

UNDERSTANDING THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HUMAN BRAIN: AN MRI BASED STUDY

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August 2025

UNDERSTANDING THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HUMAN BRAIN: AN MRI BASED STUDY

by

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Submitted

in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

to the



Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

August 2025

Dedicated to

My Parents

Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Understanding the Long-Term Impact of COVID-19 on Human Brain: An MRI Based Study**” being submitted by **Ms. Sapna S Mishra** to the Department of Electrical Engineering, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** is the record of the bonafide research work carried out by her under our supervision. In our opinion, the thesis has reached the standards fulfilling the requirements of the regulations relating to the degree.

The results contained in this thesis have not been submitted either in part or in full to any other university or institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

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Acknowledgements

The journey of completing this thesis has been one of immense learning, perseverance, and personal growth. This work would not have been possible without the support, guidance, and encouragement of several individuals, and I take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to them. First and foremost, I am profoundly grateful to my advisors, Prof. Tapan Kumar Gandhi and Prof. Bharat Biswal, for their invaluable mentorship, patience, and constant encouragement. Their insightful guidance, constructive feedback, and belief in my abilities have been instrumental in shaping this research and in my growth as a researcher. I deeply appreciate their time, expertise, and unwavering support throughout my Ph.D.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to my SRC members, Prof. Sumantra Dutta Roy, Prof. Saurabh Gandhi, and Prof. Anup Singh, whose critical insights and suggestions have significantly enriched my work. I sincerely thank Prof. Rokers, Dr. Caterina, Dr. Hafiz, Dr. Rahul, Prof. Douaud, and Prof. Joshi for their invaluable feedback, collaborative discussions, and encouragement, which have greatly contributed to refining my research. Their expertise and willingness to engage in thoughtful discussions have been truly inspiring. I would like to sincerely thank my external examiners for their careful evaluation and constructive feedback that have helped me further strengthen this work. I would also like to acknowledge the staff of the Electrical Engineering Department for their unfailing support throughout my Ph.D.

This research would not have been possible without the generous support and collaboration of many individuals and institutions. I sincerely thank Dr. Vidur Mahajan for facilitating the MRI scanning facility and ensuring a seamless workflow. I am also grateful to Dr. Alok for his assistance in subject recruitment, which was crucial for the success of this study. A special thanks to all the staff at Mahajan Imaging Center for their professionalism, cooperation, and expertise in conducting MRI scans, ensuring high-quality data collection. I also extend my gratitude to all the participants who volunteered for the MRI scanning sessions;

their willingness to contribute to research has been essential for this study.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have been surrounded by a supportive and inspiring research community. I sincerely thank my lab-mates, Raghav, Dr. Rijul, Dr. Shefali, Dr. Shobha, Dr. Kritika, Ashirbad, Prerna, Prakash, Siddhant, Virendra, Vivek, Suneedhi, Irfan, Jyotismita, Sneayushee, Dr. Taranjit, and Dr. Rohit for their camaraderie, stimulating discussions, and encouragement. Being part of such an enthusiastic research environment has been a privilege. A special thanks to Dr. Rijul for not only being a wonderful senior but also for his help in proofreading this thesis and offering invaluable guidance throughout my Ph.D. A special thanks to Hritik, Sujeet, Sanjeev, and Preeti, with whom I have had the pleasure of working closely. Their enthusiasm and hard work have been commendable in completing my thesis.

Beyond the academic sphere, I have been incredibly blessed with a wonderful circle of friends who have provided unwavering emotional support. I extend my deepest thanks to my friends Sapna and Dia, whose motivation and belief in me have been a source of strength and joy throughout my life. I am also grateful to Ankita, Abhilasha, Jayateja, and Pavan, who not only inspired me to pursue a Ph.D. but also patiently listened to my endless complaints and frustrations. A special mention to Raghav and Sneha, who have been by my side throughout this journey, providing companionship, laughter, and a constant sense of support. I am also deeply grateful to my friends, Shivani, Anusha, and Prerna, for their engaging conversations (personal and professional) and for making my Ph.D. journey memorable. I am particularly appreciative of Amar for his willingness to listen to my challenges and for offering valuable advice over the past couple of years. Finally, I will always be indebted to my friend Aman, whose unwavering support during difficult times and whose remarkable helpfulness have significantly eased my path.

I cannot express enough gratitude to my parents, who have been my pillars of strength. Their unconditional love, sacrifices, and unwavering belief in me have been the foundation upon which I have built this journey. Their continuous support has given me the resilience to push forward, even in the most challenging times. I would also like to express my heartfelt appreciation and love to my siblings, who have always supported and cheered me on. A very special thanks to my sister, Swati, who believes in me more than I believe in myself. She has been my biggest cheerleader, celebrating my successes and uplifting me in difficult moments. Finally, my most heartfelt gratitude goes to my life partner, Rohit, who has been an integral part of both my life and this thesis. His persistent support, patience, and understanding have

been my greatest source of strength. From offering words of encouragement during moments of doubt to celebrating every milestone with me, his presence has made this journey more meaningful and fulfilling.

I offer my deepest gratitude to the divine forces that guide me, who have blessed me with strength, wisdom, and perseverance. Finally, I extend my sincere gratitude to everyone who has supported me in one way or another throughout this journey. This thesis is not just a culmination of my efforts but a reflection of the collective support, wisdom, and encouragement of so many incredible individuals. I am truly grateful to have had such wonderful people alongside me, and I will cherish this journey forever.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact worldwide, not only due to its acute effects but also because of its long-term health consequences, particularly neurological and cognitive impairments. Many individuals who have recovered from COVID-19 continue to experience symptoms such as cognitive dysfunction, memory deficits, attention deficits, fatigue, insomnia, and brain fog, collectively termed as post-COVID syndrome (PCS). Despite increasing recognition of these persistent symptoms, the neurobiological mechanisms underlying PCS are still poorly understood. This thesis systematically investigates the long-term impact of COVID-19 on brain structure, white matter microstructure, functional connectivity, and cerebral blood flow using an exploratory multi-sequence Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) approach. A controlled cross-sectional study was conducted, involving a cohort of COVID-19 recovered patients (CRPs) and a matched group of healthy controls (HCs). Participants underwent a comprehensive MRI scan session, including T1-weighted MRI, diffusion-weighted imaging (DWI), resting-state functional MRI (rs-fMRI), and Arterial Spin Labeling (ASL) imaging. These images were analysed to investigate the morphology, microstructure, function, and perfusion in the brain, respectively.

T1-weighted imaging was employed to assess morphological changes in cortical and subcortical regions. Macro-scale analyses highlighted volumetric changes in subcortical components of the basal ganglia and the limbic system. Morphometric analyses, including voxel-based morphometry (VBM) and surface-based morphometry (SBM), revealed significant gray matter volume reduction and cortical thickness alterations in several brain regions, including the orbitofrontal cortex, medial prefrontal cortex, and the superior temporal gyrus. Further, analyses of white matter microstructure using DWI revealed significant alterations in the CRPs. Tract-Based Spatial Statistics (TBSS) and Automated Fiber Quantification (AFQ) revealed significant white matter disruptions in CRPs, particularly in the uncinate fasciculus,

cingulum bundle, inferior longitudinal fasciculus, and the inferior fronto-occipital fasciculus. Fixel-Based Analysis (FBA) was employed to study and quantify white matter microstructure at the sub-voxel level using fiber density and cross-sectional measures, highlighting changes in the tracts of the limbic system. These findings show that COVID-19 has a significant impact on the integrity of major white matter tracts that could be linked with cognitive processing, memory, and emotion in the brain.

Functional connectivity alterations were examined using resting-state fMRI, focusing on large-scale brain networks. Independent Component Analysis (ICA) and thalamocortical functional connectivity analyses revealed significant disruptions in the default mode network (DMN), salience network, and thalamocortical connectivity of mediodorsal thalamic nuclei in CRPs. Reduced functional connectivity within the DMN, particularly between the posterior cingulate cortex, medial prefrontal cortex, and the caudate nucleus, was observed, which could be associated with difficulties in sustained attention, multitasking, and lack of sleep. Additionally, altered thalamocortical interactions suggest disruptions in key circuits involved in memory recollection. Notably, it was observed that while functional dysfunction was prominent only in hospitalized CRPs, abnormalities in morphology and white matter integrity were consistent across survivors of mild and severe COVID-19 infections. Cerebral perfusion was assessed using ASL-MRI to evaluate alterations in blood flow, which could contribute to the neurological symptoms observed in PCS. Results of our study did not highlight a significant impact of COVID-19 on blood flow.

This research provides compelling evidence of morphological, microstructural, and functional changes in individuals recovering from COVID-19, supporting the hypothesis that the virus has long-term neurological effects. The integration of multi-sequence MRI techniques allows for a comprehensive understanding of brain health. Using the findings of this thesis, we proposed a series of hypotheses to facilitate future investigations on the underlying neurological mechanisms behind the characteristic symptoms of PCS, brain fog, fatigue, insomnia, and memory problems. The findings of this study have significant implications for public health, clinical management, and rehabilitation strategies aimed at mitigating the long-term neurological consequences of COVID-19. Future work should focus on longitudinal studies to determine whether these changes are progressive or reversible over time. Additionally, further investigations into the relationship between specific post-COVID symptoms and neuroimaging biomarkers will be essential to develop targeted interventions. This thesis lays the

foundation for future research exploring specific neural correlates of PCS and therapeutic strategies to support COVID-19 survivors experiencing persistent cognitive and neurological challenges.

सार

कोविड-19 महामारी ने पूरे विश्व पर गहरा प्रभाव डाला है, न केवल इसके तात्कालिक प्रभावों के कारण, बल्कि इसके दीर्घकालिक स्वास्थ्य प्रभावों के कारण भी, विशेष रूप से तंत्रिका तंत्र और संज्ञानात्मक क्षमताओं से जुड़ी हानियों के रूप में। कई ऐसे व्यक्ति जो कोविड-19 से स्वस्थ हो चुके हैं, वे अब भी संज्ञानात्मक गड़बड़ी, स्मृति की कमी, ध्यान केंद्रित करने में कठिनाई, थकान, अनिद्रा और मानसिक धुंध जैसे लक्षण अनुभव कर रहे हैं, जिन्हें सामूहिक रूप से "पोस्ट-कोविड संलक्षण" कहा जाता है। यद्यपि इन लक्षणों को लेकर जागरूकता बढ़ रही है, फिर भी इसके पीछे के जैविक और तंत्रिकीय तंत्र अभी स्पष्ट नहीं हो पाए हैं।

यह शोध प्रबंध कोविड-19 के दीर्घकालिक प्रभावों का मस्तिष्क की संरचना, श्वेत पदार्थ की सूक्ष्म संरचना, कार्यात्मक संपर्क और मस्तिष्कीय रक्त प्रवाह पर अध्ययन करता है, जिसमें बहु-माध्यमीय मैग्नेटिक रेजोनेंस इमेजिंग पद्धति का उपयोग किया गया है। एक नियंत्रित पार-अनुपातीय अध्ययन के अंतर्गत कोविड-19 से स्वस्थ हुए व्यक्तियों के एक समूह तथा उनके आयु और लिंग से मेल खाते स्वस्थ व्यक्तियों के एक अन्य समूह को शामिल किया गया। प्रतिभागियों के मस्तिष्क का व्यापक रूप से निरीक्षण किया गया, जिसमें टी-1 वजनित मैग्नेटिक रेजोनेंस इमेजिंग, प्रसरण वजनित छायाचित्रण, विश्राम अवस्था कार्यात्मक मैग्नेटिक रेजोनेंस इमेजिंग, और धमनीय स्पिन लेबलिंग इमेजिंग सम्मिलित थे। इन छवियों के माध्यम से मस्तिष्क की आकृति, सूक्ष्म संरचना, कार्य और रक्त प्रवाह की जानकारी प्राप्त की गई।

टी-1 वजनित छायाचित्रण का उपयोग मस्तिष्क की बाह्य और आंतरिक संरचनाओं में रूपात्मक परिवर्तनों के अध्ययन हेतु किया गया। विश्लेषण से मस्तिष्क के बेसल गैंग्लिया और लिम्बिक प्रणाली में आकार संबंधी बदलाव पाए गए। वॉक्सेल आधारित और सतही माप विश्लेषणों ने कई मस्तिष्क क्षेत्रों जैसे ऑर्बिटोफ्रंटल प्रीफ्रंटल प्रांतस्था और उच्चतर शंखीय गाइरस में ग्रे पदार्थ की मात्रा में कमी और प्रांतस्था की मोटाई में बदलाव दर्शाया।

प्रसरण वजनित छायाचित्रण के माध्यम से श्वेत पदार्थ की सूक्ष्म संरचना में भी उल्लेखनीय बदलाव पाए गए। तंतु-आधारित सांख्यिकीय विधियों और स्वचालित तंतु परिमाणन पद्धति द्वारा यह पता चला कि कोविड-19 से स्वस्थ हुए व्यक्तियों के मस्तिष्क में विशेषकर अनसिनेट संकुल, सिंगुलम समूह, निम्न अनुदैर्ध्य संकुल और निम्न फ्रंटो-ऑक्सिपिटल संकुल में श्वेत पदार्थ का क्षरण हुआ है। एक विशेष विश्लेषण पद्धति द्वारा इन तंतुओं में रेशों के घनत्व और आकार का भी सूक्ष्म स्तर पर आकलन किया गया, जिससे लिम्बिक तंत्र से संबंधित तंतुओं में परिवर्तन स्पष्ट हुआ। ये निष्कर्ष दर्शाते हैं कि कोविड-19 का मस्तिष्क के उन भागों पर महत्वपूर्ण प्रभाव है जो स्मृति, भावनाओं और सोचने

की प्रक्रिया में अहम भूमिका निभाते हैं।

विश्राम अवस्था कार्यात्मक छायाचित्रण के माध्यम से मस्तिष्क के प्रमुख कार्यात्मक तंत्रों में बदलाव का अध्ययन किया गया। स्वतंत्र घटक विश्लेषण और थैलेमस-प्रांतस्था कार्यात्मक संपर्क का विश्लेषण कर यह पाया गया कि कोविड-19 से स्वस्थ हुए व्यक्तियों में डिफॉल्ट मोड तंत्र, महत्व तंत्र, तथा थैलेमस और प्रांतस्था के बीच के संबंधों में गड़बड़ी है। डिफॉल्ट मोड तंत्र के भीतर, विशेष रूप से पश्च सिंगुलेट प्रांतस्था, मध्य प्रीफ्रंटल प्रांतस्था, और कॉडेट केंद्रक के बीच संपर्क में कमी देखी गई, जो निरंतर ध्यान बनाए रखने, बहुकार्य करने और नींद की कमी से जुड़ी समस्याओं से संबंधित हो सकती है। थैलेमस और प्रांतस्था के बीच संपर्क में बदलाव स्मृति पुनःस्मरण से जुड़ी कार्यप्रणालियों के विघटन को दर्शाते हैं। यह भी देखा गया कि कार्यात्मक गड़बड़ियाँ विशेष रूप से उन व्यक्तियों में थीं जिन्हें कोविड-19 के कारण अस्पताल में भर्ती किया गया था, जबकि संरचनात्मक और श्वेत पदार्थ की हानि सभी संक्रमण स्तरों (मामूली और गंभीर) में देखी गई। धमनीय स्पिन लेबलिंग तकनीक द्वारा मस्तिष्क में रक्त प्रवाह के आकलन से यह निष्कर्ष निकाला गया कि कोविड-19 का रक्त प्रवाह पर विशेष प्रभाव नहीं पड़ा है।

यह शोध कोविड-19 से उबरने वाले व्यक्तियों में मस्तिष्क की आकृति, संरचना और कार्य में स्थायी परिवर्तन के सशक्त प्रमाण प्रस्तुत करता है, जिससे यह धारणा बलवती होती है कि यह वायरस मस्तिष्क पर दीर्घकालिक तंत्रिकीय प्रभाव छोड़ता है। बहु-माध्यमीय मैग्नेटिक रेज़ोनेंस इमेजिंग तकनीकों के समन्वित उपयोग से मस्तिष्क स्वास्थ्य की समग्र समझ विकसित की जा सकती है। इस शोध के निष्कर्षों के आधार पर हमने यह प्रस्तावित किया है कि पोस्ट-कोविड संलक्षण में देखे जाने वाले लक्षण जैसे मानसिक धुंध, थकान, अनिद्रा और स्मृति समस्याएं संभावित रूप से मस्तिष्क में हुए जैविक और संरचनात्मक परिवर्तनों से जुड़ी हैं।

इस अध्ययन के निष्कर्ष सार्वजनिक स्वास्थ्य नीतियों, चिकित्सा प्रबंधन और पुनर्वास रणनीतियों के लिए अत्यंत महत्वपूर्ण हैं, जिनका उद्देश्य कोविड-19 के दीर्घकालिक तंत्रिकीय प्रभावों को कम करना है। आगे के शोधों को इन परिवर्तनों की दीर्घकालिक प्रवृत्ति और संभावित पुनर्प्राप्ति की संभावना का मूल्यांकन करने के लिए अनुवर्ती अध्ययन के रूप में किया जाना चाहिए। इसके साथ ही विशेष पोस्ट-कोविड लक्षणों और मस्तिष्क छायाचित्रण से प्राप्त संकेतकों के बीच संबंधों पर और अधिक शोध करना आवश्यक होगा ताकि लक्षित उपचार पद्धतियाँ विकसित की जा सकें। यह शोध प्रबंध उन उपचारात्मक उपायों की खोज की नींव रखता है, जो उन कोविड-19 उत्तरजीवियों की सहायता कर सकते हैं जो दीर्घकालिक संज्ञानात्मक और तंत्रिकीय समस्याओं का सामना कर रहे हैं।

Contents

Certificate	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	v
सार	viii
List of Figures	xiv
List of Tables	xxii
Abbreviations	xxiv
1 Introduction	1
1.1 General Introduction	1
1.2 Background	5
1.2.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic	5
1.2.2 The Post-COVID Syndrome (PCS)	5
1.2.3 Magnetic Resonance Imaging	6
1.3 Review of Literature	8
1.4 Research Gaps	11
1.5 Motivation	12
1.6 Thesis Objectives	14
1.7 Scope of the Thesis	14
1.8 Organisation of the Thesis	16

2	Study Design	19
2.1	Ethics Statement	19
2.2	Subject Recruitment	19
2.3	Data Collection	20
2.3.1	History and Symptoms	21
2.3.2	MRI Acquisition	22
2.3.3	Post-COVID Experience	23
2.4	Preliminary Analyses	25
2.4.1	COVID-19 Symptoms	26
2.4.2	Post-COVID-19 Symptoms	26
2.4.3	Infection Severity	28
3	Long-Term Impact of COVID-19 on Brain Morphology	31
3.1	Introduction	31
3.2	Cohort Demographics	33
3.3	Analysis of Brain Morphology	33
3.3.1	Whole-Brain Morphological Features	34
3.3.2	ROI-Based Morphological Features	35
3.3.3	Statistical Analysis	39
3.3.4	Results	40
3.4	Voxel-Based Morphometry	43
3.4.1	Methodology	44
3.4.2	Statistical Analysis	46
3.4.3	Results	47
3.5	Surface Based Morphometry	48
3.5.1	Data Processing	49
3.5.2	Statistical Analysis	49
3.5.3	Results	50
3.6	Discussion	54
4	Long-Term Impact of COVID-19 on White Matter Microstructure	57
4.1	Introduction	57
4.2	Analysis of Diffusion Weighted Images	59

4.2.1	Quality Check	59
4.2.2	Pre-Processing of DWIs	59
4.3	Tract-Based Spatial Statistics	61
4.3.1	Analysis Pipeline	62
4.3.2	Results	64
4.4	Automated Fiber Quantification Tractography	71
4.4.1	Methodology	71
4.4.2	Results	75
4.5	Fixel-Based Analysis	78
4.5.1	Methodology	78
4.5.2	Results and Discussions	82
4.6	Structural Connectomics using Graph Theory	86
4.6.1	Structural Connectivity	86
4.6.2	Methodology	86
4.6.3	Results	91
4.7	Discussion	91
4.7.1	Common Pitfalls in Interpreting Diffusion-Based Metrics	92
4.7.2	Microstructural Changes in CRPs	93
5	Long-Term Impact of COVID-19 on Resting State Brain Function	96
5.1	Introduction	96
5.2	Cohort Demographics	97
5.3	Analysis of Resting-State Networks	98
5.3.1	Methodology	98
5.3.2	Statistical Analysis	103
5.3.3	Results	105
5.4	Thalamocortical Functional Connectivity	108
5.4.1	Methodology	110
5.4.2	Statistical Analysis	111
5.4.3	Results	112
5.5	Discussion	119

6	Long-Term Impact of COVID-19 on Cerebral Blood Flow	122
6.1	Introduction	122
6.2	Analysis of Cerebral Blood Flow	124
6.2.1	Cohort Demographics	124
6.2.2	The Oxford ASL Pipeline	124
6.2.3	Data Processing	125
6.2.4	Statistical Analysis	126
6.2.5	Results	127
6.3	Discussion	127
7	Discussion and Conclusion	129
7.1	Findings Across MRI Modalities	130
7.2	Discussion	133
7.2.1	Attention Deficits	134
7.2.2	Fatigue	137
7.2.3	Memory Issues	138
7.2.4	Insomnia	139
7.3	Conclusion	140
7.4	Limitations	141
7.5	Future Work	143
	Bibliography	144
	List of Publications	171
	Biography	173

List of Figures

2.1	A flow chart presenting the process of recruitment of subjects for this study .	21
2.2	Participant recruitment questionnaire for symptoms during the COVID-19 infection.	22
2.3	Questionnaire used to survey (i) the impact of fatigue on the various life spheres of the participants (Part 1), and (ii) the experience of the participant with common post-COVID symptoms (Part 2) (<i>Reuse Rights Obtained</i>)	24
2.4	Symptoms experienced by COVID-19 Recovered Patients during SARS-CoV-2 Infection. Percentage out of 67 CRPs surveyed.	27
2.5	Post-COVID symptoms experienced by COVID-19 Recovered Patients Percentage out of 59 CRPs surveyed.	29
2.6	Comparison of common Post-COVID Symptoms experienced by COVID-19 Recovered Participants (CRPs) and Healthy Controls (HCs). Percentage out of 59 CRPs and 27 HCs surveyed.	30
3.1	Steps involved in data processing for analysis of brain morphology at the whole-brain level	36
3.2	Steps involved in data processing for analysis of brain morphology using specific Regions of Interest (ROIs)	38
3.3	Distribution of volume of regions that showed significant differences between the COVID-19 Recovered Participants (CRPs) and Healthy Controls (HCs) ($p_{FDR} < 0.05$)	41
3.4	Distribution of volume of regions that showed a significant effect of infection severity among Healthy Controls (HCs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) ($p_{FDR} < 0.05$).	42

3.5	Flowchart representing the data processing steps for the Voxel-Based Morphometry analysis of T1-weighted MRI.	46
3.6	Significant clusters that highlight the effect of infection severity on voxel-based grey matter volume. (A) Post-hoc comparison of Healthy Controls (HCs) and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) highlighted a significant cluster in the orbitofrontal cortex ($p_{FWE} < 0.05$, HC > HP), and (B) the post-hoc comparison of HPs with Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs) also highlighted a cluster in the orbitofrontal cortex ($p_{FWE} < 0.05$, NHP > HP).	48
3.7	Flow chart representing the data processing steps taken for Surface-Based Morphometry analysis on T1-weighted MRI. Key: GM = Grey Matter, GLM = Generalized Linear Model, FDR = False Detection Rate.	50
3.8	Significant clusters obtained upon comparison of surface-based morphological metrics between Healthy Controls (HCs) and COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs). (A) A cluster was observed in the paracingulate and medial superior frontal cortex with a significant difference in cortical thickness ($p_{FDR} < 0.05$, HC>CRP), and (B) a significant difference in cortical volume was observed in the right superior temporal gyrus and parts of the insular cortex ($p_{FDR} < 0.05$, HC>CRP).	52
3.9	Significant clusters that highlight the effect of infection severity on surface-based morphological metrics in Healthy Controls (HCs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs). Post-hoc comparison of the cohorts highlighted the following clusters ($p_{FDR} < 0.05$) (A) Significant differences in cortical thickness between HCs and HPs in the medial left prefrontal cortex (HC>HP), (B) significant differences in cortical volume between HCs and HPs in the left medial prefrontal cortex and the right primary motor cortex (HC>HP), (C) significant differences in cortical thickness between NHPs and HCs in the medial prefrontal and superior frontal cortex (HC>NHP), and (D) significant differences in cortical volume between NHPs and HCs in the right insular cortex (HC>NHP).	53
4.1	Flowchart representing the key steps involved in the pre-processing of Diffusion-weighted MRI	61

4.2	Flowchart representing the data processing steps taken for analysis of diffusion-weighted MRI (DWI) using the Tract-Based Spatial Statistics (TBSS) method. Key: FA = Fractional Anisotropy	63
4.3	Significant clusters of fractional anisotropy (FA) differences between healthy controls (HCs) and COVID-19 recovered patients (CRPs) were identified via TBSS ($p_{corr} < 0.05$). (A) HCs exhibited higher FA than CRPs in both the right and left inferior fronto-occipital fasciculi (HC>CRP). (B) Significantly elevated FA in CRPs was observed in the bilateral internal capsules (HC<CRP), the splenium of the corpus callosum (HC<CRP), and the left superior longitudinal fasciculus (SLF) (HC<CRP).	65
4.4	Clusters observed showing significant differences in Mean Diffusivity (MD) between the Healthy Controls (HCs) and COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs) using Tract-Based Spatial Statistics (TBSS) ($p_{corr} < 0.05$). Significant differences in MD were observed in the splenium of the corpus callosum, right inferior fronto-occipital fasciculus, left external capsule, left cingulum, and the forceps major tract (HC>CRP).	66
4.5	Clusters demonstrating the impact of infection severity on fractional anisotropy (FA) were identified at a corrected threshold of $p_{corr} < 0.05$. In post-hoc analyses comparing healthy controls (HCs) to hospitalized patients (HPs), (A) HPs showed significantly lower FA in the left anterior thalamic radiation and portions of the left forceps minor (HC > HP). (B) In contrast, HPs exhibited higher FA than HCs in several white-matter tracts, including the splenium of the corpus callosum, bilateral internal capsules, superior corona radiata, left superior longitudinal fasciculus, and the posterior segments of the inferior fronto-occipital fasciculus (HC < HP).	68
4.6	Significant clusters that highlight the effect of infection severity on Fractional Anisotropy (FA) ($p_{corr} < 0.05$). Post-hoc comparisons between Healthy Controls (HCs) and Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs) showed a significant increase in FA values in NHPs in the forceps major, splenium of corpus callosum, right and left inferior fronto-occipital fasciculus, the left superior longitudinal fasciculus, cingulum, and the left anterior thalamic radiation (NHP>HC). . .	69

4.7	Significant clusters that highlight the effect of infection severity on Mean Diffusivity ($p_{corr} < 0.05$). Post-hoc comparisons between Healthy Controls (HCs) and Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs) showed a significant decrease in MD values in NHPs in the right inferior fronto-occipital fasciculus (HC>NHP).	70
4.8	Significant clusters that highlight the effect of infection severity on Mean Diffusivity ($p_{corr} < 0.05$). Post-hoc comparisons between Healthy Controls (HCs) and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) showed a significant decrease in MD values in HPs in left inferior fronto-occipital fasciculus, left inferior longitudinal fasciculus, forceps major, and the left superior longitudinal fasciculus (HC>HP).	70
4.9	Flowchart representing the data processing steps taken for the analysis of diffusion-weighted MRI (DWI) using Automated Fiber Quantification (AFQ) method. Key: FA = Fractional Anisotropy, MD = Mean Diffusivity, ACPC = Anterior Commissure/Posterior Commissure, HC = Healthy Controls, CRP = COVID-19 Recovered Patient, FDR = False Detection Rate.	74
4.10	Distribution of diffusion metrics of tracts that showed a significant difference between Healthy Controls (HCs) and COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs) ($p_{FDR} < 0.05$). Key: L. = Left, R. = Right, FA = Fractional Anisotropy, MD = Mean Diffusivity, AD = Axial Diffusivity, RD = Radial Diffusivity.	76
4.11	Distribution of diffusion metrics of tracts that showed a significant effect of infection severity amongst Healthy Controls (HCs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) ($p_{FDR} < 0.05$). Key: L. = Left, R. = Right, FA = Fractional Anisotropy, MD = Mean Diffusivity, AD = Axial Diffusivity, RD = Radial Diffusivity, FDR = False Detection Rate.	77
4.12	Flowchart representing the data processing steps involved in Fixel-Based Analysis (FBA) of diffusion-weighted MRI (DWI). Key:FD = Fiber Density; FC = Fiber Cross-Section; FOD = Fiber Orientation Distribution; FDC = Fiber Density and Cross-section, WM = White Matter, FWE = Family-wise Error Rate.	82

4.13	Regions that showed significant differences in Fiber Density (FD) between the Healthy Controls (HCs) and COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs) ($p_{FWE} < 0.01$). Significantly reduced FD in CRPs (CRP<HC) was observed in the Inferior Longitudinal Fasciculus (ILF), right Arcuate Fasciculus (R-AF), and the Corticospinal Tract (CST).	83
4.14	Regions that showed significant differences in Fiber Density (FD) between the Healthy Controls (HCs) and COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs) superimposed on the study-specific template ($p_{FWE} < 0.01$). (A) Coronal slices of the brain show that significantly increased FD in CRPs (CRP>HC) was observed in the perigenual Corpus Callosum (Co.C) and the frontal terminal of the uncinate fasciculus (UF). (B) Sagittal slices of the brain highlight a significant increase in FD (CRP>HC) in the temporal terminal of the right UF.	84
4.15	Regions that showed significant differences in log Fiber Cross-Section (log-FC) between the Healthy Controls (HCs) and COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs) superimposed on the study-specific template ($p_{FWE} < 0.01$). Significantly increased log-FC in CRPs (CRP>HC) was observed in the dense crossing connections from the right uncinate fasciculus (UF) and the fornix. .	85
4.16	Regions that showed significant differences in Fiber Density and Cross-Section (FDC) values between the Healthy Controls (HCs) and COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs) superimposed on the study-specific template ($p_{FWE} < 0.01$). Significantly increased FDC in CRPs (CRP>HC) was observed in the dense crossing connections from the right uncinate fasciculus (UF) and the fornix. .	85
4.17	Flowchart representing the data processing steps involved in the graph theoretical analysis of structural connectivity derived using diffusion-weighted MRI (DWI). Key: GM = Grey Matter, WM = White Matter, FOD = Fiber Orientation Distribution, DWI = Diffusion Weighted Image, SIFT = Spherical-deconvolution Informed Filtering of Tractogram.	88
5.1	Flowchart representing the data processing steps involved in the analysis of resting-state fMRI (rs-fMRI) data using Independent Component Analysis (ICA). Key: RSN = Resting State Networks.	103

5.2	Fourteen Resting State Networks (RSN) were identified by comparing the independent components (ICs) with network maps from the Yeo Atlas (https://surfer.nmr.mgh.harvard.edu/fswiki/CorticalParcellation_Yeo2011). The identified ICs are presented here with the best-matched RSN from the atlas. The values of corresponding correlation coefficients are provided in parentheses. Key: N/w = Network	105
5.3	Significant clusters that highlight the effect of infection severity on the functional connectivity (FC) of the anterior default mode network (DMN-A1 and DMN-A2) with the brain amongst Healthy Controls (HCs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) ($p_{corr} < 0.05$). (A) Post-hoc comparison of HCs and HPs showed a significant cluster in the left posterior insular cortex (DMN-A1, HC>HP). (B) Post-hoc comparison of HPs and NHPs also highlighted a cluster in the left posterior insular cortex (DMN-A1, NHP>HP). (C) Post-hoc comparison of NHPs and HCs showed a significant cluster in the dorsal visual association cortex (DMN-A2, NHP>HC).	107
5.4	Significant clusters that highlight the effect of infection severity on the functional connectivity (FC) of the posterior default mode network (DMN-C) with the brain amongst Healthy Controls (HCs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) ($p_{corr} < 0.05$). (A) Post-hoc comparison of NHPs and HPs highlighted clusters in the precuneus, posterior cingulate, and the inferior frontal cortex (NHP>HP), and (B) post-hoc comparison of HCs and HPs showed a significant cluster in the right caudate and the left thalamus (HC>HP).	108
5.5	Significant clusters that highlight the effect of infection severity on the functional connectivity (FC) of the somatomotor network (SMN) with the brain amongst Healthy Controls (HCs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) ($p_{corr} < 0.05$). (A) Post-hoc comparison of the FC of the SMN-A in the NHPs and HPs highlighted a significant cluster in the left postcentral gyrus (NHP>HP), and (B) Post-hoc comparison of the FC of the SMN-B in the NHPs and HPs highlighted a significant cluster in the left and right caudate, the right Heschl's and supramarginal gyri (NHP>HP).	109

5.6	Flowchart representing data processing steps involved in the analysis of thalamocortical functional connectivity using resting-state fMRI (rs-fMRI).	111
5.7	Regions that exhibit significant differences in functional connectivity (FC) with the left Medio-dorsal thalamic nucleus upon comparing Healthy Controls (HCs) and Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs) ($p_{FWE} < 0.05$). A cluster with increased FC in NHPs (NHP > HC) was observed in the left anterior cingulate cortex.	114
5.8	Regions that exhibit significant differences in functional connectivity (FC) with the left Medio-dorsal thalamic nucleus upon comparing Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs) and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) ($p_{FWE} < 0.05$). Clusters with increased FC in HPs (HP > NHP) were observed in the (A) right superior parietal cortex, (B) right angular gyrus, and (C) left cuneal cortex.	115
5.9	Regions that exhibit significant differences in functional connectivity (FC) with the left Medio-dorsal thalamic nucleus upon comparing Healthy Controls (HCs) and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) ($p_{FWE} < 0.05$). Clusters with increased FC in HPs (HP > HC) were observed in the (A) left inferior visual association cortex, (B) right supramarginal gyrus, angular gyrus, and fusiform gyrus, and (C) right visual association cortex.	116
5.10	Regions that exhibit significant differences in functional connectivity (FC) with the right Medio-dorsal thalamic nucleus upon comparing Healthy Controls (HCs) and Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs) ($p_{FWE} < 0.05$). A cluster with increased FC in NHPs (NHP > HC) was observed in the left anterior cingulate cortex.	117
5.11	Regions that exhibit significant differences in functional connectivity (FC) with the right Medio-dorsal thalamic nucleus upon comparing Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs) and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) ($p_{FWE} < 0.05$). Clusters with increased FC in HPs (HP > NHP) were observed in the (A) right superior parietal cortex, and (B) medial left dorsal visual association cortex.	117

5.12	Regions that exhibit significant differences in functional connectivity (FC) with the right Medio-dorsal thalamic nucleus upon comparing Healthy Controls (HCs) and Hospitalized Patients (HPs) ($p_{FWE} < 0.05$). Clusters with increased FC in HPs (HP > HC) were observed in the (A) left inferior visual association cortex, (B) right fusiform gyrus, and (C) bilateral primary visual cortex.	118
6.1	Flowchart representing the data processing steps involved in the analysis of Arterial Spin Labelling (ASL) MRI using the Bayesian Inference for Arterial Spin Labeling (BASIL) pipeline. Key: CBF = Cerebral Blood Flow, ROI = Region of Interest.	126
6.2	A sample map of Cerebral Blood Flow (CBF) of a representative Healthy Control (HC) registered to the standard MNI space obtained using the Bayesian Inference for Arterial Spin Labeling (BASIL) Pipeline.	127

List of Tables

2.1	Demographic details of the participants recruited for this study. The age distribution is represented using the “mean $\pm$ standard deviation” values. . . .	25
3.1	Summary of clusters observed showing significant differences in voxel-based grey matter volume among the Healthy Controls (HCs), COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs).	47
3.2	Summary of clusters observed showing significant differences in cortical thickness among the Healthy Controls (HCs), COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs).	51
3.3	Summary of clusters observed showing significant differences in cortical volume among the Healthy Controls (HCs), COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs).	51
5.1	Summary of clusters observed showing significant differences in resting-state functional connectivity among the Healthy Controls (HCs), COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs).	104
5.2	Summary of clusters observed showing significant differences in thalamocortical functional connectivity among the Healthy Controls (HCs), COVID-19 Recovered Patients (CRPs), Non-Hospitalized Patients (NHPs), and Hospitalized Patients (HPs). Key: MDN = Medio-Dorsal Nucleus.	113
7.1	Summary of the key findings from analysis of brain morphology in CRPs . . .	133
7.2	Summary of the key findings from analysis of brain function in CRPs	134

7.3	Summary of the key findings from analysis of white matter microstructure in CRPs	135
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List of Abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CRP	COVID-19 Recovered Patients
HC	Healthy Controls
MRI	Magnetic Resonance Imaging
ROI	Region of Interest
RT-PCR	Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
WHO	World Health Organization
GM	Gray Matter
WM	White Matter
CSF	Cerebrospinal Fluid
FA	Fractional Anisotropy
MD	Mean Diffusivity
AD	Axial Diffusivity
RD	Radial Diffusivity
TBSS	Tract-Based Spatial Statistics
AFQ	Automated Fiber Quantification
FBA	Fixel-Based Analysis
CBF	Cerebral Blood Flow
ASL	Arterial Spin Labeling
PCASL	Pseudo-Continuous Arterial Spin Labeling
DARTEL	Diffeomorphic Anatomical Registration Through Exponentiated Lie Algebra
FWE	Family-Wise Error
FDR	False Discovery Rate