

Rush to foreign lands

For the last one year, Vikas, 22, has been working as support staff at a restaurant in Malaysia. For a special event he has arrived in his village - Vand Anuwa - nestled in a beautiful valley in Ghansali belt of Tehri Garhwal district. Vikas, indeed, has just tied the knot with a girl of the neighbouring village. In the next four days, he will return to Malaysia but without his newlywed wife.

"I have to earn a lot. She (the wife) will stay in the village to take care of my parents," Vikas explains with a grim expression on his face. Vikas spent a year at a restaurant in Pune after which one of his relatives arranged a job for him in Malaysia. He earns 1,000 ringgits (RS 17,000) per month in Malaysia, 90% of which he sends to his family in the village.

Vikas, in fact, represents the young generation from rural Tehri Garhwal district that is heading abroad for making a 'fast buck'. Though agriculture has always been the major source of income in rural Uttarakhand and Ghansali belt has more fertile land than other parts of Garhwal, it fails to stop youngsters from hunting for greener pastures abroad. "The job abroad comes at a price. Youths have to work for 18-19 hours. Though we earn little here, we are still happy," says Chandra Mohan Rawat, 39, who grows various crops on his small land holding and also runs a tea stall in Vand Anuwa village that is home to 230 families.

Nevertheless, many falling in the age group of 20-40 years do not agree with Rawat. The trend of migration, especially to foreign countries, which was slow earlier, gathered pace post 90s.

Laxmi, 35, son of Awal Singh, 61, from Vand Anuwa village migrated to Canada four months back. "He has recently sent R 50,000 home. "It's more than enough for us but I am concerned about him," says Singh.

Just like village Vand Anuwa - Tungara, Vinaykhal, Maikot, Bheti, Chamiyala, Changora and other villages are also witnessing mass migration to foreign nations such as Japan, Canada, Germany, Malaysia, Dubai or New Zealand. Dev Singh Rana of Maikot village grows mixed crops - soybean, ginger, and potato. He earns handsomely but fears soon there would be no one left in the village for farming. "Farming needs patience and time, irrigation depends on rain. Farming is not a lucrative option for the new generation," Rana underlines.

The latest census data shows that the decadal growth in population in Tehri Garhwal district is minimal in comparison to other districts in Uttarakhand. Between 2001 and 2011, Tehri registered 1.93% population growth.

Another village Changora is just 24 kilometers from Maikot village. A bird's eye view of village from main road gives an impression that it's a populated village. Dotted with both old and new houses and a visibly big temple, the village clearly displays solid economic status.

Thanks to mass exodus of villagers from Changora, the village is flush with money. Roughly one out of two families is settled in some foreign nation, especially in Japan. "The village is witnessing twofold migration.

The families of those who are working abroad have either shifted or they are shifting to cities like Rishikesh and Dehradun," shares Leela Devi, 34, village head of Changora.

Udham Singh, 58, of Changora village, who worked as driver in Mumbai, feels it's difficult to check migration since life in the village is very tough. "I am staying but my son is not interested. After spending a couple of years in Mauritius, he plans to move to Japan," he says.

There is buzz that in a bid to get entry into any foreign nation, many villagers are routed through 'agents'.
(This report is part of Inclusive Media Fellowship 2011 to study distress migration from Uttarakhand hills.)