

The Long Road Back: Returnee Migrant Workers in Odisha and the Systems That Greet Them

Odisha sends more labour migrants to other states than almost any other state in India. The corridors are well-worn and well-known: Bolangir to Hyderabad for brick kilns; Ganjam to Surat for textiles; Koraput and Nabarangpur to Tamil Nadu for construction; Kalahandi and Bargarh t...

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That departure is somewhat legible to the state. Panchayat-level tracking has been attempted. Contractors (dalals) are registered in theory. The Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979, provides a regulatory framework that requires contractors to register migrant workers. The 14 migration-prone districts — Balangir, Bargarh, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Subarnapur, Sundergarh, Khordha, Kendrapara, Puri, Ganjam, Gajapati, Rayagada, Koraput, and Nabarangpur — have been identified by the Labour Department as requiring specific intervention.

The return is largely invisible.

When a migrant worker comes home — whether because the season has ended, because construction at the worksite stopped, because a cyclone or flood has devastated the destination city, because a pandemic froze the country, or because a family emergency required presence — they arrive carrying nothing that the welfare system can see. No formal notification of their return. No assessment of what they need. No automatic reconnection to the schemes they were eligible for before they

left. In many cases, they arrive having lost several weeks or months of wages, having borrowed from contractors against future earnings, and carrying health conditions (dust exposure, repetitive strain injuries, malnutrition) that the destination city's informal economy never addressed.

This Convergence Note examines the return migration journey — who comes back to Odisha, under what circumstances, with what needs, and what the existing system offers them (and doesn't).

Understanding Return Migration: Three Types of Homecoming

Return migration from Odisha is not a single phenomenon. Understanding the different patterns matters for programme design.

Seasonal Return: The Regular Rhythm

Most Odisha migrants are seasonal — they leave after the kharif paddy harvest in November, work for four to six months, and return before the kharif transplanting season in June. This cycle has been the foundation of migration from western Odisha for generations. The Ganjam-Surat textile corridor operates on a slightly different rhythm — Surat's loom work is year-round, but workers typically return for Dussehra and Odi festivals and for family events.

Seasonal returnees are the largest group and, paradoxically, the best-adapted to the migration cycle. They have income from the destination, they understand the MGNREGS or paddy cultivation they are returning to, and they have community support systems intact. Their needs are primarily: wage protection during the lean return period (MGNREGS job card activation), health check on return (dust and chemical exposure), and continuity of whatever social security schemes they were enrolled in.

Distress Return: Forced Exit

Distress return happens when something goes wrong at the destination — wage theft by contractors, illness or injury, natural disaster at the worksite, or an economic shock that closes the factory or the construction project. The COVID-19 lockdown of March 2020 produced the largest distress return event in modern Indian history: an estimated 20–25 lakh workers returned to Odisha over six weeks, often on foot, carrying no income and with no preparation on either end for their arrival.

Distress returnees are the most acute policy challenge. They arrive with depleted income, sometimes with debt to contractors (advance payments that must be worked off but couldn't be because the work stopped), and with a need for immediate cash transfer, housing support, and health access that the normal migration-management apparatus is not designed to provide.

The Gram Vikas study on Jagannathprasad Block in Ganjam (2021) is one of the most granular post-COVID return migration assessments in Odisha. It found that nearly half of returned migrants from Jagannathprasad would prefer to stay home if they could earn a minimum of Rs 12,000 per month locally — but that MGNREGS in its normal implementation provided neither the wage nor the number of working days to approach that threshold.

Post-Cyclone and Post-Flood Return: The Climate-Driven Pattern

Odisha's cyclone history — Phailin (2013), Titli (2018), Fani (2019), Amphan (2020), Yaas (2021), Jawad (2021) — has created a specific pattern of climate-driven return migration that is distinct from both seasonal return and pandemic distress. Workers from coastal Odisha whose village homes were damaged by cyclones return to find fields flooded, houses damaged, and the local economy disrupted. The return is forced not by destination failure but by origin crisis.

For this group, SDRF (State Disaster Response Fund) assistance, PMAY housing support, and agricultural compensation under PMFBY are the relevant schemes. But these are administered by different departments (Revenue, Rural Development, Agriculture) with separate eligibility verification systems, creating a fragmented response to what is essentially a single household crisis.

The MGNREGS Problem: Why the Safety Net Doesn't Catch

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is theoretically the primary safety net for return migrants. A returned worker who registers for MGNREGS work should receive 100 days of guaranteed employment per household per year within 15 days of application, with an additional 50 days in drought-notified years, and in Odisha's case, a significant expansion.

In November 2023, the Odisha government extended its state-sector supplement — providing 200 additional days of work over and above MGNREGS's 100 days — from the original 20 migration-prone blocks in Bargarh, Bolangir, Kalahandi, and Nuapada to 10 additional blocks in tribal-majority eastern and southern districts (Gajapati, Kandhamal, Koraput, Nabarangpur, Rayagada). This expansion was specifically framed as an anti-migration measure — providing enough work in migration-prone areas to reduce distress migration pressure.

The policy intention is sound. The implementation is where the system frays.

Problem 1: Job card dormancy. Many MGNREGS job cards in migration-prone areas are technically active but practically dormant. The card is registered under a household member (often the wife, who stayed back), but the work has not been taken up for years. When a return migrant wants to access MGNREGS, the process of activating the card, getting the work assigned, and receiving payment takes longer than the worker's immediate cash need.

Problem 2: Delayed wages. MGNREGS mandates wage payment within 15 days of work completion. Chronic delays — sometimes stretching to 30–60 days — have been documented across Odisha districts and were explicitly cited by the Shramik Adhikar Manch in the context of the 2023 expansion. A return migrant who has no savings and immediate family needs cannot absorb a two-month wage delay.

Problem 3: Capture by local networks. Multiple field reports from Bolangir, the district with the highest MGNREGS demand from returned migrants during the COVID return, found that work was being allocated to households with connections to the local panchayat administration rather than to the most economically distressed returnees. "The real beneficiaries are not getting the work. So they are forced to go outside through the dalal to work as daily wagers," the Shramik Adhikar Manch secretary told Down To Earth in 2023.

Problem 4: No return-specific activation. There is no mechanism by which a worker returning to their village automatically triggers MGNREGS demand recording. The worker must go to the gram panchayat office, submit a written application for work, and wait for the 15-day response period. This administrative step is invisible when described in policy documents and enormously consequential when a family has returned with no money and hungry children.

Health Consequences of the Migration Journey

Return migrants carry health burdens that the formal healthcare system is poorly positioned to identify and address.

Occupational disease. Odisha's textile mill workers in Surat are exposed to cotton dust (risk of byssinosis), noise from looms (documented occupational hearing loss), and chemical dyes (skin and respiratory effects). Construction workers are exposed to silica dust (risk of silicosis), falls, and ergonomic strain. Brick kiln workers face extreme heat exposure, respiratory particulate exposure, and musculoskeletal injury. None of these conditions are systematically screened for on return. ESIC coverage —

which would entitle workers to occupational disease treatment — is virtually absent for informal migrant workers, who are by definition not covered.

Mental health. The psychological dimensions of distress migration are underaddressed everywhere in India and acutely so in Odisha. The experience of being stranded during COVID in a factory dormitory in Surat, watching other workers die, spending weeks uncertain whether family at home was safe, and then returning to a village that expected income that wasn't coming — this produces trauma that the mental health service infrastructure in Odisha's migration-prone districts is in no position to address. There is approximately one psychiatrist per 200,000 people in rural Odisha; in Bolangir and Nuapada, the ratio is effectively zero.

Malnutrition. Workers who returned from distress migration events are frequently malnourished — caloric deficit compounded by stress, disrupted sleep, and the physical demands of the journey itself. In the COVID context, many workers who walked hundreds of kilometres back to Odisha arrived in a state of clinical exhaustion. NHM mobile health teams did reach some return camps, but systematic nutritional screening and support were not available.

TB and respiratory conditions. India's TB epidemiology intersects sharply with internal migration. Migrants in overcrowded dormitories in textile cities and construction labour camps are at elevated TB exposure risk. Odisha has a significant TB burden (the state has been a focus of the National TB Elimination Programme), and return migration is a vector for bringing both active TB and latent infection back to high-prevalence communities. The National TB Elimination Programme's (NTEP) Active Case Finding (ACF) campaigns in migration-prone blocks are the most relevant response, but they have not been systematically timed to return migration seasons.

Skill Recognition: The Gap Nobody Talks About

A Bolangir man who has spent five years laying tiles and doing civil finishing work in Hyderabad's construction sector has skills. He can read drawings, he knows material

specifications, he can supervise a small team, and he has a mental library of hundreds of completed rooms. None of this is documented, certified, or recognised anywhere.

When he returns to Odisha — whether seasonally or permanently — these skills are invisible to the formal skill development and employment ecosystem. He cannot use them to get a certified construction job in Bhubaneswar without starting from scratch through a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process that most workers have never heard of and that few facilitating bodies in Odisha actively promote.

The Recognition of Prior Learning component of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) was specifically designed for workers like him. An RPL assessment conducted by an accredited assessment body can result in a QP-NOS (Qualification Pack - National Occupational Standard) certificate that formally recognises skills acquired through experience, without requiring the worker to sit through a full training programme. For construction workers, NSDC has accredited bodies to conduct RPL in Building Construction Skills.

The reality in Odisha is that RPL has been implemented very partially. The workers who most need it — returned migrants with substantial but uncertified skills — are the least likely to know it exists. NGOs working in migration-source districts have an opportunity to act as connectors between returnee populations and RPL assessment camps.

The Ration Card and Social Protection Continuity Problem

When a worker migrates from Bolangir to Hyderabad, their ration card stays in Bolangir. Before the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme — launched nationally in 2021 — this meant the family at home could access PDS rations, but the migrant worker in the destination city could not. ONORC theoretically solves this: a migrant can access PDS rations at any FPS (Fair Price Shop) in India using their home-state ration card and Aadhaar biometric.

Implementation of ONORC has improved but remains imperfect. In several destination states, the technical integration with Odisha's PDS database has had gaps, and workers have found their ONORC transactions failing at the point of sale. When the worker returns, the family's ration card access should resume seamlessly — and usually does for NFSA entitlements. But any welfare scheme that was linked to place-based registration (a specific AWC for the family, a specific MGNREGS panchayat) requires reactivation, and this reactivation is not automatic.

E-Shram, the national unorganised worker database, was intended to create portability of social protection — a worker registered in E-Shram should be able to access schemes regardless of state of residence. The integration between E-Shram and state-level scheme delivery remains incomplete, but the E-Shram card's PMSBY accident insurance cover (Rs 2 lakh) at least follows the worker regardless of location.

What the State Action Plan Does (and Needs to Do More)

The Odisha Labour Department's State Action Plan for Safety and Welfare of Inter-State Migrant Workers has four stated objectives: tracking of migrant workers at GP level through a database; convergence of departments to link returnees with welfare schemes; coordination mechanisms with destination states for rescue when needed; and enabling safe, informed migration through IEC and enforcement of the ISMW Act.

The tracking database — recording who has migrated from which panchayat — is the foundation. Several migration-prone districts have implemented this with varying degrees of completeness. Bolangir and Nuapada are cited as relatively better performers; remote tribal districts have significant gaps.

What the State Action Plan does not yet address adequately: the return side of the journey. There is no return notification mechanism. There is no rapid-response welfare linkage when workers return. There is no systematic health screening. There is no skill recognition pathway. And there is no coordination between the Labour Department's

migration data and the MGNREGS system — meaning the panchayat body that knows a worker has returned is not the same body that activates the MGNREGS job card.

For NGOs: The Return Migration Programme Model

Effective NGO work in the return migration space has four components:

1. Arrival tracking and needs assessment. Working with panchayats and gram sabhas in migration-source villages to identify when workers have returned, who they are, what immediate needs they have (cash, health care, food, housing), and what their migration history includes. This information feeds into case-specific welfare linkage support.

2. Rapid welfare linkage. MGNREGS job card activation, ration card continuity check, E-Shram registration if not already done, PM Suraksha Bima Yojana activation, and identification of any family members eligible for sponsorship under Mission Vatsalya (if there are children in need of care and protection). This is primarily documentation and portal navigation work — it requires staff who know the systems.

3. Health screening camps. Coordinated with NHM block-level PHC teams and ASHA workers, timed to the return season (November–December for most western Odisha migration corridors). Screening should include TB symptom screening, basic respiratory function check, nutritional assessment, and mental health first aid awareness. Workers who screen positive should be connected to the referral pathway, not just given information.

4. Skill documentation and RPL facilitation. For workers with three or more years of experience in a specific occupation, the NGO can facilitate RPL assessment through NSDC-accredited bodies. This is a relatively new and underused tool; it creates a documented skill asset for the worker that improves negotiating position both locally and in future migration cycles.

For CSR: The Opportunity in Migration-Prone Districts

Companies whose supply chains include labour from migration-prone Odisha districts — directly or through contractors — have a specific responsibility and opportunity here. Workers who have spent years building India's cities and industries return to communities with minimal infrastructure and welfare support. CSR investment in those source communities is, in one framing, a return on the value those communities' workers have already created.

More practically, CSR in this space is investable because the problems are concrete and the solutions are implementable. A well-designed programme in a migration-prone block can demonstrate: X workers registered on E-Shram; Y families whose MGNREGS cards were reactivated; Z health screenings conducted with referrals made; W workers completing RPL certification. These are clean metrics in a domain that genuinely matters.

The geographic focus for CSR in this space: Bolangir (the state's largest migration-sending district), Ganjam (particularly Jagannathprasad, Bhanjanagar, Surada, and Aska blocks), Kalahandi, Nuapada, and the tribal districts of the south — Koraput, Nabarangpur, and Rayagada.

Schemes at a Glance

Scheme	Relevance to Returnees	Nodal Department
MGNREGS (+ Odisha state supplement)	Employment on return, 200 days in eligible blocks	Panchayati Raj
E-Shram	National worker ID, PMSBY accident insurance	Ministry of Labour (Central)
One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC)	PDS access portability	Food & Civil Supplies

Scheme	Relevance to Returnees	Nodal Department
PMSBY	Rs 2 lakh accident insurance (E-Shram linked)	Finance / Banks
PMKVY 4.0 (RPL)	Recognition of prior learning for skilled migrants	MSDE / NSDC
SDRF / State Disaster Relief	Post-cyclone, post-flood housing and livelihood	Revenue Department
PMAY-Gramin	Pucca housing for eligible returnees	Rural Development
NTEP Active Case Finding	TB screening in migration-prone blocks	Health & Family Welfare
National Family Benefit Scheme	Lump sum on death of primary earner	Social Security Dept
Mission Vatsalya	Child welfare for families with children at risk	Women & Child Development

The Community That Waits

In every migration-prone village in western and southern Odisha, there is a community that is partly absent. The men have gone; some women have gone; the children are with grandparents or older siblings. The village functions in a kind of suspended state — productive enough to survive, but with a workforce gap that agricultural and development programmes don't know how to address.

When the workers come back, they bring money (or the memory of money). They also bring skills, exposure to urban practices, and sometimes leadership capacity — many of Odisha's most active village-level development leaders are return migrants who saw how things worked differently in Surat or Hyderabad and decided to try it at home.

What they need is a system that greets their return with something useful: a MGNREGS card that activates without a two-week delay, a health check, a way to get their skills recognised, and a community that can hold them until the next season or until the decision not to go back is made.

That system doesn't exist consistently anywhere in Odisha. Building it — piece by piece, panchayat by panchayat — is the work.

Sources: Odisha Labour Department, State Action Plan for Safety and Welfare of Inter-State Migrant Workers; Gram Vikas, Labour Migration Profile of Jagannathprasad Block, Ganjam (2021); Down to Earth — "Checking Migration: Odisha Extends MGNREGA Supplement" (March 2024); IndiaSpen — "Odisha Migrant Workers Return to Gruelling Shifts" (2020); SAGE Journals — "From Exclusion to Inclusion: ST MGNREGA Workers in Odisha" (2025); MGNREGS operational guidelines (MoRD); E-Shram portal data; PMKVY 4.0 RPL framework documentation.

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