

Submitted Abstract

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Abstract

The Indian rural mountain economy is currently undergoing a widespread transformation, moving it rapidly away from agriculture as the traditional economic mainstay and toward new livelihood patterns and tighter rural-urban linkages. This process in India has recently been described as a “complex social transformation with multiple dimensions” (Choitani 2021); as a “comprehensive and substantial transformation” process of “deagrarianization” (Majumdar 2020); and as a series of changes both “amazing” and “profound” (Chand et al. 2017). Yet, there have been few data to indicate how this transition plays out at the village and household level, especially in the monsoon-dependent Eastern Himalayan mid-montane. We suggest here that the “surprise factor” in this transition may be due mainly to the fact that many governmental programs and initiatives have had barely perceptible impacts on the rural mountain economy, so that the transition seems even contrary to government intentions. Several “push factors” can be distinguished. Here we place South Asian climate change impacts within an interdisciplinary and regional context, with reference to a detailed dataset from 30 villages in two mountainous areas of Darjeeling district. Human-wildlife conflict (crop raiding), loss of soil fertility, and climate variability intersect to produce a reduction in traditional farming productivity and an increase in dependence on off-farm income sources. These include especially MGNREGA, the national rural employment guarantee program, as well as other government employment and remittances from urban employment. In certain respects, these trends parallel earlier changes in European mountain areas, such as the Alps and Pyrenees -- but in Eastern Himalaya it is happening much more rapidly.