

"Tracing the Roots and Impact of International Migration from Punjab"

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Abstract

Migration has been an integral part of human history, with people moving across regions and borders for a multitude of reasons. India, with its diverse population and complex socio-political landscape, has long been involved in various waves of migration. However, the intensity and patterns of migration have varied significantly across different states. Punjab, in particular, stands out as one of the leading contributors to international migration from India. This paper tracks the historical roots of the International Migration along with social, political, economic reasons behind it and its impact at various levels with special reference to the state of Punjab. The survey conducted in this regard revealed that proportion of male NRIs is greater than female NRIs. Canada is still one of the most popular country to migrate to when it comes to Punjab's youth. Majority of individuals moved abroad after completing their class 12th. This trend has led to an increase in concepts like 'contract marriages' and 'reverse dowries'. Individuals agreed on facing some problems while living abroad but they firmly refused to the thought of moving back to India. Although the present trend is somewhat to showcase a higher social status but still it is high time that the government of the state as well as of the country do serious policy reforms to cater the needs of the youth and effectively utilize the significant amount of human resource present in the country.

Keywords: International Migration, Punjab Migration Trends, Immigration Policies, Globalisation and Migration, Historical Migration Patterns.

Introduction

Migration in common language means the movement of people from one area to another. Generally, it involves a change in the residence or geographical location. It can be both voluntary and involuntary and happens for various reasons, such as financial opportunities, seeking asylum or pursuing a better quality of life. It can be internal when happens within a country or external when moving abroad.¹

Migration involves the movement of skilled workforce from the lesser developed countries to the more developed countries. Migration is known to be a global phenomenon. It has significantly helped the developed countries by providing an abundant amount of qualified and educated labour. As a consequence of which the lesser developed countries suffer due to labour shortage. The pillars of country's strength, the youth of the country move to other countries leaving behind an irreplaceable gap. Educated and qualified people, when not given employment, suitable wages, etc. begin to get attracted towards the industrialized countries where there are better opportunities for work, better quality of life and living standards.²

History of Migration

The historical process of migration has taken place at different times and has possessed various forms. Studying it from the beginning of the 18th century, migration was seen as the movement of the convicts from the Great Britain, slaves from Africa, servants, indentured labourers from Europe. Practices such as slavery and indentured labour were fuelled from countries like India, China, etc. People from these countries were transported to other countries to work in mines and plantation fields. The advent of 19th century witnessed increase in the magnitude of migration. Starting in the late 19th century, after the First World War, the extent of migration speeded up from Europe to the other parts of the world. The period between the First World War and the Second World War observed a downfall in the rate of migration. However, the time period after Second World War saw a significant increase in the rate of cross border migration. With the passage of time the nature of the international migration has changed. In the late 20th century, globalisation has served as a major force behind the changed nature of migration.³

Migration history of India from 19th century

¹What is migration? Available at: <https://www.worksheetsplanet.com/what-is-migration/>
(last visited on January 7, 2025)

²SarishBatra, Lavleen Kaur AndVipan Kamboj "International Migration from Central Punjab: Push and pull factors" *Researchgate Journal of Agricultural Development and Policy* 42 (2022)

³Dr.ShuchiKapuria, Dr.DeveshBirwal "International Migration from Punjab: Trends and Challenges" 4
(1) *Researchpaedia* 1-2(2017).

India has a long history of migration and emigration and is the world's largest percentage of global migrants. The majority of international migrants with ancestral ties to India can trace their migration from the beginning of the colonial rule, when many Indians were compelled to relocate themselves to labour on plantations and in hazardous construction sites. In 1833, a major shift occurred when slavery was abolished across most of the British Empire, fundamentally altering the colonial system by replacing slavery with indentured labour. From the past eight decades, millions of bonded Indian labourers had been relocated to colonies across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. This process of migration further escalated with the India's partition with Pakistan in the year 1947 which fuelled the movement of millions of migrants throughout South Asia.

So the historical roots of migration with respect to India can be divided into three periods- first period associated with the colonial era including slavery and indentured labour; second period where emigration was a part of the anti-colonial struggle and later the downfall of the colonial rule and partition of the country; third period is present times where migration is majorly the result of desires to get better employment.⁴

Digging back into the history we will be able to identify the reasons behind India's historical association with migration. Major motivations which led to India being one of the countries with such a giant number of emigrants include slavery and indentured labour during the colonial rule, partition and post-war movement, labour migration to Middle East and West, etc. These reasons comprise of the history behind the process of migration of the modern India.

Colonial Rule and Indentured labour

As slavery got abolished in the United Kingdom and subsequently in other nations as France and the Netherlands, the world began to face labour shortage. Such problem was more significant in plantation works. The demand for labour increased worldwide. Slavery got substituted with indentured labour and Britishers then began to exploit Indians to fulfil the labour demand especially in sugar production as it faced significant drop in the agricultural output. Indentured servitude is a type of contract labour where a person works for an employer without any pay.⁵ Following the end of slavery, the British employed indentured servitude various colonies, including the West Indies, Africa and South East Asia. Nearly 2 million Indian indentured workers were transported to British colonies from 1834 to the end

⁴Origin of World's Largest Migrant Population, India Seeks to Leverage Immigration, available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/india-migration-country-profile> (last visited on January 17, 2025)

⁵Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire : capital, slavery, and Indian indentured labor migration in the British Caribbean I* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1998)

of World War I. Thus the demand for new workforce was met with the forceful relocation of Indians and others to distant foreign lands where their living conditions saw no betterment.

Partition and the Post-war movement

The year 1947 witnessed the collapse of the British empire in India. The fall of the empire brought with itself dramatic consequences. At midnight of August 15, 1947, the former British-Indian territory was divided into two independent nations - India and Pakistan, resulting largest forced migrations in history, during which more than 20 million people relocated forcefully from their home. Religious lines were the basis of the partition which led to a large number of refugee movements. The most severely affected was the province of Punjab, which alone witnessed the displacement of 12 million people. Horrific violence happened in the region of Punjab.

The decades long migration of Indians especially from Punjab to the United Kingdom helped forge strong kinship and friendship ties. As the United Kingdom was experiencing labour shortage at that time, it was easier for Indians to move there. Later on with the change in the laws, it became comparatively much harder for Indians to migrate to the United Kingdom. Despite all of this, India continued to be the most common country of birth among immigrants living in the United Kingdom as of 2020.

Labour Migration to Middle East and West

Third wave of Indian emigration was to Gulf as oil production and construction work boomed in 1970s. Indians actively participated in the hope of getting better employment and a quality life. Those who lacked any sort of post-secondary education picked up retail and construction work such as carpentry, masonry, construction labourer, electrician, etc. while the ones who were learnt and educated with top degrees began working in healthcare. Kerala, a South-Indian state, reported highest number of emigration to Middle East.⁶

However, if we consider the present scenario of the country, a significant number of Indians are leaving the country with a desire to avail better economic opportunities, education, lifestyle, safety, tax regime, etc. Also people think of it as a part of their status building in the society.

Magnitude of Migration in recent times

As of 2020, the worldwide total of international migrants stood at approximately 281 million, accounting for 3.6 percent of the global population. Overall, the estimated number of

⁶Prakash C. Jain and Ginu Zacharia Oommen (eds.), *South Asian Migration to Gulf Countries: History, Policies, Development* (Routledge, Abington, Oxfordshire and New York, 2016)

international migrants has increased over the past five decades. The total estimated 281 million people living in a country other than their countries of birth in 2020 was 128 million more than in 1990 and over three times the estimated number in 1970.⁷

Among countries, India had the largest population in the world with over 18 million people living outside the country in 2020. According to the 'International Migration 2020 Highlights', by the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). Indian population is scattered among the United Arab Emirates (3.5 million), the United States of America (2.7 million) and Saudi Arabia (2.5 million) thus becoming the countries hosting the largest number of migrants from India. Other countries having large numbers of Indians include Australia, Canada, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, and the United Kingdom.

Despite the pandemic, more than 0.7 million Indians migrated for work in 2020. The number increased to 1.3 million in 2022. Over the past several years, Canada has remained the top destination of Indian migrants, thanks to its accessible immigration pathways and migrant's friendly policies. According to the government data more than 1.6 million Indians have given up their citizenship since 2011, including 1,83,741 in 2022 alone. In 2021, around 1,63,370 Indians renounced their citizenship to acquire nationality elsewhere. The majority of these individuals choose citizenship in the United States (78,284), followed by Australia (23,533), Canada (21,597) and the United Kingdom (14,637).⁸

Indians indulged in top professions such as doctors, engineers, financial professionals prefer to move to the economically developed nations as the United States of America. India ranks no.1 in the number of emigrants with a post-secondary degree.

Indians are the no.1 recipient of the H-1B Visa granted by the United States of America to skilled workers all around the world. Indians in the United States are highly educated and even earn much higher than other foreigners and the U.S population.

India, today, is witnessing a large number of its population moving to other countries. New Delhi, the national capital of the country, tops the list with highest number of its population migrating to other countries. Himachal Pradesh and Punjab ranks second and third in the

⁷World Migration Report 2024, available at: <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/msite/wmr-2024-interactive/> (last visited on January 9, 2025)

⁸Indians are leaving the country in droves. Here's where they are headed and why, available at: <https://m.economictimes.com/nri/migrate/indians-are-leaving-the-country-in-droves-heres-where-they-are-headed-and-why/articleshow/96847173.cms#:~:text=More%20than%201.6%20million%20Indians,ET%20Online> (last visited on January 18, 2025)

list. Other states with high levels of external migration include Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana, Kerala, Tamil Nadu.

The attitude of a state's population towards migrating to other countries lies in their historical relations with the concept of migration as well as the present living conditions and mind-set of the people of that state. In this paper, we have discussed the history of migration with reference to Punjab, present-day conditions of the state, potential reasons behind it, challenges faced by the state itself.

Historical roots of Migration in Punjab

Located in the far north of India, Punjab shares its western border with Pakistani province of Punjab to its west, Jammu and Kashmir in north, Himachal Pradesh in the northeast. Haryana in the south and southeast and Rajasthan in the southeast.⁹

Shortly after being annexed, Punjab came to be seen as the showcase agricultural province of British India. Starting in the 1860's, land prices in the region rose sharply, By 1914, Punjab Supplied three-fifth of the Indian Army's recruits, even though the province accounted for only about 10 percent of British India's total population. During the World War I, Punjabi Sikhs made up a full quarter of India's armed forces. After completing their military services, many of these soldiers were among the first to look for job opportunities overseas. By the outbreak of world war II, the province contributed 3,00,000 Sikhs to the Indian army- roughly 48 percent of the force.¹⁰

In 1897, Punjabi soldiers under the leadership of Major Kadar Khan went to attend the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria in London. While coming back from there, they travelled some Canadian cities such as Ottawa, Vancouver, Montreal, etc. A large number of soldiers were from Punjab and were left fascinated with the foreign land of Canada. After returning to Hong Kong, they told their fellows about the abundant economic opportunities awaiting them in Canada. The Indian-British army of Hong Kong Regiment again visited Canada while coming back from England after attending the coronation ceremony of King Edward VII. Consequently, a significant number of Punjabis started migrating to Canada from 1902.

So, the causes of commencement of this migration were the availability of employment opportunities and high wages. Canadian Government appointed a Royal Commission under the direction of McKenzie who discovered the reasons for migrating to Canada from India. Report of 1907-08 revealed that increase in the distribution of pamphlets in rural areas by the

⁹Punjab State Report, available at: <https://search.app/vTCAKuvKGt2BSVseA> (last visited on January 23, 2025)

¹⁰Mohindra S. Chowdhry, *The Defence of Europe : by Sikh Soldiers in the Two World Wars* 206, 330 (Troubador Publishing Ltd. Leicester, UK, 2018)

industrialists of the British Columbia, activities of steamship of agents who wanted to make profit by selling tickets to Canada, imposition of head tax on Chinese migrants badly affected the migration of Chinese population so as a result of which the industrialists of British Columbia promoted migration from India in order to hire and get cheap labour. Primary pull factors initiating the migration were economic prosperity, abundance of wealth in the far distant lands.¹¹

Current scenario of migration in Punjab-

In the current times, due to an unusual high rate of migration in Punjab, major concern was regarding the socio-cultural milieu getting impacted. With huge rates of Punjabi youth migrating abroad, the fear of losing its culture has increased among state's population. Slow but continuous intermingling of cultures between Punjab and other states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh has now become a very possible outcome of this trend. It has led to a serious demographic shift in the state. A constant threat that internal migrants might completely fill the vacuum created by native Punjabis who have moved abroad, which only time will reveal that what price the natives will have to pay for this.¹²

Factors behind high migration rates in Punjab

Although a number of reasons are responsible for such high migration rates in Punjab, but here is a list of some push and pull factors that play a major role in it. These are-

1. Push factors-

- Lack of employment- Employment is one of the main issues from which not only Punjab but whole of the country suffers. Unemployment is thus playing a huge role pushing people to developed countries in the desire of better work opportunities there.
- Lower levels of economic development and lack of MNC's in Punjab- When it comes to the establishment of big business, corporate houses, attracting foreign companies to start their operations in the state, Punjab clearly lags behind in this race. Due to which the modern educated youth who have acquired prestigious degrees, are unable to get proportionate opportunities in Punjab.

¹¹AmritpalSingh, "Migration from Punjab to Canada in the first half of the 20th Century" 8 *International Journal of Novel Research and Development* 1-2 (2023).

¹²Shalini Sharma, Amit Guleria, Manjit Randhawa (2023) "A Study on Overseas Migration from Rural Punjab: Trends, Causes and Consequences" Department of Economics and Sociology, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana

- Lack of a visionary State Government- There have not been any visible efforts by any successive governments in Punjab to usher any sort of major development in the state.

2. Pull Factors-

- Strong tradition of migration- As previously highlighted in this paper also, Punjab has a strong and long history with migration. This serves as a major driving force behind the mindset of the youth towards settling in foreign countries.
- Availability of better jobs- Most of the state's youth is migrating abroad for better job prospects. There is higher availability of jobs and wages abroad as compared to India.
- Family and kinship network- A huge population of Punjab is settled abroad. So to join their immediate family or relatives, people are migrating to foreign countries.
- High standard of living- Independence, high standard of living, better life quality, new and open culture attract youth to settle abroad.
- Higher social status- Over the time, Punjab's mindset has been moulded in such a way that they feel settling abroad adds to their status in the society.¹³

Implications of Migration in Punjab

1. Positive implications- Migration from Punjab has several positive implications. These include increased income and improved living standards for migrants and their families, reduced unemployment in the region, and the potential for social and cultural exchange. Furthermore, remittances sent back home by migrants contribute to economic development and poverty reduction in their communities.
- Improved Living Standards: Remittances from migrants can significantly improve the quality of life for their families, allowing for better access to healthcare, education, and improved housing.
 - Reduced Unemployment: Migration can alleviate unemployment pressures in Punjab by providing job opportunities for individuals seeking better prospects elsewhere.
 - Social and Cultural Exchange: Migrants often interact with new cultures, customs, and languages, fostering a greater understanding and promoting social harmony.
 - Enhanced Education: Children of migrants may have access to better educational opportunities in their new locations, leading to improved human capital development.

¹³Dr. S.K Nayak, Dr.Jaswinder, "Migration of youth from Punjab to Developed countries: A critical analysis" 10 (1)*Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*2-4 (2023)

2.Negative Implications- Migration from Punjab to abroad has several negative implications. These include brain drain, social and cultural disruptions. Furthermore, the loss of a skilled workforce can hinder state's development, and migrants may face exploitation and poor living conditions in destination areas.

- Brain Drain:Punjab's youngsters are working hard to find ways to move abroad due to multiple reasons which lead to loss of potential workforce and capital.
- Reverse dowries: The growing commercialisation of education and migration has created a situation where women, who generally score higher marks in IELTS, are not only valued for their education but also as desirable marriage prospects. This has led to a rise in 'contract marriages' and 'reverse dowries'.
- Social and Cultural Disruption:Migration can disrupt traditional social structures and family dynamics, leading to potential social problems and cultural shifts in both sending and receiving communities.
- Increased Competition:The influx of migrants into urban areas can exacerbate competition for jobs, housing, and resources, potentially leading to social tensions and strain on infrastructure.
- Loss of Agricultural Workforce:Punjab's youth is migrating abroad due to which the main contributor to state's GDP is left vacant. It has led to a decline in the agricultural workforce, potentially affecting food production and land management.
- Erosion of Traditional Values: Migration can lead to a weakening of traditional social norms and values, particularly in rural areas, as in evident in case of Punjab's villages.

Research Gap

There are a number of studies available on International Migration with reference to state of Punjab but there is dearth of studies which comprise of an all-round, comprehensive study of the topic, including the history, magnitude, factors behind it, recent trends,its implications, along with primary researchand survey conducted in Punjab. The main purpose of this paper is to study the topic with a wide range of variables.

Objectives

The main objectives of this study are-

1. To analyse the reasons behind people wanting to migrate;
2. To analysewhich destination is being chosen by the majority and reasons behind it;
3. To analyse the lacking of our country and state which pushes people to move abroad.

Research Methodology

This research aims to examine the mind-set of the people choosing to migrate abroad and various factors playing a key role behind it. Primary data is used to meet the goal of the research. Data is gathered using a standard questionnaire in the form of Google Forms comprising of questions concerning the reason behind their decision to migrate abroad, reasons for choosing their destination country, problems faced by them, etc., to understand the mind-set of the people migrating to foreign countries.

Locale of the study and Sample Size

The study is conducted on population from various cities and villages of Punjab, who are now settled abroad. A sample size of 100 individuals has been chosen for conducting the survey out of which 57.5% are males and 42.5% are females.

Analysis

During the survey, a number of questions were asked from the individuals regarding their family's background, household income, problems that they face while in abroad, etc. These are some of the variables which have been investigated. The results related to these variables have been presented in form of pie charts which are shown below:

Figure 1: Timing of moving abroad

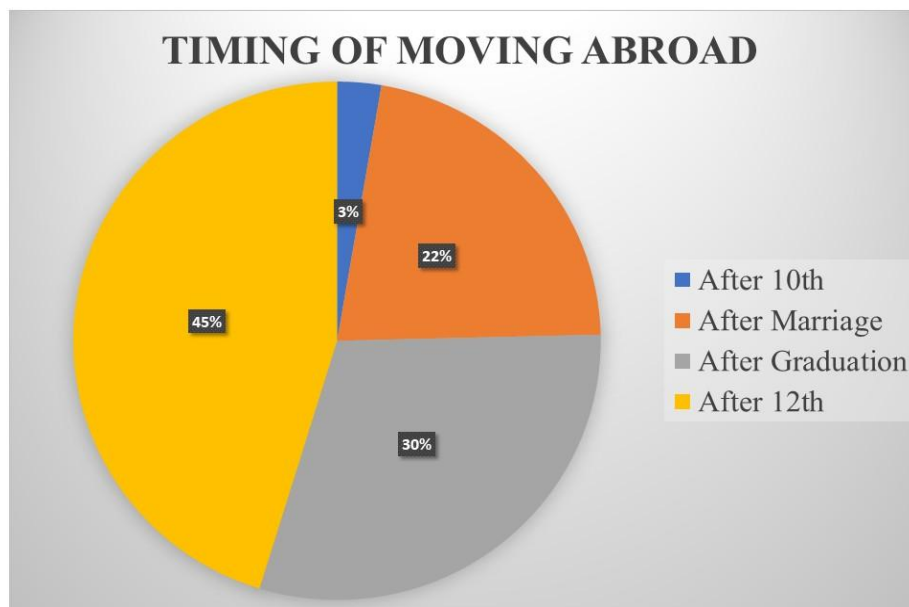


Figure 1 shows the time period after which an individual moved abroad. This has been categorized into 4 main categories, i.e after completion of class 10th, after marriage, after completing graduation and after class 12th. Majority of the individuals, that is around 45% had moved abroad after completing class 12th. While, 30% of them migrated after their graduation, 22% after getting married and only 3% after their class 10th. This result is a

reflection of two trends that are there among the Punjabi youth especially in rural areas, where youth have now made it a norm to move abroad after completing their schooling, which is why the number of visa consultancy services are increasing day by day. The other trend is that they prefer to get married to some NRI so that they can settle abroad.

Figure 2: Family background of the Migrant (while in India)

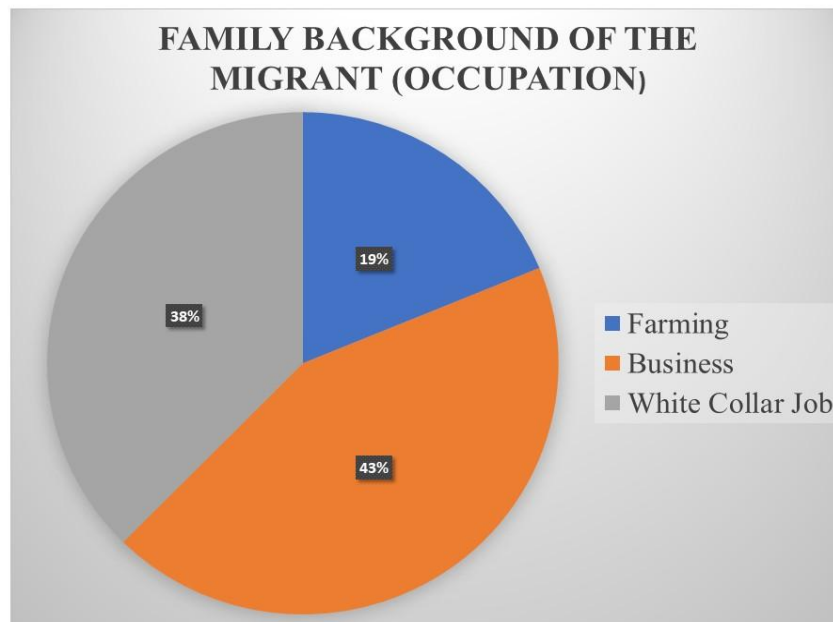


Figure 2 shows the family background of the migrant. This variable is to reflect the family income and occupation of the individual. It is broadly divided into 3 main categories, i.e Farming, Business and White collar jobs. 43% of the individuals are from business households, 38 % of them hail from the families who are involved in white collar jobs and 19% are from families involved in farming. This result reflects how a significant number of population is shifting away from farming.

Till 1990s, Punjab was India's third-richest state in terms of per capita income after Maharashtra and Haryana, but now has slipped to the 10th position with a plunge in agricultural growth, from 5% to less than 2% from 2010-2020.¹⁴

This issue is even more concerning as Punjab also lags behind in industrial and service sector development if we compare it to other neighbouring states like Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, etc.

¹⁴Lakhwinder Singh, Kesar Singh, et.al., *AgrarianDustress and Farmer Suicides in North India 6-8*, (Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon and Routledge, New York, 2016)

Figure 3: Monthly household income of the Migrant (while in India)

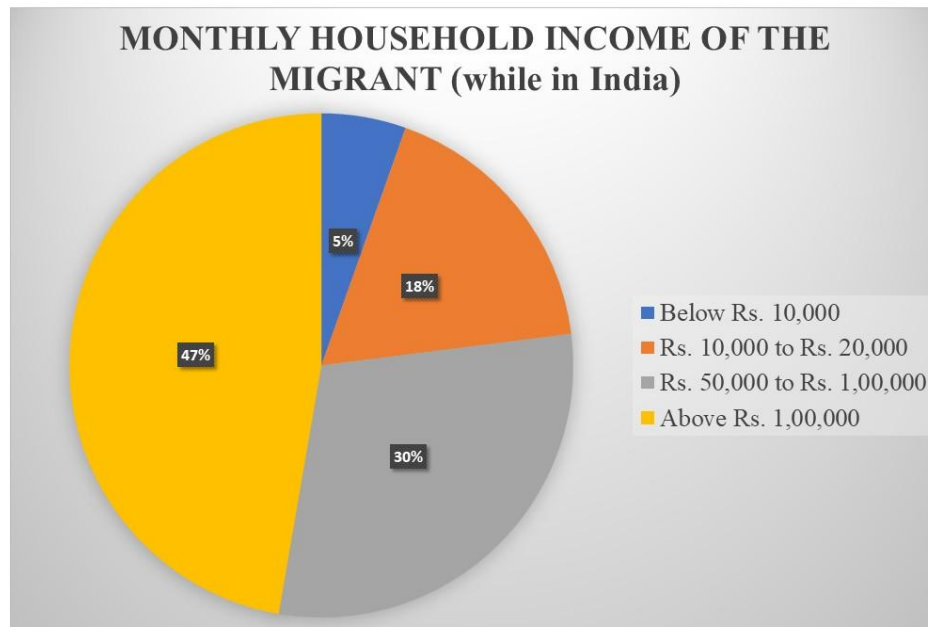


Figure 3 shows the monthly household income of the migrant while it was back in India. Although 47% of the individuals have their monthly household income of above Rs.1,00,000 and only 5% are from such households where monthly income is below Rs. 10,000. But this cannot be considered as the only reality of the society, as people even take hefty amounts of loan, mortgage and sell their belongings, in order to collect money to get their visas and move abroad.

A recent study highlights that Punjabis sold assets worth Rs. 5,636crore and borrowed Rs. 14,342crores to send their children abroad. This trend is particularly in the Doaba region, which has the highest percentage of households with family members overseas, as per a study by Punjab Agricultural University.¹⁵

¹⁵Punjab Witnesses a Steady Rise in Emigration- Punjab Agricultural University, available at: <https://share.google/QbWPUtLt6piffKI6y>(last visited on July 3, 2025)

Figure 4: Most preferred country for settling abroad

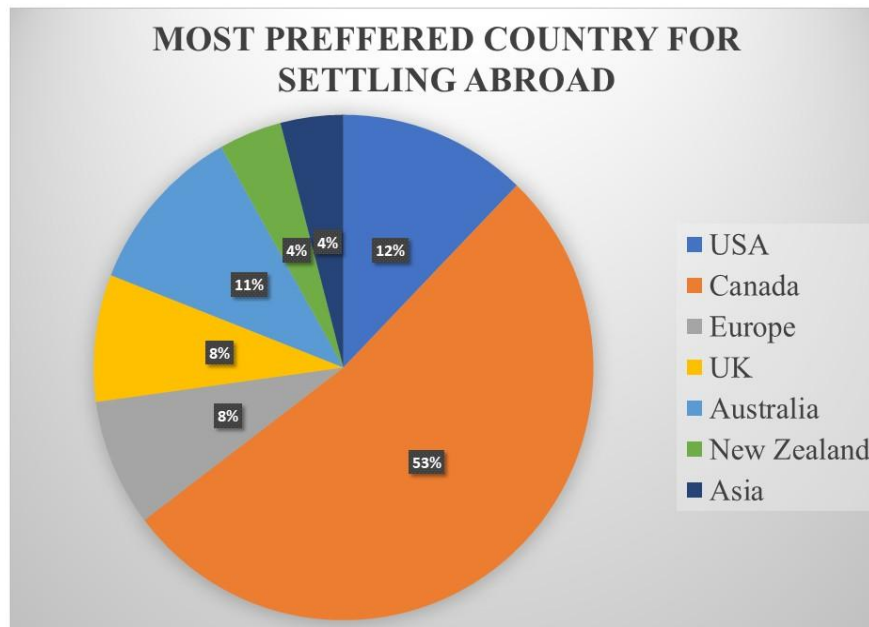


Figure 4 shows the most chosen country for moving abroad. More than half of the individuals, i.e. around 53%, had moved to Canada. This result is not astonishing at all when it comes to Punjab's youth. Historical roots, age old relations, easy visas (as it used to be in the past), kinship, etc. are some of the many reasons that pull Punjab's youth towards Canada.

A large number of Punjabi youth migrate abroad, with about 4.78 lakh people from January 2016 to 2021 for employment and 2.62 lakh students on study visas.¹⁶

Some of the other countries to which individuals had moved to include the USA, Australia, the UK, Europe, etc.

¹⁶Ranjit Singh, "The Great Punjab Migration to Canada, USA, UK & Australia Emptying Collges, Varsities & Festivities Minus the Youth" 06 *International Research Journal of Modernization in Engineering Technology and Science* 2 (2024)

Figure 5: Reason for leaving India

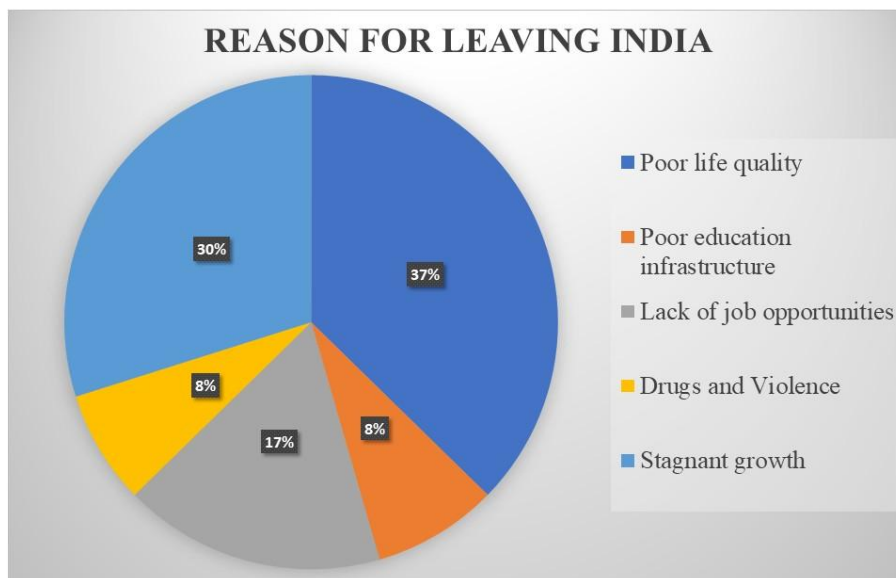


Figure 5 shows the major reason for which the individuals made the decision of leaving India and settling abroad. 37% individuals left India due to poor life quality, 30% of them left the country due to stagnant growth and 17% felt the lack of job opportunities as a reason pushing them to move abroad. However, it is an irony to see that only 8% of the individuals left the country due to poor educational infrastructure, when majority of them use study visas as a way to settle abroad.

Figure6: Whether the migrants face any problem living abroad?

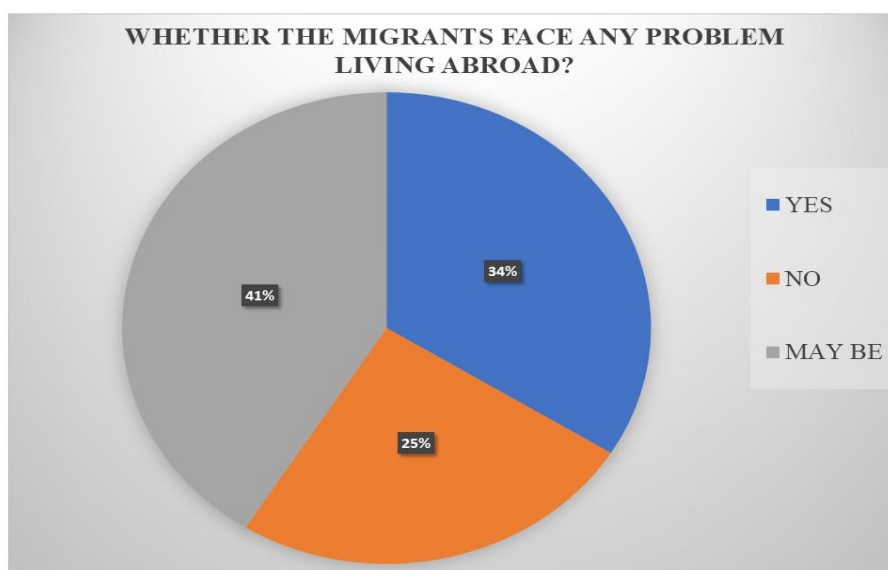


Figure 6 shows that 34% of the individuals agreed that they do face problems living abroad, 25% said they do not face any sort of issue and 41% of them said that they kind of face some problems living abroad.

Figure 7: Problems faced by migrants living abroad

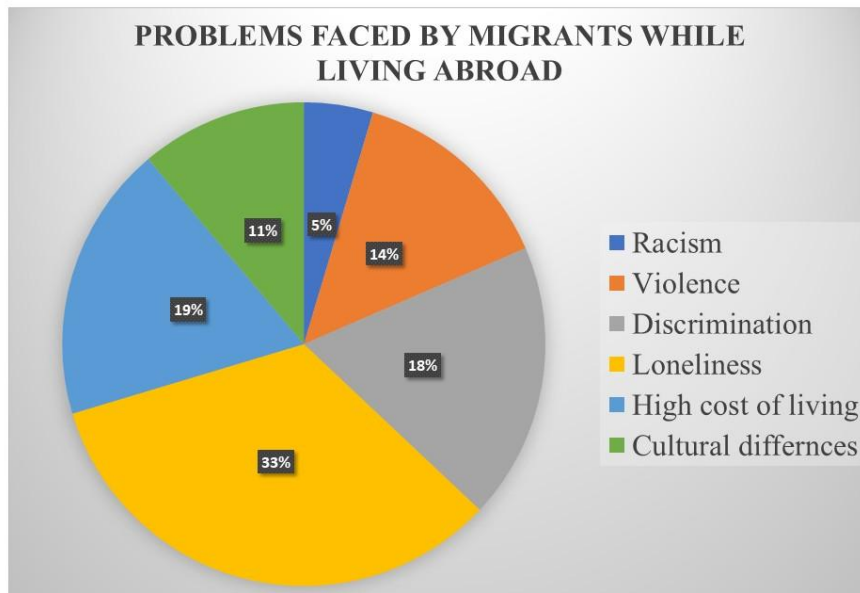


Figure 7 shows the problems that are faced by individuals living abroad. 33% of them feel lonely living abroad, 19% feel high cost of living is a major problem for them, 18% face discrimination, 11% of the individuals find it hard to cope up with cultural differences, 14% of them face violence and 5% are the victims of racism which make it hard for them to live abroad.

Figure 8: Ever think of moving back to India?

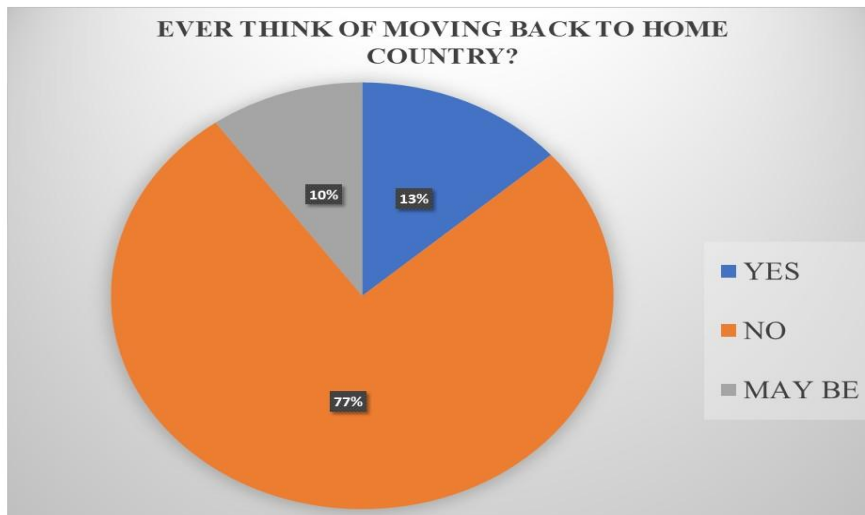


Figure 8 reveals the answer to the question that do these individuals ever think of moving back to India. 77% of them said a clear no to the thought of moving back to India, although 34% of individuals said that they face a range of problems living abroad (as in fig.6).

Figure 9: Do you think this trend of migration is majorly to reflect a higher social status?

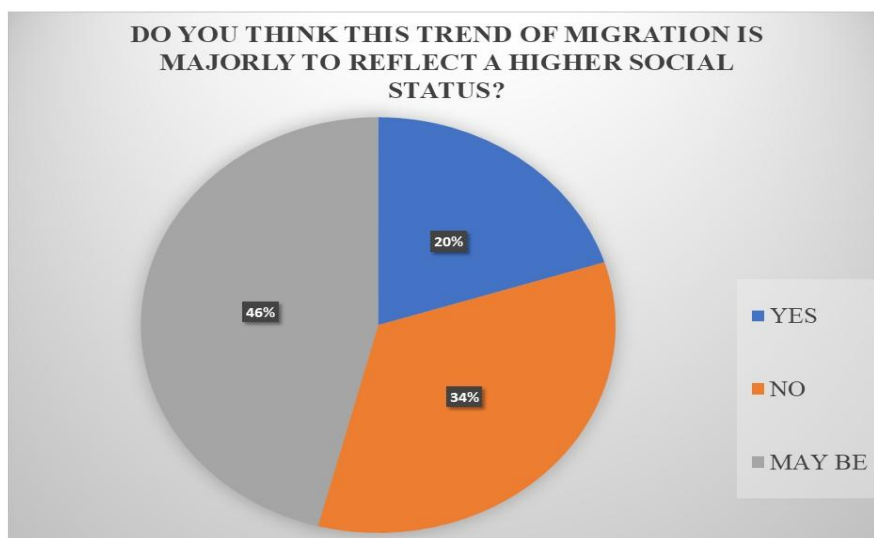


Figure 9 is about the question that whether do these individuals think that the present trend of migration is majorly to reflect a higher social status? The individuals were quite unsure about the answer to this question as 46% of them selected maybe as their answer. In fact, 34% of the individuals said a clear no to it.

Findings of the study

It is found that proportion of male NRIs is much higher than the female NRIs. Majority of the individuals migrated abroad after completing their class 12th. The study also revealed the fact

that Punjabi society is moving away from agriculture due to a number of reasons. When it comes to choosing a country for settling abroad, Canada is still being one of the most popular country among Punjabis. Australia, USA, Europe are some of the others in this list. Better life quality, job opportunities, better wages are some of the major reasons for which individuals decided to settle abroad. Although a significant portion of individuals said that they face problems while living abroad but they do not think about moving back to India at all.

Conclusion

From the above study it can be concluded that apart from economic benefits, individuals move to abroad due to variety of other reasons such as due to their family, kinship, marriage, for a higher social status. Although a number of individuals face problems while living abroad but there are some serious reasons for which they firmly refuse to move back to India. As far as remittances are concerned, this trend is advantageous but at the cost of loss of a significant amount of human resource.

Recommendations

Although the present trend of migration is beneficial for the migrant sending countries as far as remittances are concerned but it creates a problem of brain drain in the developing countries and loss of potential workforce. Therefore, the recommendation is that the government of the country along with the state needs to some serious policy reforms to cater the needs of the youth as they are the country's future.

Limitations and Scope for future research

The main limitation of this study is that it is based on the general pattern of International Migration. The sample size for this study could have been wider. This study could be extended to other states of India for better and more transparent, relevant results.

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