



## Migration in the Border Areas of Uttarakhand: An Emerging Security Threat

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**Received: 16.02.2024; Revised: 10.06.2024; Accepted: 12.06.2024**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores out-migration in the border areas of Uttarakhand and the emerging security threats due to out migration in the Himalayan state. The emerging problems of mass migration have come to light after a census was conducted to examine the problem of migration and its causes. As recently Chinese troops were also seen trespassing in the Barahoti ridge which raises security concerns as this area is unpopulated owing to migration. Therefore, this paper also discusses the security problems arising from Nepal borders. Furthermore, the study also examines the consequences of Covid-19 pandemic on migration and the security threats associated with it. Lastly, some recommendations have been given to tackle the rising problem of migration which poses a serious security threat.

**Keywords:** migration • border • security • threat • uttarakhand • COVID-19 • repatriation

### Introduction

Uttarakhand earlier known by the name Uttaranchal is situated in the northern part of India. It is a pilgrimage centre due to a large no ancient Hindu temples which are found here. It is well known for its mesmerising beauty and natural environment, situated in the lap of the great Himalayas (Atkinson n.d). It came in existence on 9 November 2000, carved out from Uttar Pradesh as the 27<sup>th</sup> state of India. The northern part of Uttarakhand is surrounded by Tibet Autonomous Region China; and the eastern part is surrounded by the Sudurpashchim Pradesh of Nepal; the west and north-west border surrounds Himanchal Pradesh and Uttar-Pradesh to the south. Uttarakhand shares a 350-km international border with China, and a 275-km unfenced boundary with Nepal. There are a total of 13 districts in Uttarakhand, five of which are border districts. Chamoli and Uttarkashi districts share its boundary with China, whereas Udham Singh Nagar and Champawat districts share its border with Nepal. Pithoragarh is strategically very sensitive as it shares boundary with both China and Nepal (Verma

2020). Migration is one of the very serious problems in Uttarakhand which tantamount to border security issues. As the local people are rapidly migrating from these sensitive border areas, turning it into ghost villages. It is vulnerable to intrusion which is a threat to India's National security. Moreover, Uttarakhand has witnessed transgression by People's liberation army multiple times in the past. To be precise in 1954 Barahoti witnessed the very first transgression by Chinese which spread to other parts and ultimately spurred to 1962 war. The LAC demarcation line between India and China remained disputed. These border areas are subject to transgression in the past few years (Pabby & Tripathi 2021). In 2015, a territorial dispute flared up with Nepal owing to India-China agreement on transit and trade in Lipulekh, Nepal considers this territory as its integral part. Another such issue flared up in 2019, when India issued its political map which showcased the disputed territory under the international border of India. This resulted into Indo-Nepal sour relations (Sharma 2019).



As Indo-Nepal relations worsened, Sino-Nepal relations reached new heights. China in widely involved in multiple infrastructural projects in Nepal, it has a say in political matters of Nepal. The violent stance of Nepal towards India is most often under the influence of Dragon.

Hence, it is relevant to conclude that a renewed threat is prevailing in India's mountainous borders which may cause grave threat if migration from these areas is not controlled. China on the other hand has a strategic edge over the border areas with Uttarakhand, including Niti, Mana, Lipulekh and Barahoti. China is improving its infrastructure in the border areas which would be strategically and geopolitically beneficial for China in the event of war for transportation and communication. It would support logistics and provide manoeuvrability and accessibility during the war.

Contrarily, on the Indian side people are migrating in pursuit of a better life as these mountainous regions lack adequate amenities like transportation, education, health, job, communication, sustainable agriculture. At this time, it is essential to protect the interest of people so that they are not forced to migrate as they are naturally the second line of defence. There is a persistent requirement of infrastructural development in the border areas to protect our borders and secure our Interests. Therefore, it is very essential for the concerned authorities to make a strategy to fill the loopholes and implement appropriate schemes as per the requirement to stop migration. The government should also be well prepared for any unforeseen situation and confrontations at these borders, as migration in these sensitive areas can turn the tide against us and hamper any security arrangements (Nailwal 2020).

#### **Migration in border areas of Uttarakhand**

Migration is described as a spatial or geographical mobility that involves a permanent or semi-permanent change in the

traditional habitat in a well-defined geographical unit. Today migration has emerged as a security challenge which impose a threat to not just Uttarakhand but the entire nation. A 2001 and 2011 census data show a decline in decadal growth of the population, as in these mountainous region people tend to migrate from rural to urban areas. In a 2001-11 census survey it was found that districts of Almora and Pauri faced an absolute decline in the population of people, notably an outflux of 17868 people.

A total of 3,83,726 persons from 6338 gram panchayats out-migrated from hilly areas non-permanently in the last ten years. While 18,981 people migrated permanently from these hilly areas. According to the data of the migration commission report, the occupation of people of here, is primarily agriculture, labour and government services. The GDP of the total hilly districts of Pauri, Chamoli, Tehri, Rudraprayag, Uttarkashi, Almora, Bageshwar, Champawat, and Pithoragarh not more than 40% in comparison to the districts of Dehradun, Haridwar, and Udham Singh Nagar which are primarily plain. The reason may perhaps be the relative lesser population in the rural based economy (Rural Development and Migration Commission Report 2019).

Pauri district has shown 50% decline in population followed by Almora (Interim Report on the Status of Migration in Gram Panchayats of Uttarakhand 2018).

#### **Causes of migration in the hilly areas of Uttarakhand:**

There are various reasons behind the exodus of people from the hilly areas such as no employment or source of income, economic base, lack of education opportunities, poor infrastructure, road, lack of hospital facility, etc. Aforementioned factors are responsible for out migration as people go out in pursuit of basic amenities and a better life. Thus, this is the basic factor behind people migrating to urban areas leading to numerous ghost villages, primarily in the



border areas, which in turn pose a serious national security threat (Awasthi et al 2020). One of factors for migration other than the above is frequent natural disasters in the mountainous region and slow development.

### **Historical Background**

The phenomenon of migration continued to happen until the British rule in India, afterwards as the youths from the hilly region were employed in the British army this trend continued thereafter. Post-Independence people started migrating basically to make their ends meet. The formation of Uttarakhand gave impetus to migration and the male member of the family or the bread earner primarily headed towards plain areas in search of jobs, while their families were engaged in the practice of farming in the hills. Consequently, with the passing of time migration from these border areas has become a serious issue moreover because Uttarakhand shares its international borders with Nepal and China. In the past India has fought a major war with China as well, China is involved in the border transgression in these border areas, which in a serious matter of concern. In recent times, it is noted that once migrants leave, they rarely come back, leaving behind barren land, which lead to depopulation and security threat (Sati 2021).

### **Migration in border areas of Uttarakhand a threat to National security**

Today, the concept of National security is indirectly interlinked with migration. In recent times as there is a surge in the number of intrastate and interstate conflicts, people are forced to migrate. In case of Uttarakhand, the migration in border areas is due to certain cumulative reasons that I have already discussed previously. Today migration is perceived as a national security issue, globally. As the policy makers are more vigilant, security agenda is the focus of every nation (The Future of Migration: Building Capacities For Change 2010). Migrants who leave their

ancestral homes are usually considered as a source of insecurity (Ullah and Kumpoh 2018). The border areas are most vulnerable to intrusion; therefore, the management of the border is essential for security of any nations (Singh 2015). The flow of migration can affect the security of a nation in manifold ways, including its capacity, national power. Migration flows affect at least three dimensions of national security: state capacity and autonomy, frequent conflicts, the balance of power (Adamson 2006). It is categorised in two types voluntary migration where people decide to migrate voluntarily and forced migration where people are compelled to migrate due to some reasons such as social, political, economic, or environmental. Traditionally, external aggression and arm rebellion are considered as threats to national security, over time, non-traditional threats such as migration have emerged to challenge security of nations (Chaudhury & Ghosh 2021).

The borders of Uttarakhand have often become a matter of concern as Chinese troops keep trespassing the high-altitude border. Due to harsh life, scarcity of food, slow development, climatic condition, education, unemployment people shift from these high-altitude areas to lower ones. This led to mass exodus of the entire population leaving behind ghost villages. A recent study has found that, due to migration a huge number of villages in the border areas are entirely abandoned, for instance, a village in the Pithoragarh district which was earlier renowned for its wood craving is now shattered due to mass exodus. Some other areas like Dharma, Johar, and Vyas met with the same fate. In this context, it is essential to note, that these villages are very close to China which makes it easily accessible for them, unlike for India, it takes several days to reach there. At the Nepal side of the border, many villages like Gonia, Kalsaniya, Poth, Semal, and Tak have been abandoned. The migration from such sensitive areas poses security complications for India (Baruah 2016).

The government of Uttarakhand is also worried about the mass exodus from border areas of



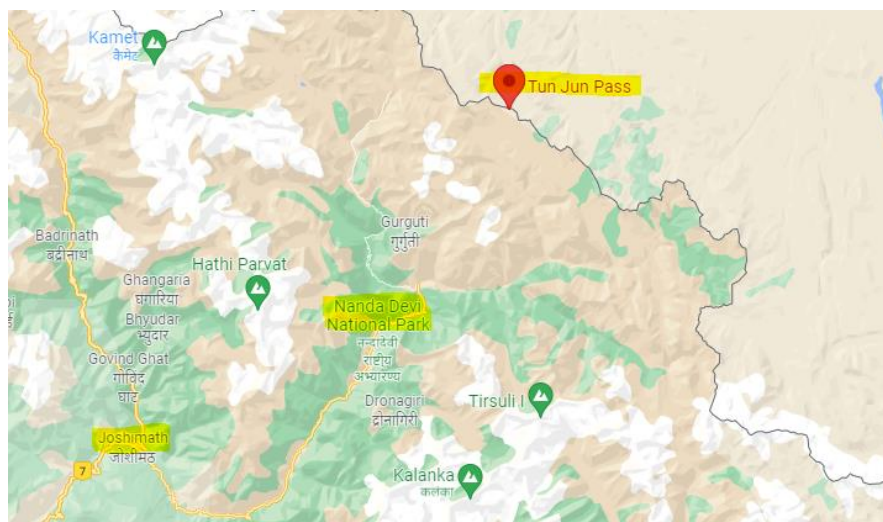
China and Nepal. Late CDS Bipin Rawat also raised this problem of migration when he visited Uttarakhand. In this context, Shekhar Pathak, a historian and a Padam Shri awardee said that, "The state government has to do just more than that by providing essential infrastructure along with power supply and other amenities like the internet. Preservation of the population of the hills is of vital importance because of cultural as well as strategic significance" ('Uttarkhand Government Turns to NREGA in Bid to Stop Migration of Villagers' 2020).

In 2022 Uttarakhand headed for polls for assembly seats to decide the fate of Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, during that time one of the shocking revelations was the complete exodus of people from 1,564 villages. It is palpable to know the reason behind such mass migration. At the time when Trivendra Singh Rawat for CM, a migration commission was set up to examine the issue of migration in Uttarakhand, it reported that Almora, Chamoli, Pauri, Rudraprayag, Tehri Garhwal, and Uttarkashi are facing a huge mass exodus. The reason for migration in the aforementioned districts is the same dearth of basic amenities, no employment, infrastructure, education or health. SS Negi vice-chairman of Migration commission said that, "More than 1.19 lakh people have left their villages in the past one decade. There is a

striking 50 per cent of them deserting their villages only in search of livelihood. Some of them have migrated out of compulsion and in distress, rest voluntarily migrated moved from one part of the state to another for jobs, education of their children and caring for better health facilities in the towns". He pointed out a massive inequality in development between hilly areas and plain areas.

"There is no transport facility in the area. No roads were built. We have to climb a high mountainous path, which is marked by the growth of wild bushes, plants and creepers. Several times, I got confronted by leopards and wild animals while escorting my daughter to a school 6 to 7 km treacherous walk. Almost all families have left because of the everyday struggle to survive and earn their living," said Dheeraj Kumar Juyal, a local from Uttarakhand (Sharma 2022).

Intrusion by Chinese troops is also a serious security threat as in September 2021, more than 100 Chinese troops intruded into the Indian territory by Tun Jun pass, entering more than five kms through the border area of Barahoti ridge in Chamoli, Uttarakhand. The Barahoti ridge is situated in the north of the Nanda Devi National Park, which is connected to the Joshimath district. ITBP is responsible to monitor this 350-km border between India and China



**Fig 1.** Joshimath, Nanda Devi National Park and Tun Jun La Pass. (Source: Google Maps)



The local villagers informed the concerned authorities about the sudden intrusion, if all the border villages are abandoned, it would be difficult for the government to acknowledge the rampant transgression as people are the second line of defence ('Over 100 Chinese Troops Entered 5 Km into Indian Territory in Uttarakhand in August: Economic Times' 2021).

Such incidents are red alerts for India as Peoples liberation army often times transgress into Barahoti ridge violating international law. On the other side, India shares some 1751 km porous border with Nepal, both the countries signed a treaty of peace and friendship in 1950, which grants an open border open between both the counties, this provision states that, the people from both the side do not require passport or visa to enter in each other's territory. Consequently, there has been a long tradition of free movement of people across the borders. It is critical to note that the Indo-Nepal border is also vulnerable to threats such as trafficking in persons, drugs, fake currency and arms. While the Government of India has mandated the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) to guard the open border with Nepal. The provision of the open border between the two countries implies that nationals of Nepal or India do not require any Passport or Visa to cross over into each other's territories. They are permitted to move across, work, or reside in each other's counties. In contrast, Indians are restricted to buy land or property or work in the government sectors in Nepal.

On the other hand, Nepali citizens are permitted to work in government institutions, except in some states and civil services. The Indo-Nepal boundary is demarcated by pillars; however, it is difficult to fence the entire border. It has resulted in the free movement of people across the border, culminating social, cultural, and economic engagement between the two countries. However, this porous open border is also susceptible to security threats which are non-traditional in nature, such as

human trafficking, transfer of drugs, arms and fake currency (Report of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2017).

It is reported that due to food shortages in some parts of Nepal, which are adjacent to Indian borders, people migrate to India in pursuit of work and sustain a livelihood for more than two or three generations (Bruslé 2020).

Amid the stalemate relations between both the countries, it is witnessed that people from Nepal are falsely acquiring Indian Aadhaar cards, at Banbasa border area of the Uttarakhand border, to cross the border which hints to a serious security threat. It is also confined by the authorities that many Nepali citizens were using Indian Aadhaar cards to cross India border at Banbasa, this issue came to light when a no of Nepalese showed up using Aadhaar cards (Joshi 2022).

### **Reverse Migration during COVID-Pandemic**

The emergence of Covid-19 led to devastating consequences in the entire world, a huge no of people succumbed to Covid-19 as the virus engulfed the entire world, it was a phase of interregnum as people isolated themselves at homes, many people lost their jobs. It was during this phase, that Uttarakhand witnessed a temporary reverse migration, as people lost their jobs in Urban areas, they deemed it necessary to revert temporarily. In this regard a survey was conducted to address the phenomenon of reverse migration which found that more than 80 percent of the migrates who reverted at the time of pandemic were those who migrated five years back. It means that the migrates who have permanently settled outside have cut off links with their ancestral village. Furthermore, it was reported that those migrates who came back were basically salaried workers, minor businessmen, street vendors, shopkeepers, labourers, cooks, clerks, waiters, small restaurant owners and those who were employed in private companies. Lack of job due to the pandemic was the main



reason behind the return of these migrants, while some returned in fear of the virus. There were also some psychological and emotional reasons behind the return of migrants (Jesline et al 2021).

### Conclusion

Migration in Uttarakhand hills is a very serious security threat at the present time. It has led to aggravated no of ghost villages, which intensifies vulnerability of trespassing, both from China and Nepal. Hence, the government need to make area specific strategy to tackle the problem of migration. It should provide employment opportunities to the locals so that they may not migrate in search of a job. Furthermore, more impetus should be given to the development of schools, colleges, and other educational institutions to impart quality education and skill development. Hospitals should be built with qualified doctors, nurses and staff. The development of road and infrastructure is also significant as due to rampant disasters roads get damaged. People should be encouraged to practice the latest technology in agriculture and government should also try to focus on making Uttarakhand a tourist destination, it will not only generate employment for the locals but also help in reducing outmigration. Further, as the in-migration of Nepalese have been reported in the border areas, the concerned authorities should investigate the matter and take appropriate measure to stop migration from Nepal. The acts of human trafficking, money laundering, transfer of illegal drugs from border should be checked. As we have witnessed the rising instances of intrusion by assertive China at the border areas in recent times, due to the huge reduction in local population owing to migration. The government should work on revert migration at the same time, robust borders should be maintained as border areas pose a serious threat not only to Uttarakhand but to the National security.

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