Reverse Migration and Cultural Reintegration Stress Among Post-COVID Job Seekers Returning to Patna: A Mixed-Methods Psychological Study

Dr Anupam priya
Assistant professor
Department of Psychology
M. R. Mahila College
Darbhanga (LNMU)

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered unprecedented reverse migration in India, compelling millions of urban workers to return to their native regions. This study examines cultural reintegration stress among post-COVID job seekers who returned to Patna district, Bihar, following pandemic-induced job loss and economic insecurity. Using a mixed-methods, cross-sectional design, quantitative data were collected from 120 reverse migrants through standardised measures of cultural reintegration stress, livelihood anxiety, social belongingness, and migration history. A sub-sample of 20 participants participated in semi-structured interviews exploring identity, stigma, and reintegration experiences. Results indicate moderate-to-high levels of reintegration stress, with perceived income loss, livelihood anxiety, unemployment, low social belongingness, and longer duration of prior urban stay emerging as significant predictors. Unemployed or irregularly employed returnees reported significantly higher stress than employed participants. Qualitative analysis revealed four major themes: feeling "stuck between two worlds," perceived status decline, stigma and suspicion from the community, and pragmatic coping through temporary work, family support, and aspirations to re-migrate. The findings demonstrate that reverse migration is not merely an economic adjustment but a psychological and cultural transition requiring integrated policy responses that combine livelihood restoration with mental-health and community-level support for returnees in Bihar.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic generated one of the largest and most abrupt episodes of internal reverse migration in India. When the national lockdown was announced in March 2020, millions of migrant workers lost their employment and were compelled to return to their native towns and villages with little institutional support. Several studies and policy assessments have documented the economic precarity, sudden income losses, and labour market disruptions that accompanied this large-scale return (Dhar, 2022; Jesline et al., 2021). However, despite a growing understanding of the socio-economic dimensions of reverse migration, the psychological and cultural implications of returning home under crisis conditions remain markedly underexplored, particularly within state-specific contexts such as Bihar.

Bihar has long been recognised as one of India's major migrant-sending states. Workers from districts such as Patna, Gaya, Nalanda, Muzaffarpur, and Darbhanga traditionally migrate to metropolitan centres including Delhi, Mumbai, Surat, and Bengaluru due to chronic shortages of local employment opportunities (Virupaksha et al., 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the state experienced a massive influx of returnees, with estimates suggesting that over 1.5 to 2.5 million migrants returned within a span of a few months (Kumar, 2020; Article-14, 2021). This unprecedented movement placed considerable pressure on local labour markets, administrative systems, and social structures.

While economic studies point to rising unemployment, increased dependency ratios, and strain on welfare programmes such as MGNREGA (Dhar, 2022), parallel research in psychology has begun to highlight the distressing mental health consequences of job loss, displacement, and uncertainty during the pandemic (Choudhari, 2020; Singh, 2021). Migrant workers have been shown to experience heightened anxiety, loneliness, depressive symptoms, and trauma arising from the sudden disruption of their livelihoods and social networks (Khan et al., 2023). However, what remains insufficiently understood is how these psychological challenges evolve after migrants return to their home environments and attempt to reintegrate into socio-cultural contexts from which they may have been absent for years.

Return migration is not merely a physical relocation but a complex psychosocial transition. Migrants returning home after prolonged residence in urban settings often confront altered expectations, transformed social identities, and mismatches between their urban-shaped values and local cultural norms (Arowolo, 2000; Kunuroglu et al., 2016). These dynamics can create what scholars term "reintegration stress," characterised by difficulty in re-establishing roles, relationships, and a sense of belonging. While such frameworks have been widely applied to international migrants, only limited empirical work has examined similar processes among internal return migrants in India.

Patna provides an important empirical setting for investigating these questions. As a district with both urban and peri-urban characteristics, it serves as a transitional socio-cultural space in which returning migrants must renegotiate their identities, aspirations, and social relations. This study therefore focuses on post-COVID job seekers returning to Patnaand examines their experiences of cultural reintegration stress, understood as the psychological strain associated with resettling into a familiar yet socio-culturally altered environment.

By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the present study addresses a critical research gap: the lack of systematic investigation into the psychological, cultural, and identity-based challenges faced by internal reverse migrants in Bihar. The study aims to contribute a nuanced understanding of how economic insecurity, loss of employment, social belongingness, and duration of prior urban stay shape reintegration outcomes among returnees in Patna.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Return Migration in Migration Theory

Migration scholarship recognises return migration as a fundamental aspect of the migration cycle. Early demographic theorists viewed return migration as a "counter-stream" arising from changing economic conditions or migrant dissatisfaction (Ravenstein, 1885, as cited in Virupaksha et al., 2014). Later conceptualisations emphasised that return migration represents a multidimensional process, involving adaptation to the origin context, renegotiation of social roles, and psychological reorientation (King, 1986; Arowolo, 2000). Arowolo's work highlights the "problematic" nature of reintegration, noting that returning individuals often face hostile labour markets, altered social expectations, and identity dissonance.

Contemporary frameworks underscore that reintegration is shaped not only by structural factors such as employment opportunities but also by subjective experiences of belonging and recognition (Kunuroglu et al., 2016; Global Migration Centre, 2018). These studies collectively demonstrate that return is not merely a reversal of migration but a distinct phase requiring psychological adjustment.

2.2 COVID-19, Migrant Workers, and Mental Health in India

During the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant workers emerged as one of the most vulnerable groups in India. Empirical research identified widespread psychological distress including anxiety, helplessness, loneliness, and trauma linked to job loss, displacement, mobility restrictions, and fear of infection (Choudhari, 2020). Singh (2021), in a comprehensive review, reported that migrant workers experienced heightened mental health challenges due to poor access to healthcare, stigma, social isolation, and prolonged uncertainty.

Several studies indicate that more than half of surveyed migrant workers during the pandemic reported moderate-to-severe psychological distress (Khan et al., 2023). Chavan et al. (2021) found that factors such as food insecurity, wage loss, and separation from family played pivotal roles in triggering reverse migration decisions. These stressors often persisted after return, leading to sustained mental health burdens.

While these studies provide valuable insights, they primarily focus on the migration-to-return transition rather than what happens after return, leaving the psychological aspects of reintegration insufficiently examined.

2.3 Economic and Social Dimensions of Reverse Migration in Bihar

Bihar's long-standing pattern of circular labour migration made it a key site for pandemic-induced reverse migration. Kumar (2020) documented the large number of workers who returned to Bihar, many of whom were quarantined in makeshift facilities and subsequently constrained by minimal job opportunities. Article-14 (2021) similarly reported that numerous returnees remained unemployed for months, relying heavily on family support and public welfare.

Dhar (2022), analysing rural Bihar, shows that income loss was widespread among returnees, with many shifting from relatively stable urban jobs to irregular or informal rural work. Studies further highlight that the state machinery struggled to absorb the sudden influx, and returnees often experienced diminished autonomy and increased dependency (The COVID-19 Pandemic and Migrant Workers from Rural Bihar, 2023).

Despite these detailed economic analyses, the psychological implications of prolonged unemployment, altered social status, and disrupted family dynamics in Bihar remain understudied.

2.4 Acculturative Stress and Reintegration

Acculturation theory offers a useful lens for understanding reintegration challenges. Berry (2006) defines acculturative stress as the psychological strain arising from cultural transition. While traditionally applied to international migrants, this framework is equally relevant to internal migrants experiencing cultural dissonance within their country.

Kuo (2014) argues that identity conflict, perceived discrimination, and social isolation exacerbate stress during cultural transitions. Lerias and Byrne (2024) found that low social support and value mismatch predict poor mental health among migrants adjusting to new environments.

Applying these ideas to reverse migration, scholars argue that returnees often undergo "re-acculturation" as they attempt to re-embed themselves in a setting that may no longer reflect their transformed identities (Arowolo, 2000; Kunuroglu et al., 2016). Németh (2022) extends this further by suggesting that subjective well-being during migration transitions is shaped by the alignment between personal aspirations and structural realities.

2.5 Cultural Reintegration Stress and Gaps in Existing Literature

Although the literature establishes strong linkages between migration, identity, and mental health, there is a noticeable absence of research focusing specifically on cultural reintegration stress among internal return migrants in India, particularly in high-migration states such as Bihar. Studies on Bihar's reverse migration have predominantly focused on employment, income, and policy responses, leaving the psychosocial dimensions of reintegration largely unexplored.

The present study therefore contributes by:

- Investigating cultural reintegration stress as a distinct construct shaped by identity conflict, loss of belonging, stigma, and disrupted social roles;
- Analysing how economic variables (income loss, employment status), cultural variables (belongingness), and migration history (duration of urban stay) predict reintegration stress;
- Providing district-level insights from Patna, where reverse migrants face a unique blend of urban and rural socio-cultural pressures.

This inquiry is significant because effective reintegration requires more than economic rehabilitation; it demands understanding and

addressing the psychological and cultural challenges confronting returnees.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study employs a mixed-methods, cross-sectional research design to examine the psychological dimensions of cultural reintegration stress among post-COVID reverse migrants in Patna. The mixed-methods approach was selected to capture both the quantitative magnitude of stress, livelihood anxiety, and social belongingness, as well as the qualitative depth of the participants' subjective reintegration experiences. This complementary design allows for methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the validity, reliability, and interpretive richness of the findings. The quantitative component utilised standardised psychometric instruments, while the qualitative component incorporated semi-structured interviews aimed at eliciting nuanced narratives of identity, belongingness, coping patterns, and socio-cultural adjustments.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in the Patna district of Bihar, a region that experienced one of the highest volumes of returnees during the 2020–2022 reverse migration wave. Patna's socio-economic landscape, characterised by intersecting urban, peri-urban, and rural settlements, provides a suitable context for examining reintegration dynamics. Data collection encompassed localities such as Danapur, Phulwari Sharif, Khagaul, Kankarbagh, Patna City, and several adjacent semi-urban pockets to ensure adequate geographical and cultural representation.

3.3 Population and Sample

3.3.1 Target Population

The target population consisted of adult migrant workers who returned to Patna during the COVID-19 pandemic owing to job loss, workplace closures, or economic uncertainties in metropolitan cities.

3.3.2 Sample Size

A total of 120 participants were included in the quantitative phase. In addition, a sub-sample of 20 participants was purposively selected for in-depth qualitative interviews.

3.3.3 Sampling Technique

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was used. Purposive sampling enabled the identification of eligible returnees who met the inclusion criteria, whereas snowball sampling facilitated access to individuals within migrant networks and informal community clusters, which are often difficult to enumerate through conventional sampling methods.

3.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

3.4.1 Inclusion Criteria

Participants were included if they:

1. Returned to Patna between March 2020 and December 2022 due to pandemic-related economic disruptions;
2. Were between 20 and 50 years of age;
3. Had resided in Patna for a minimum of six months after return;
4. Were capable of providing informed consent.

3.4.2 Exclusion Criteria

Individuals were excluded if they:

- Returned for non-economic or non-pandemic reasons (e.g., marriage, education, medical treatment);
- Had severe cognitive impairment or psychiatric conditions that impeded participation;
- Declined consent or withdrew during the course of data collection.

3.5 Instruments

Four primary tools were utilised:

An adapted 20-item Likert-type scale measuring stress arising from cultural re-embedding, identity conflict, family expectations, and socio-cultural mismatch. Higher scores indicate elevated reintegration stress. A scale assessing concerns regarding future employment, unstable income sources, financial insecurity, and fears related to long-term livelihood sustainability. A scale measuring participants' perceived acceptance, community connectedness, and sense of belonging in their home environment. Higher scores reflect greater belongingness. A structured self-report schedule capturing demographic variables such as age, gender, education, marital status, type of employment before return, income changes, duration of urban stay, and family type. Developed to explore personal experiences of reverse migration, perceived stigma,

shifts in identity, social acceptance, role negotiation within the family, and coping strategies.

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process occurred between January and May 2025. Initial contact with participants was established through local community leaders, migrant associations, panchayat representatives, and informal neighbourhood networks. After explaining the study's purpose, written informed consent was obtained.

Quantitative surveys were administered face-to-face in the participants' residential settings or community spaces. For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted either in-person or telephonically (depending on participant preference), and with permission were audio-recorded. Interviews varied in duration from 25 to 45 minutes. All recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic and contextual fidelity.

Prior to the full data collection, a pilot test with 20 participants was conducted to examine the clarity of the instruments and estimate internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the main scales were satisfactory:

- CRSS: $\alpha = 0.86$
- LAI: $\alpha = 0.81$
- SBS: $\alpha = 0.88$

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical principles of social science research, including voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. No identifying information was included in the data analysis. Emotional distress protocols were established; participants showing heightened anxiety or distress were referred to appropriate counselling services available at local institutions.

3.8 Data Analysis

3.8.1 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS (Version 26). The following analytical procedures were employed:

- Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency distributions) to summarise demographic and psychological variables;

- Pearson's correlation to examine associations between reintegration stress, livelihood anxiety, income loss, social belongingness, and duration of urban stay;
- Independent samples t-test to compare reintegration stress levels between employed and unemployed returnees;
- One-way ANOVA to assess group differences based on duration of urban stay;
- Multiple linear regression to identify major predictors of cultural reintegration stress.

3.8.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using Thematic Analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) identification of themes, (4) review of themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final narrative interpretation. Manual coding was performed to retain sensitivity to context, language, and cultural nuances.

3.9 Variables of the Study

- Dependent Variable: Cultural Reintegration Stress.
- Independent Variables: Income loss, livelihood anxiety, social belongingness, duration of urban stay, and employment status.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

Data were collected from 120 reverse migrants who had returned to Patna district between 2020 and 2022. The socio-demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 120)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	92	76.7
	Female	28	23.3
Age (years)	20–29	34	28.3
	30–39	51	42.5
	40–50	35	29.2
Marital Status	Unmarried	41	34.2
	Married	79	65.8
Educational Level	Up to Class 10	29	24.2
	Class 12	37	30.8
	Graduate	42	35.0
	Postgraduate/Above	12	10.0

Type of Pre-COVID Employment	Informal sector (daily wage, etc.)	57	47.5
	Formal/contractual	35	29.2
	Service sector (retail, hospitality, etc.)	28	23.3
Duration of Urban Stay (years)	< 3	26	21.7
	3–5	44	36.7
	> 5	50	41.6
Current Employment Status	Employed (any income activity)	53	44.2
	Unemployed / irregular work	67	55.8
Family Type	Joint	71	59.2
	Nuclear	49	40.8

The sample is predominantly male (76.7%), in the 30–39 year age bracket, with a sizable proportion having at least Class 12 or graduation. Most respondents had moderate to long urban exposure (over 3 years), and more than half were unemployed or engaged in irregular work at the time of the survey.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Key Psychological Variables

Three major psychological constructs were examined: Cultural Reintegration Stress (CRSS), Livelihood Anxiety (LAI), and Social Belongingness (SBS). Each construct was assessed using Likert-type scales, where higher scores indicate higher levels of the construct, except for social belongingness, where higher scores indicate greater perceived belongingness.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Psychological Variables (N = 120)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Cultural Reintegration Stress (CRSS)	1.65	4.80	3.42	0.68
Livelihood Anxiety Index (LAI)	2.10	4.90	3.85	0.61
Social Belongingness Scale (SBS)	1.20	4.10	2.37	0.72
Income Loss (1–5 perceived scale)	1.00	5.00	3.91	0.82

Duration of Urban Stay (years)	1.00	12.00	5.43	2.14

The mean CRSS score of 3.42 (SD = 0.68) indicates a moderate-to-high level of cultural reintegration stress across the sample. Livelihood anxiety is also notably high (M = 3.85), reflecting continuing insecurity regarding work and income. The relatively low mean for social belongingness (M = 2.37) suggests that many returnees do not feel fully re-embedded in their home social environment.

4.3 Correlation Between Key Variables

Pearson's product–moment correlation was used to examine the relationships between the variables. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table: 3 Correlation Matrix of Key Study Variables (N = 120)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. CRSS					
2. LAI	.58**				
3. SBS	–.55**	–.42**			
4. Income Loss	.62**	.49**	–.33**		
5. Duration of Urban Stay	.41**	.29**	–.21*	.27**	

Note. $p < .05^*$, $^*p < .01$

Key observations:

- Cultural Reintegration Stress (CRSS) shows a strong positive correlation with income loss ($r = .62$, $p < .01$) and livelihood anxiety ($r = .58$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher perceived financial harm and future work uncertainty are strongly associated with greater reintegration stress.
- CRSS has a moderate negative correlation with social belongingness ($r = –.55$, $p < .01$), suggesting that individuals who feel less accepted and integrated into their home community experience significantly higher stress.
- Duration of urban stay is positively correlated with CRSS ($r = .41$, $p < .01$), which supports the idea that longer exposure to urban life leads to more intense identity and adjustment difficulties upon return.

These findings provide initial support for H1 (income loss ↗ stress) and H2 (longer urban stay ↗ conflict/stress).

4.4 Group Differences: Employed vs Unemployed Returnees

To test H3 (unemployed returnees will show significantly higher stress), an independent samples t-test was conducted comparing CRSS scores of employed (n = 53) and unemployed/irregular workers (n = 67).

Table 4:Comparison of Cultural Reintegration Stress by Employment Status

Variable	Employment Status	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p
CRSS	Employed	53	3.12	0.61			
	Unemployed/Irregular	67	3.66	0.64	–4.42	118	< .001

Unemployed/irregular workers reported significantly higher reintegration stress (M = 3.66) compared to their employed counterparts (M = 3.12); the difference was statistically significant, $t(118) = –4.42$, $p < .001$. The effect size (Cohen's d) is approximately 0.80, representing a large effect, indicating that employment status is a strong differentiating factor for psychological distress.

This result clearly supports H3.

4.5 Differences by Duration of Urban Stay

To understand whether the length of urban experience influences reintegration stress, respondents were divided into three groups based on duration of their stay in the city:

- Group 1: Less than 3 years (n = 26)
- Group 2: 3–5 years (n = 44)
- Group 3: More than 5 years (n = 50)

A one-way ANOVA was conducted.

Table: 5: ANOVA: Cultural Reintegration Stress by Duration of Urban Stay

Group (Urban Stay)	n	Mean CRSS	SD
< 3 years	26	3.09	0.58
3–5 years	44	3.39	0.65
> 5 years	50	3.61	0.69

ANOVA results:

- **F**(2, 117) = 6.21, **p** = .003

Post-hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) indicated that:

- Returnees with **>** 5 years urban experience had significantly higher CRSS than those with < 3 years (p = .002).
- The difference between 3–5 years and > 5 years was in the expected direction but marginal (p just above .05), suggesting a trend of increasing stress with higher duration.

These results corroborate the correlational finding that longer urban stay is associated with higher reintegration stress, and strongly align with H2.

4.6 Predictors of Cultural Reintegration Stress: Regression Analysis

To identify the key predictors of cultural reintegration stress, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted with CRSS as the dependent variable and income loss, livelihood anxiety, social belongingness, duration of urban stay, and current employment status (dummy coded: 0 = employed, 1 = unemployed/irregular**)** as predictors.

Table: 6: Multiple Regression Predicting Cultural Reintegration Stress (N = 120)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	1.12	0.34		3.29	.001
Income Loss	0.28	0.06	.35	4.48	< .001
Livelihood Anxiety (LAI)	0.21	0.07	.26	3.10	.002
Social Belongingness	–0.31	0.06	–.38	–5.04	< .001
Duration of Urban Stay	0.05	0.02	.19	2.44	.016
Employment Status	0.24	0.09	.18	2.65	.009

Model statistics:

- $R^2 = .58$, Adjusted $R^2 = .56$
- F(5, 114) = 31.56, p < .001

Interpretation:

- The model explains 58% of the variance in cultural reintegration stress, which is quite substantial for psychosocial research.

- Income loss ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$) and social belongingness ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$) emerge as the strongest predictors.
- Livelihood anxiety and duration of urban stay also contribute significantly, albeit with slightly smaller beta weights.
- Employment status (coded as 1 = unemployed/irregular) remains a significant predictor even after controlling for other variables, demonstrating that being without stable work independently adds to reintegration stress.

These findings collectively support the hypothesised relationships and underscore that economic loss, ongoing livelihood anxiety, low belongingness, longer urban exposure, and unemployment jointly shape the psychological burden of reverse migration.

4.7 Qualitative Findings: Thematic Summary

Qualitative interviews with **20 participants** provided depth to the quantitative findings. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes:

1. **"Stuck Between Two Worlds"** – Identity Conflict

   Many respondents described themselves as feeling "neither fully urban nor fully village/local." After years in big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, or Bangalore, returning to Patna's mixed rural–urban culture created a sense of being "out of place" in both settings. Changes in speech, dressing style, and aspirations often clashed with family and community expectations.

2. **"Respect Lost, Status Down"** – Perceived Status Decline

   Several participants felt that their social status had decreased after returning without a stable job. Earlier, they were viewed as *kamane wale shehar ke log* (earners from the city), but post-return they reported being subtly treated as "failed migrants" or burdens on the family economy. This perceived status loss amplified feelings of shame and helplessness.

3. **"Log Kya Kahenge?"** – Stigma and Suspicion

   Especially during early phases of the pandemic, some returnees experienced stigma as potential carriers of COVID-19. Even later, traces of suspicion

regarding their lifestyle and values persisted. Comments about their "changed behaviour" or "city habits" reinforced a feeling of social distance, which links closely with low social belongingness scores.

4. **"Adjust Karna Hi Padega"** – Coping and Resilience

   Despite severe stress, many participants demonstrated pragmatic coping: taking up temporary jobs, starting small businesses, joining local networks, or planning to re-migrate once conditions improved. Family bonding, religious faith, and peer support among fellow returnees emerged as key protective factors that moderated stress for some individuals.

These themes complement the quantitative data, illustrating how income loss, identity conflict, stigma, and fragile social support come together to produce high levels of cultural reintegration stress.

5. Discussion

The present study set out to examine the psychological impact of reverse migration and cultural reintegration stressamong post-COVID job seekers who returned to Patna. Specifically, it aimed to (a) measure levels of cultural reintegration stress, (b) explore its association with income loss, livelihood anxiety, social belongingness, and duration of urban stay, and (c) qualitatively understand the lived experiences of returnees negotiating identity, stigma, and reintegration. The findings collectively suggest that reverse migration is not merely an economic or logistical process but a deeply psychosocial and cultural transition that can generate substantial stress, especially in resource-constrained contexts such as Bihar.

5.1 Overall Levels of Cultural Reintegration Stress

The descriptive statistics indicate that participants report moderate-to-high levels of cultural reintegration stress (M $\approx$ 3.4 on a 5-point scale). This finding underscores that returning "home" after a crisis is not automatically comforting or psychologically protective. Rather, for many participants, the home environment became a site of unmet expectations, ambiguous roles, and uncertain futures. The relatively high scores on the Livelihood Anxiety Index parallel this pattern, demonstrating that financial insecurity remains a central axis of distress in the post-return phase.

These results resonate with broader migration and disaster literature, which suggests that individuals who are compelled to return under crisis conditions often face double vulnerability: they lose the relative stability of their host environment without securing comparable opportunities at home. The present study extends this insight to the specific context of Patna, where economic structures, labour markets, and institutional support mechanisms are still evolving and may not be equipped to absorb a large influx of returnees.

5.2 Economic Insecurity as a Core Stressor

One of the most robust quantitative findings is the strong positive correlation between perceived income loss and cultural reintegration stress, as well as the significant regression weight of income loss as a predictor of stress. This indicates that economic loss is not just an objective material event but a subjective psychological blow that shapes how individuals experience "coming back" to their native place.

For many respondents, pre-pandemic urban employment provided not only income but also dignity, autonomy, and a sense of upward mobility. Returning to Patna without secure employment meant a loss of these psychosocial affordances. The qualitative themes of "respect lost, status down" echo this: several participants reported feeling that their social status had diminished within their families and communities after returning without the financial successes that were once associated with their urban migration. This perceived status decline appears to fuel shame, guilt, and self-doubt, thereby intensifying reintegration stress.

The regression analysis, which showed income loss and livelihood anxiety as significant predictors of cultural reintegration stress, further suggests that reverse migration cannot be de-linked from structural questions of livelihood and social protection. Psychological interventions alone, without simultaneous economic measures, may have limited impact.

5.3 Social Belongingness and Cultural Reintegration

Another critical finding is the strong negative relationship between social belongingness and cultural reintegration stress. Participants who felt less accepted, less supported, and less emotionally anchored in their home communities reported higher stress scores. This suggests that cultural reintegration is not simply about physically returning to a familiar geography, but about being re-recognised and re-accommodated within local social relationships, norms, and expectations.

The qualitative theme of "log kya kahenge?" (what will people say?) points to the enduring power of community judgment in shaping self-perception and emotional well-being. Several participants narrated experiences of being subtly or explicitly criticised for their "city habits," "changed attitude," or inability to immediately contribute economically after return. This kind of micro-level social evaluation erodes the sense of belonging and reinforces a feeling of being "out of place" even in one's own place.

From a psychological standpoint, these findings highlight the importance of social identity and place identity in the reintegration process. Individuals returning from metropolitan environments often carry altered aspirations, behaviours, and identities that may not seamlessly align with the expectations of their home communities. When this misalignment is met with stigma or lack of understanding, reintegration stress is likely to escalate.

5.4 Duration of Urban Stay and Identity Conflict

The study also found that longer duration of urban stay is associated with higher levels of cultural reintegration stress. Respondents who had spent more than five years in cities reported significantly greater stress than those with less than three years of urban experience. This pattern suggests that extended exposure to urban cultures, work structures, and lifestyles can lead to deeper psychological investment in a "city-based" identity, which then becomes more difficult to relinquish or reconfigure upon return.

The qualitative theme "stuck between two worlds" vividly illustrates this phenomenon. Many participants described feeling neither fully urban nor fully local: they no longer entirely fit into their native rural or semi-urban cultural norms, yet also felt disconnected from the urban life they had left behind. This liminal identity being "in-between" is psychologically demanding and may intensify feelings of alienation and uncertainty.

These findings align with concepts of acculturative stress traditionally applied to international migrants, but here they manifest in the context of internal migration within a single country. The results suggest that internal migrants can also experience something analogous to "re-acculturation stress" when they return to environments that differ significantly from the ones in which they have reconstituted their identities.

5.5 Employment Status and Reintegration Stress

The significant difference in cultural reintegration stress between employed and unemployed/irregularly employed returnees confirms the hypothesis

that employment status is a powerful determinant of psychological well-being. Unemployed participants reported markedly higher stress scores, with a large effect size.

However, the regression analysis indicates that even after controlling for income loss and livelihood anxiety, employment status continues to predict stress. This suggests that a job is not only a source of income but also of structure, social recognition, and self-worth. Being unemployed or underemployed in the home context may reinforce the perception of being a "burden" rather than a contributor to the household, exacerbating stress and undermining feelings of reintegration.

Moreover, the narratives of participants wanting to "re-migrate" once conditions improve reveal that many see their current stay in Patna as temporary and involuntary, further complicating their ability to psychologically "settle" and invest in local social ties.

5.6 Interplay of Structural and Cultural Factors

A central contribution of this study is its demonstration that structural (economic) and cultural (identity and belongingness) dimensions of reintegration are deeply intertwined. Income loss, livelihood anxiety, and unemployment do not operate in isolation from cultural and relational processes. Instead, they intersect with family expectations, community norms, and local notions of success and failure.

For example, in joint family settings, the inability to bring in regular income can alter intra-household power dynamics and respect, thereby straining relationships. When these dynamics are combined with accusations of having "changed too much" after living in cities, individuals may experience a compounded form of stress that is both material and symbolic.

The qualitative themes highlight that, for many returnees, coping involves a mixture of pragmatic adaptation (taking temporary jobs, exploring small business opportunities) and emotional strategies (relying on religious faith, peer support, and hope of future remigration). These coping mechanisms moderate stress to some degree, but they do not fully compensate for the absence of institutional support systems that could assist in long-term reintegration.

5.7 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have several important implications:

1. Beyond Economic Packages:

While financial relief and employment schemes are indispensable, they need to be complemented by psychosocial interventions, such as community-based counselling, support groups for returnees, and training for local leaders in recognising and responding to reintegration stress.

2. Community Sensitisation:

Given the central role of belongingness, initiatives that sensitise communities to the challenges faced by returnees reducing stigma, correcting misconceptions about "city-influenced" behaviour, and encouraging inclusive attitudes may directly reduce reintegration stress.

3. Targeted Interventions for High-Risk Groups:

Returnees with long urban stays, high income loss, and current unemployment represent particularly high-risk groups for psychological distress. Special attention to these sub-groups through tailored programmes (e.g., skill upgradation, job matching, psychological first aid) is warranted.

4. Integration of Mental Health into Migration Policy:

Migration and reverse migration policy frameworks in India often focus on transport, cash transfers, and employment. This study underscores the need to explicitly integrate mental health and psychosocial supportinto such policies, particularly in states like Bihar with large migrant populations.

5.8 Theoretical Contributions

At a conceptual level, the study contributes to an emerging body of work that views internal migration not only as an economic phenomenon but also as a process of identity formation and transformation. The notion of cultural reintegration stress demonstrated here suggests that returning to a familiar cultural space does not automatically restore psychological equilibrium. Instead, it may require a complex renegotiation of identity, roles, and belonging, comparable in some respects to post-return experiences of international migrants.

The study also shows that internal reverse migration can generate forms of acculturative stress similar to those discussed in cross-cultural psychology, thus

arguing for a broader and more nuanced application of acculturation frameworks within the Indian context.

6. Conclusion

The present study provides a comprehensive examination of cultural reintegration stress among post-COVID reverse migrants returning to Patna, revealing that the phenomenon of "returning home" is far more complex than traditionally assumed. Rather than constituting a straightforward process of reabsorption into familiar social and cultural environments, reverse migration produces significant psychological, economic, and identity-related challenges that shape the lived experiences of returnees in profound ways.

Quantitative findings indicate that cultural reintegration stress among returnees is moderate to high, suggesting that re-entry into the home environment is marked by uncertainty, role ambiguity, and emotional strain. Income loss, livelihood anxiety, unemployment, low social belongingness, and longer urban stay emerged as strong predictors of stress, demonstrating that reintegration is shaped by both material conditions and symbolic–cultural factors. The qualitative themes feeling "stuck between two worlds," perceived status loss, experiences of subtle stigma, and attempts at pragmatic coping further illuminate the psychological realities behind these statistical patterns. Together, these findings make evident that reverse migration represents a dual displacement: a physical return but a psychological dislocation.

Importantly, the study highlights that reintegration is not a passive or automatic return to normalcy but a dynamic and negotiated process, influenced by family expectations, community perceptions, identity conflict, and structural economic constraints. For many participants, the home environment did not provide the anticipated support or stability; instead, it became a site where their altered urban identities clashed with local cultural norms, intensifying stress and diminishing belongingness.

The study's findings also carry significant policy implications. Reintegration support must extend beyond immediate economic relief and address the psychosocial dimensions of return migration. Programmes that combine livelihood restoration with mental-health support, skill development, and community sensitisation can help reduce reintegration stress and facilitate smoother transitions. Identifying and supporting high-risk groups such as returnees experiencing long-term unemployment or substantial income loss should be a priority for policymakers in Bihar and other migration-dependent states.

Conceptually, the study advances the understanding of internal migration by demonstrating that acculturative and identity-related difficulties are not limited to international migrants. Reverse migrants within India may also undergo significant psychological strain as they renegotiate their identities and social roles in familiar yet transformed cultural spaces. This insight broadens the theoretical lens through which migration and return are analysed, highlighting the need for integrated frameworks that recognise the intersection of economic, cultural, and psychological factors.

In conclusion, reverse migration in the post-COVID context is not merely a demographic shift but a deeply human and psychological transition, requiring multidimensional support systems. This study underscores the necessity of recognising returnees not simply as economic actors but as individuals navigating profound emotional, social, and identity-based challenges. Addressing these complexities is essential for building resilient communities and ensuring that reintegration becomes an opportunity for renewal rather than a source of prolonged distress.

7. Limitations

Although the present study offers valuable insights into the psychological dimensions of reverse migration in Patna, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualise the findings.

The study employed a cross-sectional approach, capturing participants' experiences at a single point in time. As a result, it cannot establish causal relationships or track how cultural reintegration stress evolves over longer periods. A longitudinal design would have provided richer insights into temporal changes in psychological adaptation.

The use of purposive and snowball sampling, while suitable for reaching dispersed migrant populations, limits the generalisability of findings. Participants who were socially connected or more accessible may have been overrepresented, potentially excluding the most vulnerable or isolated returnees.

The study relied on self-reported data for psychological variables, which may be influenced by social desirability bias, recall bias, or participants' willingness to disclose sensitive experiences. Although standardised tools were used, subjective perceptions may not always align with objective indicators.

The study focuses exclusively on returnees in Patna district. Bihar is socio-culturally diverse, and reintegration experiences may differ significantly in other districts or rural regions. This geographic

specificity restricts the applicability of findings to broader migrant populations across the state or India.

While the study measured psychological stress using validated scales, it did not include formal clinical assessments or diagnostic tools. Therefore, conclusions regarding mental-health outcomes are indicative rather than diagnostic.

The qualitative component, though rich, included only 20 interviews. A larger and more diverse qualitative sample might have captured additional themes, particularly regarding gender differences, caste-based experiences, or differences between formal and informal sector workers.

Because the study focuses on post-COVID returnees, findings may not fully generalise to reverse migration occurring in non-crisis periods. The exceptional nature of the pandemic likely exacerbated emotional and economic stress in ways that might differ from typical migration cycles.

References

Arowolo, O. O. (2000). Return migration and the problem of reintegration. *International Migration, 38*(5), 59–82.

Article-14. (2021). *A year since the long walk: Stuck at home in Bihar*.

Berry, J. W. (2006). Stress perspectives on acculturation. In D. L. Sam & J. W. Berry (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of acculturation psychology* (pp. 43–57). Cambridge University Press.

Chavan, B. S., Sidana, A., Arun, P., et al. (2021). Factors leading to reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Primary Care Companion for CNS Disorders, 23*(2).

Chaudhuri, S. (2013). Acculturation and mental health among internal migrants. *Psychology and Developing Societies, 25*(1), 111–138.*

Choudhari, R. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic: Mental health challenges of internal migrant workers of India. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry, 54*, 102254.

Dhar, N. S. (2022). COVID-19 induced income loss among migrant workers: Evidence from Bihar. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics, 65*, 247–266.

Jesline, J., Romate, J., Thapar, R., & Bhattacharjee, A. (2021). The plight of migrants during COVID-19 in India: A systematic review. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 8*(1).

Khan, M. I., et al. (2023). Mental health status of migrant workers during COVID-19. *Healthcare, 11*(11).

King, R. (1986). Return migration and regional development. In R. King (Ed.), *Return migration and regional economic problems* (pp. 1–37). Croom Helm.

Kumar, S. (2020). Perspectives on return migration during COVID-19. *Migration Affairs, 2*(2), 1–23.

Kunuroglu, F., Yagmur, K., Van de Vijver, F., & Kroon, S. (2016). Return migration and reintegration: A review. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 8*(2).

Kuo, B. (2014). Coping and acculturation: A synthesis of migrant adaptation literature. *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine, 2*(1), 16–33.

Lerias, D., & Byrne, K. (2024). Acculturative stress and migrant mental health. *Transcultural Psychiatry, 61*(2), 215–240.*

Németh, Á. (2022). *Conceptual framework for the subjective well-being of migrants*. Austrian Academy of Sciences.

Singh, G. P. (2021). Psychosocial and mental health issues of migrants during COVID-19. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine, 43*(5), 432–438.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Migrant Workers from Rural Bihar. (2023). *Economic and Political Weekly, 58*(6), 43–51.

Virupaksha, H. G., Kumar, A., & Nirmala, B. P. (2014). Migration and mental health: An interface. *Journal of Natural Science, Biology and Medicine, 5*(2), 233–239.

harm, loss, or injury, whether personal or otherwise, that might occur from the use, interpretation, or reliance upon the information, methods, instructions, or products discussed in the journal's content.

****