

hindustantimes

■ Friday, July 06, 2012

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Chamoli/Dehradun, January 24, 2012

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First Published: 15:01 IST(24/1/2012)

Last Updated: 15:03 IST(24/1/2012)

Border villages deserted

Since adolescence, Tappar Singh, 52, a resident of Kunja village in Chamoli district had been involved in farming. But now he runs a small sweets shop in Galnau, a hamlet en route to Gairsain. Heading a family of four, Singh says farming is no longer useful. "No one wants to do farming, we buy everything from the market," he says. His elder son has already left for Delhi in search of a job.

With villages becoming empty with each passing year, there are few farmers to cultivate land that is fast turning barren. With no employment opportunity, farming remained the only source of income in the last several decades. However, with time, people like Singh switched over to other means of livelihood.

Almost every hill district in the state has witnessed migration, but the exodus from border districts is of major concern. The two neighbouring districts - Chamoli and Pithoragarh share boundaries with China. These districts have strategic importance.

Migration has hit Chamoli hard. Dimmir, Rayal, Deoura, Gvad, Khandura, Dimmir, Jhirkoti, Kevar and many other villages have seen a surge in migration.

Dimmir village, some 20 kilometres from Karnprayag town, had a population of more than 600 people 10 years ago but now less than 300 people here.

"At least 40 families have migrated to Dehradun. How long can one live without proper facilities and no opportunity?" says Rajendra Dimri who also happens to be the district president of BJP's Chamoli unit.

Kamlesh Dimri, 47, from the same village, says that over the years, problems have doubled, forcing villagers to move elsewhere. "We have small canals but no water. We have fields but wild animals like wild boars and monkeys destroy crops," he says.

"Leopards are here to kill us. Only people like us who can't move are staying on in the village," says Upraen Devi, 68, of the same village, her eyes moist.

Population has equally dwindled in the upper reaches of Niti and Mana valleys. The population in Gamsali village in Niti valley was 208 in 1991 census, which slipped to 147 by the 2001 census. Similarly, Malari has 434 people left against 554 and Jumma village 98 against 214 people.

"Niti valley is some 70 km from China border. I wonder why the government is not taking the migration problem seriously," says Jay Singh Rawat, journalist. As per Rawat, Niti, Mana and Barahoti are three ways to enter the Indo-China border and the most vulnerable is Niti valley. "Locals had always played role in manning borders but the authorities are doing little to strengthen infrastructure in border villages," he adds.

The situation is worse in Pithoragarh district. Haldu, Pancheswar, Nabidhang, Gunji, Bundi, Milam, Simli, Malpa, Saal and Salla villages are almost deserted. Experts say sluggish pace of Indo - Sino barter trade is also a reason for migration from the border villages.

“For years, Bhotia tribes were involved in trading. They also played crucial role in manning border areas but over the years, trade with China has fallen due several government restrictions. Of late, people also prefer government jobs in other parts of the state,” says HC Pande, a local resident of Pithoragarh.

Pande adds other villages like Sukoli and near Pithoragarh are deserted since people are dejected with agriculture.

Askot wildlife sanctuary is another reason that led people to leave villages from three sub divisions - Dharchula, Munsyari and Didihat.

“Development works have completely come to a standstill in nearly 111 villages owing to environmental reasons after Ascot wildlife sanctuary was notified in 1986. Neither activists nor officials are giving a thought to the troubles that people are facing. Women have to stay in the village but young boys are leaving,” explains Vijay Vardhan, local journalist.

The voters' list for the assembly election also supports Vijay's view.

Women voters have outnumbered males in three out of four assembly segments of Pithoragarh. For instance, in Dharchula assembly segment, 36,199 female voters are listed against 35,419 male voters.

(This report is part of Inclusive Media Fellowship 2011 to study distress migration from Uttarakhand hills.)