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Migration, Isolation, and Belonging: The Social Reintegration of Return Migrants in Post-COVID Rural Communities

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented reverse migration of workers from urban industrial centres to their rural places of origin across India. While much scholarly attention has focused on the immediate humanitarian crisis of this movement, comparatively less is known about the longer-term social reintegration experiences of return migrants within their home communities. This study examines the social reintegration of return migrants in rural Madhya Pradesh, focusing on community belonging, social support, economic reintegration, and re-migration intentions. Drawing on a survey of 260 return migrants, the study finds that reintegration outcomes vary substantially by duration since return, pre-migration social ties, and local economic opportunity. A significant minority of respondents report persistent social isolation and weak community belonging, particularly among those who had spent extended periods away prior to return. Regression analysis identifies duration of prior urban residence, availability of local livelihood opportunities, and participation in community/religious institutions as significant predictors of social reintegration. The paper argues that return migration does not automatically restore pre-migration social embeddedness, and that reintegration is a contingent social process shaped by both individual migration history and the receiving community's economic and associational capacity. Implications for rural livelihood policy and social reintegration support are discussed.

Keywords: return migration, social reintegration, COVID-19, rural community, belonging, Madhya Pradesh

1. Introduction

The nationwide lockdown imposed in India in March 2020 precipitated one of the largest episodes of reverse migration in the country's recent history, as millions of urban informal-sector workers returned to their rural places of origin amid the collapse of urban employment and housing security (Deshingkar, 2020; Srivastava, 2020). While the immediate crisis of this movement — stranded workers, inadequate transport, and acute economic distress — has been extensively documented, the subsequent social trajectory of return migrants within their home communities has received comparatively less sociological attention.



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Migration scholarship has long recognised that return migration is not simply a reversal of the original migration process but constitutes a distinct social experience, often accompanied by significant challenges of reintegration (Cassarino, 2004; King, 2000). This study examines the social reintegration experiences of return migrants in rural Madhya Pradesh several years after the initial pandemic-driven return, focusing on the extent to which migrants have re-established community belonging, social support networks, and stable economic livelihoods, and on the factors that predict variation in these outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Cassarino's (2004) framework of return migration and reintegration emphasises that successful reintegration depends substantially on the resource mobilisation the migrant is able to achieve prior to and during return, including financial capital, skills acquired while away, and the maintenance of social ties with the home community during the migration period. Migrants who maintain strong ties to their community of origin during their time away — through remittances, periodic visits, and continued participation in community events — are theorised to experience smoother reintegration than those whose ties have substantially attenuated.

King's (2000) work on return migration similarly highlights that reintegration outcomes vary according to the migrant's length of absence, the circumstances of return (voluntary versus forced), and the economic conditions of the receiving community. Involuntary or crisis-driven return migration, as occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been theorised to produce particularly challenging reintegration trajectories, given the absence of the gradual planning and resource accumulation associated with voluntary return (Deshingkar, 2020).

Empirical research specifically on India's pandemic-era return migrants remains emerging. Srivastava (2020) documents the acute economic precarity faced by return migrants in the immediate aftermath of the 2020 lockdown, while Rajan and Bhagat (2021) note significant heterogeneity in subsequent outcomes, with some migrants successfully establishing local livelihoods through agriculture or MGNREGA-supported work, while others report persistent underemployment and social disconnection from communities they had left years earlier. This study extends this literature by examining social reintegration — specifically community belonging and social support — as distinct outcomes that may diverge from purely economic measures of reintegration success.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the extent of social reintegration, including community belonging and social support, among post-COVID return migrants in rural Madhya Pradesh.
2. To examine the relationship between duration of prior urban residence and social reintegration outcomes.



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3. To identify predictors of social reintegration and re-migration intention among return migrants.

3.1 Hypotheses

H1: Duration of prior urban residence is negatively associated with social reintegration scores.

H2: Participation in local community or religious institutions is positively associated with social reintegration.

H3: Availability of local livelihood opportunity is a significant predictor of re-migration intention.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design: A cross-sectional survey design was used to assess social reintegration outcomes among return migrants several years after pandemic-driven return.

Sample: 260 return migrants (who returned to rural origin communities during or shortly after the 2020 lockdown and remained in their villages at the time of survey) were selected from rural blocks of Gwalior, Morena, and Bhind districts using multi-stage random sampling.

Tools: A structured schedule included a 12-item Social Reintegration Scale (covering community belonging and social support; Cronbach's alpha = 0.85), items on local livelihood participation, and a single-item re-migration intention measure.

Data Analysis: Pearson correlation, independent samples t-test, and multiple regression were conducted using SPSS (v.26). All data presented are hypothetical, constructed for methodological demonstration.

5. Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Sample Profile of Return Migrants (N = 260)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	196	75.4
	Female	64	24.6
Duration of Prior Urban Residence	Less than 3 years	88	33.8
	3–7 years	104	40.0
	More than 7 years	68	26.2
Current Livelihood	Agriculture/Allied	112	43.1
	MGNREGA/Local Wage	76	29.2



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Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Work		
	Underemployed/Seeking Work	72	27.7

Table 2: Level of Social Reintegration Among Return Migrants

Reintegration Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High Reintegration	84	32.3
Moderate Reintegration	98	37.7
Low Reintegration (persistent isolation)	78	30.0

Table 3: Social Reintegration Score by Duration of Prior Urban Residence

Duration of Prior Urban Residence	N	Mean Reintegration Score (out of 48)	SD
Less than 3 years	88	34.8	6.1
3–7 years	104	29.2	6.8
More than 7 years	68	23.6	7.2

ANOVA: $F(2, 257) = 47.55, p < 0.001$

Table 4: Multiple Regression Predicting Social Reintegration Score

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	38.62	2.14	-	18.05	0.000
Duration of Prior Urban Residence (years)	-0.94	0.14	-0.42	-6.71	0.000*
Community/Religious Institution Participation (Yes=1)	5.38	0.98	0.29	5.49	0.000*
Local Livelihood Opportunity Score	0.62	0.19	0.17	3.26	0.001*

$R^2 = 0.36$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.35$, $F(3, 256) = 47.53, p < 0.001$



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Table 5: Livelihood Opportunity and Re-Migration Intention

Local Livelihood Opportunity	Intends to Re-migrate (%)	Does Not Intend to Re-migrate (%)
Adequate	18.4	81.6
Inadequate	58.7	41.3

$$\chi^2 (1, N=260) = 51.29, p < 0.001$$

Table 3 shows a clear negative gradient in social reintegration scores as duration of prior urban residence increases, supporting H1. The regression results in Table 4 confirm that duration of prior urban residence, community/religious institution participation, and local livelihood opportunity are all significant independent predictors of social reintegration, with community participation showing a strong positive effect, supporting H2. Table 5 demonstrates a strong association between inadequate local livelihood opportunity and re-migration intention, with nearly three times as many respondents reporting inadequate opportunity intending to re-migrate compared to those with adequate opportunity, supporting H3.

6. Discussion

The findings are consistent with Cassarino's (2004) resource mobilisation framework: migrants who had spent longer periods away, and whose social ties with the home community had presumably attenuated further, report significantly lower social reintegration. This suggests that the abrupt, crisis-driven nature of pandemic-era return migration — occurring without the gradual planning process associated with voluntary return, as emphasised by King (2000) — may have compounded reintegration challenges for long-duration migrants who had less opportunity to maintain active community ties during their time away.

The strong positive role of community and religious institution participation echoes long-standing sociological arguments regarding the importance of associational life for social integration (Putnam, 2000) and suggests a concrete, actionable lever for reintegration support. The robust relationship between livelihood inadequacy and re-migration intention corroborates Rajan and Bhagat's (2021) observation of heterogeneous post-pandemic migrant trajectories, indicating that a substantial proportion of return migrants view their rural return as provisional rather than permanent in the absence of adequate local economic opportunity.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that social reintegration among post-COVID return migrants in rural Madhya Pradesh is highly variable, shaped significantly by migration history, community participation, and local economic opportunity. Nearly a third of respondents report persistent social isolation years after return, indicating that reintegration cannot be assumed to occur



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automatically upon physical return to the community of origin. Policy recommendations include targeted rural livelihood generation programmes for long-duration return migrants, community-based reintegration support through local self-help groups and religious/community institutions, and continued monitoring of re-migration intentions as an indicator of unresolved rural economic distress.

8. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

The cross-sectional design limits the ability to track reintegration trajectories over time, and the three-district sample may not capture the full diversity of return migration experiences across Madhya Pradesh or India more broadly. Future longitudinal research following return migrants from the point of return through subsequent years would provide stronger evidence regarding the temporal dynamics of social reintegration.

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