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## *The Vanishing Villages of Uttarakhand: How Outmigration Is Eroding the Rural Economy*

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Walk through the stone-paved lanes of Pithoragarh or Chamoli, and you'll often find villages unnervingly empty. Official records list nearly 1,800 villages in Uttarakhand as completely or partially abandoned—more than ever before. This is not some seasonal drift or generational wanderlust. It's a steady, tragic collapse. Beneath the green hills and postcard beauty lies an exodus that is eroding the foundations of Uttarakhand's rural economy. Over three lakh people have left the hill districts in just four years. More than 28,000 of them have migrated permanently. The rest may be labelled as “temporary migrants,” but the reality is that most of them won't return unless something drastically changes. Entire age groups, especially the 26 to 35 brackets, are vanishing from the census. In places like Almora, Pauri, and Tehri, the rate of outmigration has crossed the point of demographic self-repair.

This crisis isn't new. Even between 2001 and 2011, hill districts like Pauri and Almora saw

an absolute drop in population, something rare in India's rural landscape. In that same period, plain districts like Dehradun and Haridwar added lakhs to their numbers. The internal imbalance within the state itself is deepening every year.

The reasons are brutally straightforward. Farming in the hills has become unsustainable. With only a fraction of land under irrigation, unpredictable weather, and increasing wildlife attacks, agriculture no longer guarantees subsistence, let alone profit. Traditional crops are failing, storage infrastructure is missing, and local markets have shrunk. Then there's the collapse of education and healthcare infrastructure. Schools in many villages have no teachers. Others operate with just one. Some classrooms have one or two students. Hospitals are worse—many hill blocks have no functioning primary health Centre. A child's fever or a woman's pregnancy can mean a four-hour walk or a night in an open vehicle. These are not inconveniences; these are life and death risks that push families to leave. Jobs, of course, are virtually

non-existent. There's no industry in the hills. Government employment is minimal. Tourism, while often discussed, is mostly limited to a few towns and temple routes. For most of the hill youth, there's only one option -migrate.

Governments have tried. On paper, there are a lot of employment guarantee schemes, rural start-up incentives, and efforts to promote homestays and medicinal plant farming. But in practice, these remain scattered, poorly funded, and often misaligned with ground realities. Schemes built for plains don't work in steep, remote mountain terrain. Bureaucratic delays, lack of local accountability, and minimal political interest have made things worse.

The pandemic briefly reversed the flow. Thousands of young men and women came back to the hills when lockdowns hit the cities. For a moment, there was hope. If given support, some of them could have started building businesses, created services, and revived the local economy. But without planning, institutional support, or serious investment, that opportunity vanished. Today, most of those returnees are back in the cities, working as drivers, guards, and sales staff, sending money home to ageing parents in empty villages. But this isn't irreversible. The answer doesn't lie in slogans, it lies in ecosystems. What Uttarakhand needs is a cluster-based rural economy strategy that fits the hill context, not imported models from the plains. Start by identifying and developing high-potential rural cluster villages with road access, digital connectivity, and an available youth population.

Invest in these with three things: infrastructure, value-chain linkages, and handholding. Medicinal and aromatic plant cultivation, for instance, already shows success in patches. But without forward contracts, market linkages, and processing units within 50 km, it won't scale. Set up village-level processing hubs—run by local producer groups and linked to e-commerce or pharma companies. Back them with real-time agri-advisory services and credit access through local banks. Instead of scattering efforts, build focused success stories. Rural tourism needs a similar pivot. The model cannot be seasonal temple tourism with dusty rooms and broken roads. It must be experiential, curated, and built around the local ecology and culture. Identify 50 villages across the Kumaon and Garhwal regions with tourism potential and declare them “Green Tourism Zones.” Offer one-time grants to convert homes into certified eco-homestays, train locals in hospitality, and build robust online booking platforms. Partner with hospitality schools in Dehradun or Nainital for skill-building. Create a village-level tourism council that owns the brand.

Digital work is another underexplored opportunity. Instead of pushing people to migrate to work in customer support or data entry, bring work to the hills. Promote the development of digital work hubs in semi-urban centers like Bageshwar or Rudrapur, connected by fiber optics and supported by the state with rent subsidies and power backup. Even if 200 young people stay back



in each block, working remotely, it creates ripple effects in the local economy.

Public services need reform too. Make rural postings attractive, not just mandatory. Provide incentives, housing, and transport reimbursements for teachers and doctors in remote blocks. Introduce a “Hill Education Corps” or “Hill Health Corps” on the lines of fellowships to plug critical shortfalls. Digitize school operations. Make health centers telemedicine ready. These are not futuristic ideas, they just need urgency. The longer we keep treating this crisis as a slow-moving trend, the harder it becomes to reverse. Migration is not just a statistic—it’s a bleeding of opportunity. Each village that fades off the map is not just a settlement lost, it is a market lost, culture diluted, and an economy crippled. People are not leaving the hills because they hate their homes. They are leaving because the state has made staying irrational. If that changes, if villages become viable again economically, educationally, and socially, they will just not survive. They will thrive.