

## Ghost villages

From the buzzing Rudraprayag town in the Garhwal hills, the 11-kilometre serpentine steep muddy stretch leads to more than half -a-dozen villages dotted on the hillside. In the last few years, these villages - Cham Gudhera, Bilota, Gwar, Bauntha and Barsu have witnessed mass migration of inhabitants, mainly owing to no road connectivity.

The figures compiled by various government agencies on migration are contradictory, yet an eye-opener, for they point out that migration is emerging as one of the biggest issues in the nine hill districts of Uttarakhand.

The government had revealed in the state assembly that 160 villages were abandoned between 1991 and 2001. Four such villages are in Rudraprayag district alone and the worst hit districts are Almora and Pauri.

The fresh census data reveals 33 villages no longer exist in the state's map. As per the 2001 census, there were 16,826 villages in the state. The number dwindled to 16,793 in the fresh census. However, another data compiled by the statistics department suggests 1065 villages have turned into 'ghost villages'.

Paucity of drinking water due to the dwindling natural water resources, lack of electricity, scarcity of basic amenities, low standard of education, poor health services, unemployment and disenchantment with marginalised farming due to menace of wild boars and monkeys and shortage of irrigation facilities are reasons that have forced the people to leave their land and seek livelihood elsewhere. In the last one-decade, the hill villages witnessed all sorts of migration - inter district, inter state and even international.

Bars village near Rudraprayag, that once had 280 odd families, is a typical case study that indicates checking migration is not that easy for the government. This village is a 'ghost village' as no one lives here. Families left one by one when there was no road connectivity and by the time the road came under the Prime Minister Rural Road Scheme, the village was completely abandoned.

Barsu is just 8 kilometre from the busy Rudraprayag town that falls on the national highway. Interestingly, the village has both traditional and modern houses. Moreover, there is regular supply of water and electricity but still no one stays here. Weeds have mushroomed in the otherwise small green fields. The village appears like a 'graveyard' with locks hanging at the doors in the entire village. The wind sweeping between the leechi and mango trees in the silent village literally sends a chill down one's spine. Only the chirping of a bird breaks the silence.

"Most of the villagers have either settled in Rudraprayag or in Dehradun and Delhi," says Badri Dutt Nautiyal, 39, journalist and resident of Barsu who lives in Rudraprayag.

Nautiyal's father, a retired head clerk from the education department, says he had to walk four kilometers one way through the forest to reach home.

"Moreover, lack of medical and schooling facility in the village forced me and others to move," says octogenarian Vishweshwar Dutt Nautiyal.

The last resident Arvind Semwal also left Barsu during the summer of 2010. In fact, some time back a few families gave fields free of cost to Nepalese labourers to grow vegetables and crops. The experiment worked for some time but later the labourers also left.

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

### **Pauri: a sad tale of Settlements sans life**

Pauri: Pauri, unfortunately is one of the districts that have suffered migration the most. The identities of many villages are saved by one or two people who still live there. The names of such villages may be lost to the world in future.

The barren fields and ruined houses tell the tale of the sad exodus.

The villages that were bustling with life only a few years ago, wear a haunted look now with the grass growing on the walls and roofs of the deserted mud houses.

A study of the deserted villages reveals that the villages that are far off from the link roads suffered the most and headed the list of urbanization. Villages are inhabited with only those who could not afford to migrate and are forced to lead a life of misery and loneliness.

Even the Kaljikhil block, near the district headquarters Pauri, has many villages such as Reekund, Silar, Singakoti, Thangardhar, KotMahadevSen, Kota, Senarmolthi, Dalegar and Tilfari that do not support a population of double figure. Baluni and Nauli villages are left with a single person.

In 2001, Chaundli, a village about 10 kms away from the main road, had a population of about 36 people which has been reduced to an old couple, Prem Singh, 75, and his wife Surma Devi, 70.

The same state of affairs prevails in other villages of Pabho Bareilly, Alasu, Uda, Kunkali, Sural, Takanna and Nausil in Kaljikhil block that have a population of 10 to 25 people. There are apparently two categories of migration in Pauri district. In the first category are the ambitious and capable people who migrated to the big cities of the state or even out of the state to seek opportunities befitting them and the other category is of those who left their villages and settled down near the main roads in their area, to be safe from wild animals that they encountered on the lonely pathways running through the forest to their villages, and also to avoid their daily struggle for drinking water and other necessities of life.

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