



Reverse Internal Migration: Identity Negotiation in 1232 Km: The Long Journey Home and Homebound

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Abstract

The ascent of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 not only threatened the physical well-being of the masses but also raised several social, economic, and humanitarian concerns. One of the many afflictions instigated by this massive pandemic is the reverse internal migration that took place all over India. Amidst the misery of the crisis, millions of migrants were seeking the comfort of their homes and returned to their hometowns, but unfortunately, most of these journeys turned out to be dreadful. This paper aims to explore how these individuals navigate the transformation of their identities in the challenging process of returning to their hometowns amidst the crisis by employing a theoretical framework that draws upon the concepts of identity, reverse migration, and internal migration. By synthesising the theoretical perspectives of “Self-Categorization” as devised by David Willer and Henri Tajfel’s “Social Identity Theory,” the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how the return migrants negotiate their “self” and “home.”

Keywords: Reverse Migration, Internal Migration, Identity Crisis, Displacement, Reverse Internal Migration, COVID-19.

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Introduction

The pandemic-led reverse migration in India exposed the systemic vulnerabilities of migrant workers, the harsh realities of economic dependency, social isolation, and inadequate health infrastructure. The instances of brutal law enforcement alongside the abrupt closure of industries not only led to widespread economic distress, but the uncertainty about their future also caused psychological distress among the migrant workers (Choudhari 1). In reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic's unprecedented outbreak in 2020, India experienced a tremendous surge of reverse internal migration, with millions of people returning to their homes. Upending their lives and means of subsistence, the pandemic changed the migrants' perception of home and identity. This paper endeavours to elucidate the complex mechanisms through which return migrants undergo identity negotiation, in the context of leaving their current homes to move back to their hometowns, by employing a theoretical framework that draws upon the concepts of identity, reverse migration, and internal migration. It seeks to critically analyse the transformative journey of these individuals as they redefine notions of home and belonging. By synthesising the theoretical perspectives of "Self-Categorisation" as devised by David Willer and Henri Tajfel's "Social Identity Theory," the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how the return migrants negotiate their "self" and "home."

As a response to the pandemic, the Government of India implemented a one-day curfew called the 'Janta curfew' on March 22, 2020, which soon turned into a nationwide lockdown beginning on March 24, 2020, leaving inhabitants only four hours to respond. Overnight, everything took an unknown turn, transit lines came to a halt, leaving travellers stranded and without a place to go. In the months that followed, some of the most appalling displays of despair and agony were seen. Following the unanticipated closure of enterprises and industries, thousands of migrants along with their families and dependents were forced to go back home under harsh conditions and on foot. On their way, they met unforeseen hardships including violent beatings by police, a sense of estrangement, and an identity crisis insinuated by displacement. Returning to their hometowns amidst the crisis was a challenging task for all the

migrants given the financial crisis, immobility, social disintegration, and fear for life. The two poignant novels: *1232 Km: The Long Journey Home* by Vinod Kapri and *Homebound* by Puja Changoiwala, serve as windows into the harrowing experiences of migrants who had to take an arduous journey back to their “homes,” underscoring the need for more robust social safety nets and supportive policies for internal migrants in future crises. The matter of concern is the question if their supposed homes will offer them the comfort of a home. These books chronicle physical trials as well as the emotional and psychological toll exacted by the reverse migration, uncovering social disintegration/reintegration against the backdrop of crisis-induced challenges.

1232 Km: The Long Journey Home gives a crucial account of reverse migration through seven migrant workers- Ritesh, Ram Babu, Sonu, Mukesh, Krishna, Sandeep, and Ashish, who felt so displaced by the pandemic that they decided to bicycle their way back home all the way from Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, to their villages in Saharsa and Samastipur in Bihar. Identity crises are exacerbated by the loss of social ties, and this is what can be observed in the plight of the migrants who had to move to their original homes. According to Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups, and consequent social identity shapes their behaviour and attitudes (Leaper 338).

As soon as they were hit by the crisis, the need to return home overpowered the challenges standing in their way as they only identified themselves with their place of origin. Kapri's meticulous account lays bare the extremities and challenges that they choose to face in order to be where they belong. The sense of un-belonging to where they lived as migrant workers and, on the way, comes from the encounters with police brutality, hostility from the locals (landlord), and constant fear of hunger (Kumar 318). This compelling narrative reflects the transformation of the identity of these individuals when they are met with crisis. In the houses that they lived in, they are just tenants who must leave if the rent is not paid on time. On the streets, they aren't citizens of India moving to their homes but unruly subjects who deserve to be beaten. In other villages, they are travellers who carry the deadly disease. As a result, the migrants

identified themselves with their original homes despite having a strong connection with the newer homes (Jha and Lahiri 3). They identified with each other as “migrant workers” who are outsiders everywhere except their villages.

While these seven migrant workers were able to be at “home” finally in their villages and identified themselves with the people and place that they come from, “Homebound” by Puja Changoiwala paints a different picture. For the young Meher, Dharavi represented a realm of opportunities and potential. However, things take an unfortunate turn with the extensive lockdown imposed by the Indian government as a response to COVID-19. Her parents lost their employment, thrusting them perilously close to losing their lives. Amidst the surging COVID-19 cases, they grapple with the realisation of the uncertainty of their lives and leave for their home which is their sole shelter. Despite the given restrictions on public movement, they decide to walk a 900-kilometer-long journey and face barbaric police officers, scorching temperatures, and the seemingly dispassionate whims of fate on their way. Even though the journey ended, her search for home remained unfinished.

Internal Migration and Reverse Migration

During the national lockdown, when people were asked to stay put at home, migrants faced an appalling question of where their home is. The one that they had been living in and adapting to for a long time did not seem like an option anymore. The reality of internal migration is no different than international migration (Khan and Arokkiaraj 12). The same kind of dissociation happens as soon as a crisis comes. While Meher claims Mumbai as her home, her “disillusioned” father calls it a mirage and stresses that they must return home despite the known risks.

“It’s dangerous,” argued Ma. “Heavy police deployment everywhere, day and night. Many have died on the road already.”

“Many haven't. And once we finish this journey, we'll be home?” But this is home, I registered my protest.

No, asserted my father, too curt for his make. “This is its mirage.” (Changoiwala 2)

Meher's father's resolute commitment to returning to "home," coupled with his characterisation of their current residence as a "mirage," suggests a fundamental distinction between the immediate environment of Dharavi and the true essence of home. While Dharavi may appear as home to Meher due to her limited experience with what her father believes is their home, it fundamentally lacks the essential qualities of a true home, that is, a safe and secure refuge. Meher's conception of home is thus primarily grounded in familiarity rather than a deeper sense of security and belonging.

As Everett S. Lee's Push-Pull Theory states, migration decisions are based on a combination of push factors and pull factors, that are based on social, economic, and political conditions of both the homeland and the host land. These factors work similarly in the case of reverse migration. Meher and her father are torn between such factors. For Meher, Dharavi represents hope, possibilities, and familiarity, rendering it to be a more profound and cohesive concept of home as compared to the place of their origin, but the pandemic-induced lockdown brought the brink of despair and her father's decision to initiate this reverse migration serves as a powerful testament to the existence of migrants as marginalised communities especially in the face of overwhelming odds. The problem with internal migration is that when one moves away for opportunities, he/she does not think of himself/herself as a migrant, and even if there is the slightest thought of being a migrant, it is overshadowed by the idea of nationalism. However, the reverse migration is not the same. There is an instant identity crisis followed by the negotiation of a home. The return in internal migration happens with a lot of rethinking and negotiation of identity (Rajan et al.). For Meher and her family, even though the return was inevitable, there was a sense of loss about leaving Dharavi. As they embarked on the journey, the contemplation of "home" and return began:

As the men counted more reasons to justify our illegal escape from Mumbai, Electron Aunty weighed in with negatives. We will always be outsiders in this city, she droned. 'For people in this jungle, families like ours are good enough to build their subways. and skyscrapers, but not good enough to deserve decent homes, paid leaves, even pending wages.'" (Changoiwala 17)

The calculated decision to return home, despite knowing the gravity of the situation and the risks associated with this journey serves as a poignant commentary on the position of the outsiders. This narrative of the family's journey offers a multifaceted interplay between societal perceptions of migrants and the individual agency. On one hand, the decision to return home and choosing to confront adversity underscores the strained relationship between migrants and the host society; on the other hand, the resistance by the younger members reflects their choice of the 'known' over the 'unknown' home: "He left Balhaar when he was five, and he remembered too little of our village to tolerate this arduous journey" (Changoiwala 40). This realisation of unfamiliarity with the so-called "home" during the return is what leads to a vulnerable state of identity crisis. However, what makes the internal migration stand out is that there is both acceptance and rejection of two homes at the same time. While Meher considers Dharavi to be her home, she also accepts Balhaar as one when she agrees to Electron Aunty's reply "But we're leaving for home. Is that a crime, too?" to "Leaving home is a crime" (Changoiwala 52).

Reverse migration, like migration, is also motivated by economic and social unrest (Lee 51). Both *1232 Km: The Long Journey Home* and *Homebound* exhibit the challenges of reverse migration in the context of internal migration. Keeping the characters' emotional distress in view, it is important to note that the hurt of return is much greater than anticipated and acknowledged.

Identity and Crisis

It is in times of adversity that the need for acceptance and oneness with people and a place arises. With the announcement of the lockdown, the migrants were promptly unsettled and the authorities and the locals made them feel abandoned in their own country. Not only were they beaten with police batons on the highways when they tried to reach a safe place on their own, but they also met new forms of untouchability as they were denied admission into village boundaries, and were even denied water and food. The treatment they received at government quarantine camps was sub-human at best. All that happened during this bicycle insurrection from Ghaziabad to Saharsa of these seven migrant workers, describes an unimaginable, unscrutinised sight of the plight of reverse internal migrants. Kapri's *1232 Km: The Long Journey Home* is a "haunting and also hallucinating ethnography of a rare form of spontaneous 'mass civil disobedience' by millions of disenfranchised and invisible so-called 'footloose workers' in migration studies" (Kumar 318). The one instance where Ritesh, Ram Babu, and Sonu decide to cross the Ganga, knowing they will not make it, sheds light on their willingness to risk their lives as their sense of self was being reduced constantly and the return seemed the only way to assert some form of agency.

Stella Ting-Toomey's idea that "individuals acquire and develop their identities through interaction with others in their cultural group" stands true in this context. As the crisis made them question their place as migrants, their interaction with people and perception of others became biased based on class, place of origin, and religion:

‘And, apart from the police beatings, even the locals in Dharavi threatened us.

Did you know that? About six of them, when we were returning home after the lathi-charge. They held Jairaj and me by our necks and said, "if any of you filthy outsiders gets infected with the virus, no one will be spared, we will bury you alive." It's time you realize that Mumbai wasn't ours, but the biggest delusion of our lives, the greatest mirage' . . .

‘Do you know, Jairaj? Two of those six men were Muslims,’ Baba added. ‘I’m sure they instigated our Hindu brothers against us.’ (Changoiwala 48)

“The self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications” (Stets and Burke 227). Drawing from the Turner’s concept of “self-categorization,” it is evident that the crisis amplified pre-existing biases and accentuated the inherent vulnerabilities associated with migrant identities, bringing out a new, negotiated identity (Willer et al. 647). Turner argued that people don’t hold rigid, fixed identities; instead, their sense of self changes depending on their surroundings and social situations. Turner’s perspective highlights that return migrants are likely to re-evaluate their self-concepts upon returning to hometowns where the community’s expectations or norms may differ from the areas they are returning from. This fluid sense of identity demands them to adjust, aiming for a sense of coherence between their experiences in both urban and rural environment (Willer et al. 647). The hostility directed towards migrants by local residents, driven by religious and class-based prejudices, fundamentally disrupted their sense of belonging within Mumbai. This adversarial environment compelled the migrants to confront the stark reality of their outsider status, catalysing a reassessment of both their identity and their conception of home. This situation exemplifies how identities are negotiated through the interplay between external social interactions and individual self-perception.

There is another side of the migrants' lives presented by Kapri and Changoiwla where the migrants have formed a close-knit community and their identification with each other is based on factors beyond their strong connection with their home. Meher's description of Dharavi sums up her life as a migrant: "The slum is not a conventional beauty, the world knows that, but what it does not know is that everyone here speaks the same language. Not Hindi, Marathi, Tamil or Telugu, but the language of people who know what it's like to leave their homes, falter, mend, learn, experience, and evolve. Now that we are returning to Balhaar, Ms Farah, I think I will feel lost in my village, more than I ever did in this alien ghetto" (Changoiwala

27). Meher's disagreement with her father, asserting that Dharavi is home, highlights a potential generational and emotional gap in the perception of what defines home. This can be understood through Kimberlé Crenshaw's theoretical framework of intersectionality which states that individuals concurrently identify themselves with multiple social categories (including race, gender, caste, class, etcetera) and it is their experiences that shape the final impression of their identity.

After traveling thousands of miles and witnessing countless atrocities, Meher's contemplation of whether any city, country, or the world can be the "home" implies that "home," like identity, is not confined to the place of origin or immediate surroundings. She perceives her identity as the sum of her experiences and her home is a space where there is solidarity, a nurturing environment, and no fear:

I've been trying to understand the idea of home, what it means to me, and why humans are willing to lose all for a few walls. I peeked inside me for answers, but I found them in those around me, in their resolutions, and in their defeats. Home is where fear dies, ma'am, where solidarity dwells, and where love begets love. It's where your smiles remain honest, where you're mothered and you're nurtured, and where you cannot bear to see the ache of others. It's where the feelings of the mind are not blunted, and where interest does not draw a film across the eyes. It's where mercy does not veil her face, and no heart is dead to warmth.

It's where all journeys begin and end, where we all belong, where we can leave and know that we shall still belong. It gives you wings to fly, the home, and room to fall flat. It's a winter hearth, the home, a summer stream. And if that is what home means, ma'am, I wonder if this country, this world, is my home. They could not be. (Changoiwala 224)

For the reverse migrants, the idea of home became a defining factor of their identities. The idea of home was substantially redefined. It turned out to be not the physical location they expected, but rather an emotional anchor.

Conclusion

A significant shift is needed in migration studies from economic, social, and political theories toward psychoanalysis of migrants and hosts, to ensure the creation of a safe haven for migrants, especially return migrants. Diaspora theorists have described home as “a mythic place of desire in their minds” and a “place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin” (Brah 188). This narrative of not belonging anywhere needs to be changed and this paper attempts to revisit the struggles of return migrants, whose journey towards ‘home’ is at an epistemological impasse. An attempt is made to explore the migrants' ability to negotiate an identity where a sense of ease and 'home' is possible. To comprehend the reverse migration, we must transcend traditional frameworks to reconceptualise identity and belonging. Such an approach will bring forth the complex interplay between the quest for 'home' and their existential narratives.

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