

“From Cities to Hometowns: The Socioeconomic Realities of Return Migration in Karnataka”

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Abstract

Migration patterns are often influenced by economic, social and cultural factors, shaping the choices of both migrants and their families. This research is conducted in the 2 Class-IV towns of Dharwad district namely Alnawar and Kundgol and the data is collected through structured interview schedule. Based on Multi-stage random sampling method the sample size is limited to 158.

This study examines the perspectives of both migrants and household heads regarding return migration in Karnataka. Findings indicate that 59.41% of household heads preferred male migrants to return home to manage ancestral property, while 30.69% opposed their return due to limited economic opportunities. In contrast, 75.44% were unwilling for female migrants to return, reinforcing traditional beliefs that married women belong to their husband's household. In total, 75.95% of migrants were unwilling to return, citing economic limitations, career aspirations, and social commitments. Meanwhile, 12.03% expressed a desire to return, primarily for emotional or property-related reasons, while 8.86% remained undecided, consisting mostly of students or recent migrants. These findings highlight the complex interplay of tradition, economic security and personal aspirations in shaping return migration trends.

Keywords: Migration, Return / Reverse Migration, Household Preferences

Introduction

Migration has always played a crucial role in shaping societies, influencing population trends, economic systems and social structures. In India, the movement of people has traditionally been dominated by rural-to-urban migration, as individuals leave their villages in search of better job prospects, improved living conditions and access to modern amenities. However, in recent years, a growing number of people who previously migrated to cities are choosing to return to their native places, a trend known as *return migration* or *reverse migration*. This shift has been particularly noticeable in Karnataka, a state that features a mix of bustling metropolitan areas like Bengaluru and vast rural landscapes dependent on agriculture and allied sectors.

From the incipient of the studies it is found that the impact of out-migration on the society in terms of socio-cultural, demographical, economical aspects etc. is tremendous, T.V. Shekar in his work states that out of 2000 entries in the bibliography of migration, hardly ten works refer to return migration. This illustrates that it is almost a neglected topic in the field of migration research. Further even the census reports fail to provide sufficient information regarding the return migration. This negligible tendency is due to the difficulties in obtaining the exact data, lack of proper and correct information, identification of return migrants etc. further even many studies focus on migration as one-way process, wherein people abandon their native places one for all and settle in towns and cities. However return migration has not received enough attention it deserves to be.

T.V. Shekar (1993) defines return migration as “a movement of migrants back to their home lands to resettle”. Return migration is the final phase when the reverse movement sets in and the cycle of migration is completed.

Return Migration can be defined as migrants' return to their native places to live there permanently. Thus return migration can be described as “back to Pavilion”. It has a profound effect not only on the life of the individual but also on the land of origin as the culture, tradition, skills, improvement both in terms of social and economic aspects can be seen in this return migration.

Urban Out-Migration in Karnataka: Causes and Concerns

For decades, economic disparities and a lack of employment opportunities in rural Karnataka have driven large-scale migration to urban centers such as Bengaluru, Mysuru and Mangaluru. These cities, known for their booming industries, IT hubs and extensive infrastructure, have been magnets for job seekers across different skill levels. However, despite their appeal, these urban environments come with significant challenges. Rising costs of living, overpopulation, environmental degradation and employment uncertainties—especially for unskilled and semi-skilled workers—have

made city life increasingly difficult. Beyond economic concerns, many migrants also experience social isolation, cultural disconnection and mental stress, which eventually prompts them to rethink their decision to stay in urban areas.

Understanding the Rise of Return Migration

In recent years, several factors have contributed to the rise of return migration in Karnataka. The COVID-19 pandemic was a major turning point, as sudden lockdowns and economic slowdowns left thousands of workers without jobs, compelling them to return to their hometowns. However, even beyond the pandemic, deeper structural changes have played a role in this shift. Government policies, rural development initiatives, investment in local businesses, and agricultural reforms have started making rural areas more viable for sustainable living. Furthermore, with the advancement of digital technology and remote work, certain professionals now have the flexibility to earn a livelihood without being tied to urban centers.

Socioeconomic Transitions and Their Implications

The return of migrants has led to significant socioeconomic changes, impacting both individuals and rural communities. Many returnees face challenges such as limited employment options, mismatched skills and difficulties in adapting back to village life. At the same time, their return also brings positive contributions, including the introduction of new business ideas, knowledge-sharing and economic investments in their home regions. The money saved and remitted by returning migrants helps stimulate local economies, and their exposure to urban work cultures often translates into more innovative entrepreneurial ventures and improved agricultural practices.

However, this shift is not without its difficulties. If rural areas fail to create adequate employment and economic opportunities, issues like unemployment, underemployment and financial instability may persist, forcing people to migrate again in search of work. To ensure that return migration leads to long-term sustainable development, policymakers must focus on enhancing rural infrastructure, creating job opportunities and providing skill-development programs. Understanding the push and pull factors behind migration and addressing them effectively will be essential in shaping a balanced and inclusive development model for Karnataka.

Review of Literature

Migration has been a key subject of sociological, economic and demographic research, shaping regional development and influencing labor markets. While rural-to-urban migration has been widely documented, return migration is gaining prominence as an emerging trend with significant socio-economic implications. Studies on migration both at the national and international level have now come to occupy an important place in social science research, wherein many have focused on both immigration and emigration. But however topics on return migration have been unexplored. This section reviews the existing literature on urban out-migration and return migration, particularly in the Indian and Karnataka context.

1. Theories of Migration and Return Migration

Migration theories provide the foundational framework for understanding why people move and why some return. Ravenstein's Laws of Migration (1885) suggest that migration is primarily driven by economic opportunities and that return migration occurs when those opportunities no longer exist or when migrants achieve their intended goals (Ravenstein, 1885). Lee's Push-Pull Theory (1966) further explains that individuals migrate due to unfavorable conditions in their place of origin (push factors) and are attracted to better prospects in urban areas (pull factors), but may later return due to economic, social, or cultural factors (Lee, 1966).

Contemporary studies emphasize that return migration is often linked to failed urban experiences, family obligations, economic downturns, or improved rural conditions (Cassarino, 2004). Research also suggests that return migration does not always mean failure; rather, it can be part of a strategic livelihood strategy where individuals accumulate skills, capital, and experience before returning home to invest in local enterprises (King, 2000).

2. Urban Out-Migration in Karnataka: Trends and Causes

Karnataka has witnessed a significant rural-to-urban migration trend, particularly toward Bengaluru, Mysuru and Mangaluru driven by the state's growing IT, manufacturing and service sectors (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). Migration from rural areas has largely been fueled by agrarian distress, lack of rural employment and climate-induced challenges (Chand & Srivastava, 2014). Many migrants belong to the unorganized sector, working in construction, domestic labor, and informal service jobs, often with precarious job security and low wages (Tumbe, 2018).

However, despite the appeal of urban areas, studies indicate that migrants often face poor living conditions, economic instability, rising costs of living and a lack of social security (Kundu, 2009). This has led to reverse migration, particularly among marginalized communities and informal sector workers who struggle to sustain themselves in cities (Srivastava, 2020).

3. Return Migration: Factors and Challenges

Several studies highlight the factors driving return migration in India, including:

- **Economic Instability in Cities:** Job losses and financial crises often push migrants to return to their hometowns (Mitra & Murayama, 2009).
- **Pandemic-Induced Reverse Migration:** The COVID-19 crisis accelerated return migration, exposing vulnerabilities in the urban labor market (Gupta & Pal, 2021). Many migrants returned to rural areas due to sudden unemployment and inadequate social protection.
- **Family and Social Ties:** Many migrants return to care for aging parents, maintain familial connections, or invest in their native communities (Cassarino, 2004).
- **Government Policies and Rural Development:** Initiatives like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and skill development programs have provided alternative employment opportunities in rural areas, encouraging return migration (Dutta et al., 2012).

Despite these factors, returning migrants often struggle with reintegration issues such as lack of suitable employment, skill mismatches, and adjustment difficulties (Ellis, 2003). Some migrants bring back financial capital and new entrepreneurial ideas, positively impacting local economies (Rajan & Bhagat, 2021). However, if rural economies fail to support them, they may migrate again, leading to circular migration patterns (Deshingkar, 2012).

4. Socioeconomic Transitions and Policy Implications

The socioeconomic impact of return migration varies depending on the region, economic conditions and migrant profiles. Studies suggest that return migration can lead to positive rural transformations, such as:

- **Entrepreneurship and Skill Transfer:** Migrants returning with urban experience often start small businesses, invest in agriculture or engage in self-employment, leading to rural development (McCormick & Wahba, 2001).
- **Rural Employment Growth:** Government schemes and microfinance initiatives have helped returnees find stable livelihoods (Dutta, 2012).
- **Social and Cultural Change:** Some returnees bring back modern work ethics, education perspectives and digital awareness, benefiting rural communities (King, 2000).

However, studies also warn of negative consequences, such as increased rural unemployment, resource strain and social tensions, if return migration is not well-managed (Rajan & Bhagat, 2021). Policies must focus on creating sustainable employment, improving rural infrastructure and integrating returning migrants into local economies (Kundu, 2009).

The literature highlights that urban out-migration and return migration in Karnataka are shaped by economic, social, and policy-driven factors. While many migrants initially leave rural areas in search of better opportunities, difficult urban experiences, economic downturns and rural development policies are prompting many to return. Return migration brings both opportunities and challenges, requiring strong policy interventions to ensure that returnees can contribute meaningfully to rural economies. Future research should explore longitudinal migration patterns, the role of technology in sustaining rural employment and policy frameworks for integrating return migrants into Karnataka's development strategy.

Research Objectives and Scope

This study aims to explore the patterns of return migration in Karnataka within the broader framework of urban out-migration. It seeks to examine the factors influencing migrants' decisions to return, the challenges they face upon reintegration and the potential socioeconomic transformations resulting from their return. By analyzing data from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives, this research intends to provide insights for policymakers, planners and stakeholders to devise effective migration management strategies that promote balanced regional development.

Methodology

The research is conducted in the 2 Class-IV towns of Dharwad district namely Alnawar and Kundgol and the data is collected through structured interview schedule. Based on Multi-stage random sampling method the sample size is limited to 158.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In the study, the researcher got an idea of collecting the information about the return of the migrants to their original places. Generally people out-migrate for major reasons, but the intention to return home also has various reasons, which may vary in terms of sociological, psychological, economical and other pursuits.

Respondents Intention Regarding Return Migration Of their Children

Along with the migrants' opinion even the Heads of the Households opinion was sought regarding their intention whether they preferred their sons or daughters to return home permanently.

Table No.1 Respondents Intention Of Migrants Returning To Native

Sl. No.	Response	Males		Females		Total	
		F	Per cent	F	Per cent	F	Per cent
1	Yes	60	59.41	05	8.77	65	41.14
2	No	31	30.69	43	75.44	74	46.83
3	No Plans	10	9.90	07	12.28	17	10.76
4	No Idea	00	0.00	02	3.51	02	1.27
	Total	101	100	57	100	158	100

Source: *Fieldwork Survey*

From the above Table No.1 we find that majority of the respondents preferred their male migrant to return home, constituting 59.41 per cent so that they could look after the ancestral property, while 30.69 per cent did not wish as they felt that their kins would not prosper well if they returned to native due to limited economic opportunities, scarcity of resources etc. Further they themselves were at the heels of disposal of the property and wished to join their children. Majority of the respondents were unwilling to see their daughter or female migrants who were already married or to be married, to return home. They amount to 75.44 per cent. Many replied that "Kotta Henu Kulada Horege" which means that the once the females are married they are out from the parent's houses. They have to live with their husbands until death. Thus a women is a merely a guest who can visit her native place for a short time and go back. While 8.77 per cent preferred the female migrants to return home who were either widows or spinsters the rest of the respondents did not give any proper response and they amount to 15.79 per cent.

Thus, on the whole we find that majority of the respondents were unwilling to keep their children tied by sentiments (46.83 per cent) as they did not want to be a barrier to their children's life in future. While 41.14 per cent wished that their children should come to native places and must look after their property. Further the emotions and sentiments made them to feel that their children should continue their life in the native place. While 10.76 per cent respondents did not have any idea or plans as they left everything to them to the children themselves to decide about their stay in future.

Intention of the Migrants for Returning to Native

During the survey opinion was collected by the Head of the Household regarding the intention of the migrant for returning to their native place in future permanently.

Table No: 2 Migrants Intention In Returning Home

Sl. No.	Response	Males		Females		Total	
		F	Per cent	F	Per cent	F	Per cent
1	Yes	14	13.86	05	8.77	19	12.03
2	No	75	74.26	45	78.95	120	75.95
3	No Plans	09	8.91	05	8.77	14	8.86
4	No Idea	03	2.97	02	3.51	05	3.16
	Total	101	100	57	100	158	100

Source: *Fieldwork Survey*

From the above Table No: 2 it is found that majority of the respondents knew that their male migrants unwillingness to return to their native place during their old age constitute 74.26 per cent, while 13.86 per cent are willing to return as they are afflicted with the existing environment and moreover the vast ancestral property pressed them to return to native. While 8.91 per cent of the male migrants were not sure about their place of stay and a few of the respondents (2.97 per cent) did not have a clear idea about the migrants preference of stay in future or old age.

Among females majority were unwilling to return to native and they amount to 78.95 per cent. In a country like India where tradition, culture, beliefs, values etc are strong, the married females stay with her husbands or in-laws until death. They visit their native after marriage just for a few days and return to their husband's houses. While hardly 8.77 per cent have the intention of returning to native. They are either windows or spinsters. While the rest 8.77 per cent did not have any plans regarding their stay in future.

Thus on the whole we find that majority of the migrants are unwilling for returning to native who amount o 75.95 per cent. This was due to the fact that many of the migrants have limited economic pursuits, higher educational degrees, social obligations or lack of interest etc. Those wishing to return home amount to 12.03 per cent who are generally

emotional towards their native and further the intention to look after their ancestral property made them to think of returning home permanently in future. While 8.86 per cent migrants did not have any plans regarding their stay in future life. They are either students or young people who left their native place recently.

Preference of Stay In Old Age

Each and every person dream of a comfortable life in their old age and therefore he tries to equip himself with the means to face the old age. Therefore during the survey the respondents were asked as to where their children preferred to stay during the old age.

Table No: 3 Preference Of Stay By The Out-Migrants

Sl. No.	Response	Males		Females		Total	
		F	Per cent	F	Per cent	F	Per cent
1	Return to native	14	8.86	05	8.77	19	12.03
2	Go to better place	23	14.56	02	3.51	25	15.83
3	Stay wherever they are	24	15.19	36	63.16	60	37.97
4	Go abroad	23	14.56	04	7.02	27	17.09
5	Stay in ashrams	0	0.00	01	1.75	01	0.63
6	No plans	11	6.96	07	12.28	19	11.39
7	No Ideas	06	3.80	02	3.51	08	5.06
	Total	101	100	57	100	158	100

Source: *Fieldwork Survey*

The survey data reveals that nearly 14.56 per cent of the male migrants preferred to go to better places than the present ones, while 15.19 per cent preferred to stay in the present place. Those who preferred to settle abroad are accounted to be 14.56 per cent. Hardly 8.86 per cent preferred to return to native so that they can look after their ancestral property and lead a calm and peaceful life. A few migrantss who are either students or young did not have any idea about their stay during the old age. They constitute about 6.96 per cent. However 3.80 per cent of the respondents were unable to answer this question as they never discussed about this issue with the male migrants.

Among females majority of the married migrants preferred to stay in the same place wherever they are residing presently and they amount to 63.16 per cent. While 8.77 per cent preferred to return to their native who are either widows or spinster's. However a few females migrants who are educated and working preferred to go abroad and settle there only. They constitute 7.02 per cent. Hardly 1.75 per cent preferred to stay in ashrams with the intention of doing some social service.

On the whole majority of the migrants preferred to stay where they were (37.97 per cent), while 17.09 per cent migrants preferred to stay and settle abroad as they thought that comparatively life abroad is more comfortable than in their native land. However, those preferring to go to better places accounted to 15.83 per cent. However hardly 12.03 per cent showed the inclination of returning to native who are either impelled to take care of their ancestral property or else, the sentiments made them choose the place. However in recent times we find people becoming more calculative and practical which has stopped them from doing social service or staying in ashrams. We find that hardly 0.63 per cent choose ashrams as their future stay. Thus it reveals that majority of the migrants are unwilling to stay in their native permanently.

Motivational Factors of Return Migration

Migration flow is not always uni-directional phenomenon, but dual phenomena wherein migrants leave the place of migration and return home permanently. A few migrants even though well settled in the land of destination, prefer to stay or return to their native during old age. Various reasons are as follows.

- i) Many return after the completion of their contract signed to the work.
- ii) Migrants who are unable to adjust with the outside environment difference from their native places.
- iii) Migrants coming back to look after their ancestral property or those preferring to increase their ancestral trade.
- iv) The love and affection attached to their other family members, friends' etc., Staying in their native places.
- v) A few migrants return because of prolonged illness and wish to be buried in their native places.
- vi) A few return when they fail to fulfill their dreams they had before leaving.
- vii) Social service oriented people who desire to uplift their native place by spreading the culture, tradition, skill that they have acquired in the migrated area.
- viii) Migrants whose presence is very much required in their native place.

Summary and Conclusion

Summary

This study explores the perspectives of migrants and household heads regarding return migration in Karnataka. The findings indicate a strong gender-based preference for return migration, with 59.41% of household heads favoring the return of male migrants, primarily to manage ancestral property. However, 30.69% opposed their return, citing limited economic opportunities and resource constraints. In contrast, 75.44% of respondents were unwilling for female migrants to return, reinforcing cultural norms that married women should remain with their husband's family. **Only** 8.77% of female migrants, mainly widows or spinsters, were considered for return.

Regarding long-term intentions, 74.26% of male migrants and 78.95% of female migrants were unwilling to return, emphasizing better economic prospects and social obligations in urban areas. Meanwhile, 12.03% of migrants wished to return, primarily for emotional attachment and property management, **while** 8.86% remained undecided. These findings suggest that migration decisions are influenced by economic factors, cultural expectations, and personal aspirations.

Conclusion

The study highlights that return migration remains an unlikely choice for the majority of migrants in Karnataka due to economic constraints, career growth, and social obligations. While male migrants face property-related responsibilities, many are reluctant to return due to the lack of rural employment opportunities. Female migrants, particularly married women, are culturally expected to stay with their husband's family, reducing the likelihood of return.

For policymakers, these insights underline the need to develop rural economies, create employment opportunities, and address social reintegration challenges to make return migration a viable option. Strengthening rural infrastructure, promoting entrepreneurship, and offering incentives for return migrants could help bridge the gap between urban and rural economic opportunities. Future research should explore longitudinal migration trends and policy interventions that can support sustainable return migration in Karnataka.

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