the preservation of Uttarakhand's unique cultural and ecological heritage. Understanding the multifaceted impact of COVID-19 on migrant livelihoods in Uttarakhand is crucial for designing effective policies to foster long-term rural revitalization and improve the quality of life for these communities.

The condition of livelihood disruption among migrants in Uttarakhand due to the COVID-19 pandemic presents several interrelated problems:

Economic Instability and Unemployment: Many migrants lost their urban jobs during lockdowns and were forced to return home, only to find limited employment opportunities in their native villages. Traditional agriculture and allied sectors often provide unstable and insufficient incomes, leading to continued financial hardship.

Lack of Infrastructure and Basic Services: The rural hill regions of Uttarakhand suffer from poor connectivity, inadequate healthcare, limited educational facilities, and weak digital infrastructure. These deficiencies hinder economic activities and access to markets, making it difficult for returnees to establish sustainable livelihoods.

Inadequate Government Support and Policy Implementation: While government schemes exist, their reach and effectiveness remain inconsistent. A lack of long-term, integrated rural development planning means that short-term relief measures fail to secure permanent resettlement or economic transformation for migrants.

Social and Cultural Disruption: Migration affects family structures and community cohesion, with the elderly and women often left behind to bear increased burdens. The ongoing outmigration risks the erosion of local culture, languages, and traditions, threatening the identity of hill communities.

Environmental Fragility: The fragile Himalayan ecology limits the kind of economic activities that can be sustained without ecological damage, restricting opportunities for large-scale industrial or infrastructural development.

Reverse Migration Challenges: Though the reverse migration wave brought people back, about a third eventually returned to cities due to these persistent problems, indicating that temporary returns without sustainable support may not reverse the migration trend.

Together, these problems highlight the complex and multidimensional challenges faced by migrant livelihoods in Uttarakhand, underscoring the need for holistic, people-centered development approaches that address economic, social, infrastructural, and environmental factors simultaneously.

Objective

This study aims to explore the real-life challenges and opportunities faced by migrants from Uttarakhand during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to understand the key factors that help or hinder migrants in building sustainable livelihoods, especially as many returned to their native villages in an unexpected wave of reverse migration caused by the pandemic.

1. Socio-Economic Condition of Migrants

2. Employment Opportunities of Migrants

Socio-Economic Condition of Migrants -The research will look closely at the kind of jobs and income sources migrants had before the pandemic and how these changed afterward, considering the role of skills, local infrastructure, and government support in shaping their opportunities. It will also delve into the socio-economic conditions of migrant families, particularly focusing on the vulnerable sections of society, to see how the pandemic altered their situations.

Employment Opportunities of Migrants- important goal is to find out Employment opportunities how migrants coped with sudden job losses, income uncertainties, and other hardships during the crisis, including the strategies they used to survive and rebuild. The study also assesses how well government policies and welfare schemes have supported migrants in returning and settling back in their communities in a lasting way.

Beyond economics, this research values the social, cultural, and environmental impacts of migration—the changes in family life, community bonds, traditions, and the fragile mountain ecology of Uttarakhand. Finally, the study aims to provide thoughtful recommendations that encourage inclusive, people-centered development so that the hills of Uttarakhand can become a place where migrants choose to stay and thrive, not just a place they leave.

Methodology

The methodology for studying the impact of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of migrants in Uttarakhand typically involves a combination of primary and secondary research approaches:

1. Primary Data Collection:

Conducting field surveys and interviews with return migrant workers from various districts of Uttarakhand, especially hill regions like Pauri Garhwal, Almora, and Chamoli.

Using purposive sampling methods, such as snowball or reference techniques, to identify and interview returnees. Semi-structured or telephonic interviews gather detailed information on migrants' socio-economic profiles, education, employment history, reasons for migration and return, coping strategies during the pandemic, health impacts, and future plans.

Surveys focus on key aspects such as income loss, job disruptions, government assistance received, living conditions, and challenges faced during reverse migration.

2. Secondary Data Analysis:

Utilizing government reports such as the Census, National Sample Survey (NSS), Human Development Reports, and data from the Uttarakhand Migration Commission.

Reviewing published academic articles, policy documents, news reports, and official statistics relevant to migration trends and livelihood impacts during the pandemic.

Combining secondary data to contextualize field findings and track broader patterns of migration and economic changes.

3. Analytical Techniques:

Descriptive statistical analysis to profile migrants and quantify the scope of impact.

Qualitative analysis of interviews for thematic insights into migrants' lived experiences, social and emotional challenges.

Logistic regression or other statistical tools to identify factors influencing migration decisions and livelihood outcomes.

4. Geographic and Demographic Scope:

Covering different geographic areas within Uttarakhand including Kumaon and Garhwal regions.

Including diverse demographic groups such as youth, women, different caste categories, and socio-economic strata to capture varied impacts.

This mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the multilayered effects of COVID-19 on migrant livelihoods in Uttarakhand, combining quantitative patterns with qualitative human stories to inform effective policy design and intervention strategies.

Review of Literature

Research on migration highlights various aspects of rural out-migration, migrant labor conditions, and global refugee challenges.

Nijam Khan (1986) studied rural out-migration in Uttar Pradesh, showing that economic backwardness, lack of employment, and small landholdings push rural populations to migrate. Migration transformed from a seasonal to a more permanent feature.

Tripathy and Dash (1997) examined migrant laborers in Orissa, reporting harsh working conditions, including long hours and low wages, and difficulties in implementing protections under the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act.

Zolberg and Benda (2001) discussed how population growth, ethnic conflicts, and environmental degradation create migration crises globally with no easy solutions.

McAdam (2008) analyzed global refugee protection systems, highlighting tensions between security measures and human rights, with focus on displaced peoples' access to asylum and protection.

Castles (2013) provided a global perspective on migration flows, examining causes, effects, and connections to ethnicity, economy, politics, and climate change.

Bertram (2018) debated the rights of states versus migrants, critiquing restrictive immigration controls and arguing for fair and just migration laws respecting all individuals.

Snowden (2019) and Honigsbaum (2019) offered historical views on how epidemics and pandemics shaped societies, medical science, and social tensions, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

These studies collectively reflect that migration is a complex phenomenon influenced by economic hardship, social structures, political policies, and global challenges such as pandemics and environmental changes. The harsh realities faced by migrants require comprehensive legal, social, and welfare responses that protect their rights and dignity while addressing the root causes of migration.

Table 1- Socio-Economic Condition of Migrants

Sl.No.	Indicator	Category/Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Structure of Residence	Pucca (Brick/Concrete)	398	56.45
		Kuchcha (Mud/Thatched)	174	24.68
		Mixed (Partially Pucca)	133	18.87
2.	Electricity Facility at Home	Yes	667	94.68
		No	38	5.32
3.	Source of Drinking Water	Hand Pump / Own Boring	376	53.33
		Public Tap	189	26.81
		Springs / Gadheras	102	14.47
		Uttaranchal Koops	38	5.39
4.	Ration Card Ownership	Yes	654	92.77
		No	51	7.23
5.	Availability of Nearby ATM Facility	Yes	487	69.08
		No	218	30.92
6.	Work Status	Fixed Income Job	133	18.87
		Daily Wage	276	39.15
		Monthly Wage	171	24.26
		Variable Income	125	17.73
7.	Family Monthly Income	Below ₹10,000	298	42.27
		₹10,001 – ₹20,000	241	34.18
		₹20,001 – ₹30,000	108	15.32
		Above ₹30,000	58	8.23
8.	Fixed Savings Practice	Yes	193	27.38
		No	512	72.62
9.		₹1,000 – ₹2,000	109	56.48 (of savers)

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		₹2,001 – ₹4,000	57	29.53 (of savers)
	Monthly Amount of Fixed Savings	More than ₹4,000	27	13.99 (of savers)
10.	Ownership of Agricultural Land	Yes	538	76.31
		No	167	23.69
11.	Size of Agricultural Landholding	Up to 1 acre	224	41.64
		1 - 2.5 acres	172	31.97
		2.5 - 5.0 acres	93	17.29
12.	Ownership of Livestock Animals	More than 5.0 acres	49	9.11
		Yes	462	65.53
		No	243	34.47
13.	Loan Dependency for Family Needs	Yes	408	57.87
		No	297	42.13
14.	Aim of Taking Loan	For Consumption	132	32.35
		For Emergency Needs	105	25.74
		Fulfillment of Social Obligations	91	22.30
		For Self-Employment	80	19.61
15.	Access to Fundamental Necessities Pre-Pandemic	Yes	288	40.85
		No	417	59.15
		Average	276	39.15
16.	Family Financial Situation Post-Pandemic	Good	96	13.62
		Better	41	5.82
		Worst	292	41.42

socio-economic profile of the 705 inter-state reverse migrant workers returning to Champawat and Almora districts reveals several key insights into their living conditions, livelihood status, vulnerabilities, and reintegration challenges post-pandemic:

Housing and Basic Infrastructure

Housing Quality: A majority (56.45%) live in pucca (brick/concrete) houses, indicating relatively stable and improved living conditions, likely supported by prior earnings or government housing schemes. However, nearly a quarter (24.68%) reside in kuchcha (mud/thatched) houses, reflecting economic hardship and vulnerability in a substantial subset.

Electricity Access: High electrification rates (94.68%) indicate good access to basic energy infrastructure, crucial for education, communication, and livelihoods. The lack of electricity primarily affects kuchcha households, suggesting uneven infrastructural development concentrated in poorer housing segments.

Drinking Water: More than half depend on hand pumps or personal borewells, reflecting partial self-reliance but potential issues with maintenance and water quality. A significant number still rely on public taps or traditional springs, highlighting persistent infrastructure gaps, especially among daily wage and variable income earners.

Economic Status and Livelihoods

Employment Patterns: The dominant employment type post-return is daily wage labor (39.15%), a marker of informal, insecure, and unstable livelihoods. Only 18.87% have fixed income jobs, underscoring limited access to formal or stable employment.

Income Levels: Economic vulnerability is stark, with 42.27% of households earning below ₹10,000 monthly and another 34.18% earning ₹10,001–₹20,000, highlighting that over three-quarters of returnees are in low-income brackets.

Fixed Savings: A large majority (72.62%) do not practice fixed savings, mirroring their precarious financial situation. Even among savers, most can only set aside small amounts (₹1,000–₹2,000) monthly, indicating limited financial resilience.

Loan Dependency: Over half (57.87%) rely on loans, often for basic consumption and emergencies, which signals high financial strain. Only a minority borrow for productive investments like self-employment.

Land and Livestock Ownership

Agricultural Land: Most respondents (76.31%) own agricultural land, but the holdings are small or marginal, with over 73% owning less than 2.5 acres. Such small landholdings constrain the potential for commercial farming, pointing to a reliance on subsistence agriculture.

Livestock: Over 65% own livestock, a critical supplementary income and sustenance source given the marginal farming context, underscoring the continued importance of mixed livelihood strategies in this hilly terrain.

Social Welfare and Financial Inclusion

Ration Card Coverage: High ration card ownership (92.77%) suggests effective integration into public distribution systems, essential for food security.

ATM Access: While 69.08% have access to ATMs nearby, nearly one-third lack this crucial financial service, indicating a gap in rural financial inclusion, especially impactful for accessing government benefits and savings.

Pre- and Post-Pandemic Impact

Access to Necessities Before COVID-19: A majority (59.15%) lacked adequate access to fundamental necessities like food, shelter, education, and healthcare before the pandemic, highlighting deep-rooted deprivation driving migration.

Financial Situation Post-Pandemic: The pandemic severely worsened conditions for 41.42% of families, with only 19.44% reporting good or improved financial status after return, underscoring the lasting economic shocks on these households.

Analytical Conclusions

The profile reveals that returnee migrants predominantly come from economically and socially vulnerable groups characterized by low incomes, small landholdings, high dependency on informal labor, limited savings, and significant debt.

Housing and infrastructure inequities exacerbate vulnerabilities, with kuchcha households and those lacking electricity or reliable water facing compounded hardships.

The high loan dependency for consumption and emergencies indicates fragile coping mechanisms, emphasizing the need for financial and livelihood support.

The persistence of small-scale agriculture and livestock ownership emphasizes the relevance of agri-based livelihood interventions but also signals barriers to commercial or diversified farming.

Sustainable reintegration will require targeted policies focusing on skill development for stable employment, expansion of rural financial services, improvement of infrastructure in poorer households, and social protection for marginalized groups like SC, ST, and OBC communities.

This analysis highlights the urgent need for multi-dimensional rural development strategies to support reverse migrants in transitioning from survival to sustainable livelihoods in Uttarakhand's fragile mountain economy.

Table 2: Employment Opportunities

Sl. No.	Indicator	Category/Response	Frequency (No. of Respondents)	Percentage (%)
1.	Sufficient Employment Opportunities in Village	Yes	110	15.6
		No	330	46.8
		Limited	265	37.6
2.	Most Employment Opportunities Locally	Agriculture	290	41.1
		Animal husbandry	85	12.1
		Tourism	60	8.5
		Construction	145	20.6
		Other service work	125	17.7
3.	Men have more access to jobs than Women	Yes	400	56.7
		No	110	15.6
		Same for both	195	27.7
4.	Caste/Social Background a barrier to job access	Yes	260	36.9
		No	290	41.1
		Sometimes	155	22.0
5.	Seasonal Jobs more common	Yes	395	56.0
		No	110	15.6

	than	Both types	200	28.4
	Permanent			
	Public	Yes	380	53.9
6.	Transport a problem in reaching work	No	165	23.4
		Sometimes	160	22.7
	Skills sufficient for decent employment	Yes	285	40.4
7.		No	290	41.1
		Not sure	130	18.5
	Skill mismatch is reason for unemployment	Yes	410	58.2
8.		No	145	20.6
		Not sure	150	21.2
	Willingness to participate in future training	Yes	510	72.3
9.		No	89	12.6
		Maybe	106	15.0
	Expected monthly income	Below ₹5,000	60	8.5
10.		₹5,001 – ₹10,000	215	30.5
		₹10,001 – ₹15,000	280	39.7
		Above ₹15,000	150	21.3
		Government	310	44.0
		Private	85	12.1
11.	Preferred job type	Self-employment	160	22.7
		Any stable income	150	21.2
	Willingness to work outside village for higher wage	Yes	310	44.0
12.		No	210	29.8
		Maybe	185	26.2
	Access to capital for starting business	Yes	180	25.5
13.		No	360	51.1
		Limited	165	23.4
	Barriers to starting own venture	Lack of money	310	44.0
14.		Lack of skill	120	17.0
		No market	95	13.5
		Fear of risk	100	14.2
		Family pressure	80	11.3
	Awareness of employment-related government schemes	Yes	430	61.0
15.		No	275	39.0
	Benefit from employment-related government schemes	Yes	198	28.1
16.		No	367	52.1
		Applied but not received	140	19.8
	Perception of local government efforts	Yes	142	20.1
17.		No	321	45.5
		Somewhat	176	25.0
		Don't know	66	9.4
	Most needed government	Skill training	240	34.0
18.		Financial aid	190	27.0
		Market access	130	18.4

19. support for employment Perception on reverse migration and job competition	Job placement services	145	20.6
	Yes	310	44.0
	No	245	34.8
	Don't know	150	21.2

The survey results from Champawat and Almora districts highlight that employment opportunities in rural Uttarakhand remain highly constrained. Only 15.6 percent of respondents felt that sufficient work was available in their villages, while nearly half (46.8 percent) reported an outright lack of opportunities, forcing many into underemployment or migration. Agriculture continues to be the main source of work (41.1 percent), but its seasonal and low-paying nature makes it unsustainable in the long run. Construction (20.6 percent) and services (17.7 percent) are emerging alternatives, while animal husbandry (12.1 percent) and tourism (8.5 percent) remain underdeveloped. However, employment distribution is marked by inequalities, with a majority (56.7 percent) believing that men have more access to jobs compared to women, and 36.9 percent reporting that caste or social background acts as a barrier to decent work. Seasonal employment dominates the labour market, with 56 percent of respondents identifying seasonal jobs as more common than permanent ones, underscoring the high degree of livelihood instability. Physical accessibility also emerged as a barrier, as 53.9 percent reported that inadequate public transport hampers their ability to reach workplaces.

On the question of employability, 41.1 percent admitted they lack sufficient skills for decent employment, while 58.2 percent believed skill mismatch is a key cause of unemployment. Yet, encouragingly, 72.3 percent expressed willingness to join future training programmes, reflecting a significant scope for skill-based interventions. Income expectations have risen, with nearly two-thirds (61 percent) aspiring to earn at least ₹10,000 a month, and over 21 percent aspiring for above ₹15,000, suggesting that poorly paid, subsistence jobs are increasingly unacceptable. In terms of job preference, government employment remains the most coveted (44 percent) due to security and stability, while 22.7 percent showed interest in self-employment, and 21.2 percent indicated readiness to accept any stable livelihood given their urgent needs. Migration pressures continue to shape rural life, as 44 percent of respondents are willing to work outside the village if wages are higher, revealing that reverse migration during COVID was mostly a temporary fallback.

The entrepreneurial ecosystem remains weak as over half of respondents (51.1 percent) reported having no access to capital for starting business ventures, and lack of money was cited as the single largest barrier to self-employment (44 percent). Other challenges included lack of skills (17 percent), fear of risk (14.2 percent), absence of market access (13.5 percent), and family pressure (11.3 percent). Policy interventions, while visible, show limited effectiveness: 61 percent were aware of government employment schemes, but only 28 percent reported benefiting, and 19.8 percent had applied without receiving any support, pointing to bottlenecks in implementation. Moreover, 45.5 percent felt that local government bodies were not doing enough to promote employment, indicating a governance gap between policy design and grassroots delivery. When asked about the most needed government support, 34 percent prioritized skill training, followed by financial aid (27 percent), job

placement services (20.6 percent), and market access (18.4 percent)—all pointing to integrated, multi-pronged requirements for strengthening rural livelihoods.

Finally, the effects of reverse migration during COVID-19 were clearly perceived, with 44 percent observing increased competition for limited village jobs, especially among returnees. Taken together, the findings present a picture of rural employment as insufficient, seasonal, and unstable, shaped by structural barriers of gender inequality, caste hierarchy, poor infrastructure, lack of capital, and weak institutional support. At the same time, they reveal considerable aspiration for better-paid work, government jobs, and self-employment, coupled with a high willingness for training. This indicates an urgent need for policies that combine skill development with financial inclusion, non-farm diversification, and stronger government delivery mechanisms to transform villages from being migration-dependent to becoming sources of sustainable and dignified livelihoods.

Conclusion

The survey and socio-economic profiling of returnee migrants in Champawat and Almora districts reveal that employment opportunities in rural Uttarakhand remain highly constrained, unstable, and unequal. With fewer than one in six respondents perceiving sufficient work locally, the rural labour market is dominated by seasonal, low-paying agricultural activities, supplemented by temporary construction and service sector jobs. Structural inequalities persist: men are seen as enjoying greater access to employment than women, while caste and social hierarchy act as barriers for a significant proportion, curtailing inclusive participation. Infrastructural deficits, particularly in public transport, further limit accessibility to workplaces.

The challenge of unemployment is compounded by a pronounced skill deficit and mismatch. While nearly three-fifths of respondents identified inadequate or irrelevant skills as a key reason for unemployment, more than 70 percent expressed willingness to undergo training, highlighting both the severity of the problem and the strength of latent potential for capacity-building. Aspirations have simultaneously risen, with over 60 percent seeking incomes of at least ₹10,000 per month and nearly half preferring secure government jobs. Self-employment also emerged as an aspirational pathway, though largely hindered by poor capital access—over 50 percent reported no access to credit, while lack of finance was the most cited barrier to starting enterprises.

Government schemes, though widely known to respondents, have yielded limited benefits in practice. While 61 percent were aware of employment-related schemes, only 28 percent had successfully benefited, underscoring implementation gaps at the grassroots level. Perceptions of local government performance were also poor, with almost half believing local bodies were not doing enough to promote employment. When asked about support needs, respondents highlighted skill training, financial aid, job placement services, and market linkage as the most urgent interventions, pointing toward the necessity of a multi-pronged support strategy.

The broader socio-economic profile further reinforces these vulnerabilities. Returnee migrants are concentrated in informal wage labour with low and irregular incomes, minimal savings, and significant reliance on debt for consumption needs. Though land and livestock ownership remain widespread, over 70 percent of landholdings are marginal, restricting agricultural productivity and pushing households into subsistence. Despite better access to electrification and ration cards, disparities in housing quality, drinking water access, and financial inclusion persist across socio-economic groups, with the poorest relying heavily on loans and public distribution systems for survival.

Reverse migration triggered by COVID-19 has deepened competition for already scarce rural jobs, exposing the fragility of Uttarakhand's Mountain economy. The findings highlight that meaningful and sustainable employment generation in the region cannot rely solely on traditional agriculture or temporary relief schemes. Instead, it demands structural transformation through skill development aligned with local opportunities, financial inclusion measures that improve access to capital, diversification into non-farm sectors such as eco-tourism and rural services, and stronger institutional delivery of social welfare and livelihood schemes.

In conclusion, unless rural employment is reimagined in more inclusive, skill-based, and resilient terms, reverse migrants are likely to re-migrate once urban markets stabilize, perpetuating the state's cycle of outmigration. Future policies should therefore integrate livelihood security with social equity, ensuring that marginalized groups, women, and small farmers can access resources, training, and dignified work. Building such a sustainable employment ecosystem is not just essential for the reintegration of returnee migrants, but also for revitalizing Uttarakhand's rural economy and strengthening its resilience against future crises.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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