



Student migration from Punjab: A call for youth-centred migration policies in India

Sugandha Nagpal¹

Abstract

Despite being a key source country for youth migration, India does not have a policy framework to respond to the concerns of prospective youth migrants in the pre-migration phase. This paper discusses the case of student migration from Punjab (India) to Canada to argue for the importance of youth-centric migration policy in the source country. The interviews with young Punjabis preparing to migrate as students to Canada reveal that youth – who have social networks in the destination country and are aware of the migration process – are less susceptible to misinformation and exploitation by immigration agents in Punjab. Based on these findings, the author argues that youth-centric migration policy in India can regulate information flows to increase prospective migrants' awareness about post-migration challenges and inculcate in them a long-term view of migration.

Introduction

The domestic conversation on the demographic dividend of India focuses on youth unemployment and the gap between youth education and skill level.² Another implication of this demographic dividend is that India, the country with the youngest population in the world, is also a prime migrant-sending country. Since many

Western countries face a demographic decline due to an ageing population, their economic sustenance relies on attracting migrants from populous countries, such as China, India and Nigeria. This creates an opportune moment for India to leverage its demographic dividend and establish itself as a reliable source country. This is especially pertinent given the degree of irregular migration from key outmigration states in India such as Punjab. The extent of irregular migration from Punjab came to the fore recently when Canada threatened to deport 700 Indian international students from Punjab due to fraudulent documentation.³ While the Government of India has expressed concern over the welfare of its international students, especially during the pandemic, they have not evolved a policy response to youth migration. This paper draws on the example of student migration from Punjab to Canada to argue that the Government of India should respond to the needs of its increasingly mobile youth and create a youth-centric international migration policy, which uses the experiences of youth migrants in the pre-migration phase as a point of departure. This will not only enable India to establish itself as a trusted source country, but it will also allow young people to engage in forms of migration that are safe and orderly and contribute to their long-term development goals. As per the Government of India, *youth* are defined as young

¹ Sugandha Nagpal is an Associate Professor for the School of International Affairs and Director for the Centre for Migration and Mobility Studies at the O.P. Jindal Global University in Sonapat, India.

² *The Economic Times*, "India becomes the most populated: A dividend or a damper?" (19 April 2023).

³ Vikas Vasudeva, "Punjab's illegal immigration back in spotlight after Canada's recent deportation threat", *The Hindu* (16 June 2023).



people between the ages of 15 and 29. However, given that the independent migration of young people after high school are being probed, for the purposes of this paper, youth will be defined as belonging to the age group between 18 to 29.

According to the Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2,500,000 students have moved out of the country for studies in the past five years. Out of these students, 750,000 migrated in 2022, the highest outmigration of students in the past five years. Punjab, a state in North India, is a key site of student migration from India. Between 2016 and February 2021, 984,000 people migrated from Punjab and Chandigarh, which includes 379,000 students and 600,000 workers. Based on these numbers, 1 in 33 Punjabis moved abroad in the last five years, and 38 per cent of those who immigrated did so on student visas.⁴ The strong culture of migration, especially in the Doaba region of Punjab, is attributed to the region's long history of migration dating back to the independence of India, the decline in its agricultural sector and the concomitant lack of industrialization, which reduces avenues for youth to move from farming to non-farming jobs.⁵ In this context, in pursuing student migration, Punjabi youth are not only seeking an education abroad; they are also using education as a route for permanent settlement in a Western country.⁶ In conversations with them, Punjabi youth planning to migrate as students reveal that they prioritize migration to countries

that offer an accessible pathway to permanent citizenship. In fact, the attraction of Canada as a destination country is linked to its offer of a two-step migration process, wherein the first step of entering Canada as an international student is followed upon graduation by a second step of applying for permanent residency. Historically, the immigration policy of Canada has been centred on retaining international students as permanent residents.⁷ But recently, there has been a perceptible shift in the immigration policy of Canada. Various measures have been introduced, such as temporary caps of study permits, stricter eligibility criteria for the Post-graduation Work Permit and spousal open work permit to reduce the number of international students and make it more difficult for international students to remain in Canada after the completion of their study programmes.⁸ These policy changes have been met with stark resistance from international students, a large majority from Punjab. Since the last week of August 2024, international students across Manitoba, Ontario and the Prince Edward Island have been protesting the withdrawal of postgraduate work permits. Protesting students assert their right to live and work in Canada.⁹ While it is not the purpose of migration policy in a sending country like India to facilitate or motivate permanent migration of Indian students, India needs to be cognizant of and responsive to this reality. The needs and experiences of Punjabi student migrants who plan to transition from temporary to permanent migrants will

⁴ Nikhil Rampal and Reeti Agarwal, "Few jobs, bad pay, so why should we stay? Behind Punjab youngsters' rush for IELTS, migration", *ThePrint* (19 February 2022).

⁵ Aswini Kumar Nanda, Jacques Verón and S. Irudaya Rajan, *Passages of Fortune? Exploring Dynamics of International Migration from Punjab* (Routledge India, 2021).

⁶ Lilach Marom, "Market mechanisms' distortions of higher education: Punjabi international students in Canada", *Higher Education*, 85:123–140 (2022).

⁷ Colin Scott, Saba Safdar, Roopa Desai Trilokekar and Amira El Masri, 2015. "International students as 'ideal immigrants' in Canada: A disconnect between policy makers' assumptions and the lived experiences of international students", *Comparative and International Education*, 43(3).

⁸ Immilaw Global, "Canada's new student visa rules 2024" (7 February 2024).

⁹ Kusum Arora, "Fearing deportation, international students protest Canada's pullback of work permit extension", *The Wire* (8 September 2024).

be different from other student migrants who intend to return to their home country after graduation.

Migration policy in India is focused on improving the use of remittances to enhance the development of India, ensuring economic integration of return migrants and reducing irregular migration. The Emigration Bill 2021, currently being discussed in Parliament, introduces measures to facilitate the safe and orderly migration of labour migrants through provisions like pre-departure orientation sessions. While it has introduced measures to regulate immigration agents, the Bill in its current form fails to attend to the specific vulnerabilities experienced by student migrants.¹⁰ Typically, advocacy for international students and their concerns occurs in the post-migration context, and in the case of Canada, it has recently taken the form of protesting new immigration rules that reduce permanent residency routes for international students as previously mentioned. Attending to the experiences of potential student migrants in the pre-migration phase is crucial in developing youth-centric migration policy in the pre-migration phase that can allow for effective migration management. This paper draws on the challenges experienced by prospective international students from Punjab in the pre-migration stage, such as fraudulent practices in the immigration industry, low level of awareness and difficulties selecting an appropriate study programme. Young Punjabis' experiences demonstrate that social networks

in the country of destination and the ability to gather independent knowledge of the migration process prevents young people from being misinformed and exploited by immigration agents. Using these findings as a point of departure, the study proposes that youth-centric migration policy in India should target the pre-migration phase and focus on disseminating information to prospective international students on life after migration and inculcating a long-term vision of migration.

This paper draws on qualitative data collected over 11 months in 2020 as part of an exploratory study, "COVID-19 and Punjabi migration", conducted in collaboration with the York University in Canada and funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In-depth interviews were carried out on the Zoom platform with 27 Punjabi migrants – one set with prospective migrants in Punjab, India, preparing to migrate to Canada and another set with those already residing in the Greater Toronto Area. In Punjab, 13 respondents were interviewed (4 women, 9 men) between the ages of 22 and 31 from different religious backgrounds who were planning to or in the process of migrating as students or skilled migrants. In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with non-governmental organization workers, immigration lawyers and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) centre teachers/owners. All the Punjabi Indian respondents had completed their undergraduate degrees. Six had finished or were in the process of finishing their postgraduate education. The respondents pursued undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in disciplines, such as information technology, civil engineering, physical education, commerce and science, business administration,

¹⁰ Aayushi Gupta, "Emigration Bill, 2021: Two steps forward, one step back", Impact and Policy Research Institute (24 August 2022).



international relations and marketing. These young people were the first members of their families to pursue postsecondary education. For the purposes of this paper, there are only discussions on the interviews with key informants and seven respondents between the ages of 22 and 29 who are planning to migrate as international students. These respondents are at different stages of migration, varying from thinking about migrating to preparing for their IELTS exam, applying for their visa and waiting for their visa.

Navigating the immigration industry

In planning their migration, young Punjabis cite the pervasive issue of *fraudulent* agents. The use of the term fraudulent is not to point out irregular migration but rather the misinformation peddled by agents and their inability to facilitate promised migration, thereby cheating people off their money. They point out that the nexus between Canadian colleges and agents translates into agents steering clients towards certain colleges and programmes. Respondent 1 is 26 years old and applying to Canada as a college student. He has previously completed his undergraduate degree at a local college in Punjab. He recounts that his agent was trying to convince him to apply to Loyalist College as opposed to Lambton. The agent goes so far as to make a fake document claiming that Lambton rejected him. However, upon receiving the document, the respondent detected something was not right about the rejection letter: "As the font was weird ... even the images were not opening". Respondent 1 uncovered that this agent was trying to get him into a college where he stood to make some money rather than the college where Respondent 1 wanted to go to. Respondent 1 dropped him and decided to go with another agent.

Even so, not all respondents are as aware and able to detect and thwart fraudulent practices, such as college suggestions that are not aligned with their own interests, compromising the success of their visa application. Respondent 2 is 25 years old and despite having a good IELTS score, his student visa has been rejected thrice, for reasons such as a mismatch between his previous education and what he is planning to do in Canada and the likelihood of him not returning to India following his education. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Physical Education from a renowned college in Punjab. In his first attempt, he applied for a diploma course in child psychology in Canada. The second time he applied for a diploma in sports management. He claims he has lost USD 19,000 over two years in trying to migrate. These two respondents express different navigations with the immigration industry based on their information flow, which is shaped by their social networks and the extent of independent research.

Respondent 1 takes pride in conducting extensive research about the immigration process, not just on immigration requirements but also on the workings of the Canadian immigration system. It helps that he has a strong transnational social network, including immediate family who have migrated to Canada and New Zealand, and an older brother who is so well-versed in immigration policy that he filed his visa applications independently. He also has friends in Canada with whom he regularly communicates. This defines his expectations and navigation of the migration process. For instance, in describing the process of selecting his course of study, he talks about how his course in project management is tied to his long-term goal of entering the construction business in Canada

with his friends. He says, “I am doing project management; he has done architecture and the other friend is into estimation like construction estimation ... so people of three different trades and what is required in construction, we have that.” This type of long-term, vision-based selection of courses and programmes requires both the ability to gather information online and, perhaps more importantly, interactions with friends already settled in Canada.

In contrast, Respondent 2 is not in touch with too many people in Canada. He mentions that he did not have a friend circle in college and is in touch with some friends from school who migrated to Canada after high school. He also relies more heavily on advice from his agent, likely due to the absence of reliable second-hand information. In explaining dependence on his agent, Respondent 2 says, “I think if the person who is advising is an expert, he would know more; what if I say something and it affects me later.” Despite the strong culture of migration in Punjab – which motivates young people to pursue migration for many years even after repeated unsuccessful attempts – migration is an uncertain and high-stakes outcome. Thus, despite the possibility of fraud, many young people prefer to go through an agent to reduce personal liability. The propensity to seek immigration consultants or agents to migrate is heightened among those with poor networks and support systems abroad and a lack of family history of migration.¹¹

Social networks in the country of destination and the ability to gather independent knowledge about migration better prepares migrants to navigate the migration process. In contrast to older youth migrants that migrate after completing their undergraduate or postgraduate education in India, those migrating after high school are more vulnerable to exploitation by the immigration industry. Respondents who have personal experience of family members migrating right after high school point out that in addition to their propensity to fall into patterns of conspicuous consumption and debt post-migration, young student migrants are ill-prepared to adapt to a new academic system, and many have trouble balancing studies with employment. Respondent 3 is a 26-year-old girl who is a resident of Chandigarh but was completing her master’s degree in a reputed private university in Haryana at the time of the interview. In referring to the post-migration experiences of her brother, who migrated to Canada after grade 12, she mentions, “My brother kind of portrayed a life that was very, very amazing in Canada. He got a Mercedes. He was, you know, taking vacations here and there. Looking at him, so many people in my community in Chandigarh and our family, they also left, you know thinking that he’s having so much fun, but the reality was usually different. He was in a lot of debt.” In speaking about her brother, Respondent 3 is not only highlighting the post-migration challenges faced by younger migrants but also how their selective narratives of aspirational consumption influence and reinforce an ill-informed desire for migration among other young men.

¹¹ Nanda et al., 2021.



A key informant points out that young student migrants do not know enough about the programmes offered abroad and are likely to follow blindly what the agent suggests. She adds that the message relayed to prospective students by agents is, “You have to go there and take your diploma for two years, you will get your work permit and then you can apply for your Permanent Residence. They were getting people ready for blue-collar jobs.” Agents do not guide students on what programmes to pursue to further their career trajectory. However, this is also a problem for older youth migrants such as Respondent 2 who do not conduct independent research and are more dependent on the agent in guiding their study programme choices. This means that many young people migrating as international students from Punjab do not develop a long-term vision of their migration and its linkage with their career development. They remain fixated on the short-term goal of using student migration to attain permanent residency in Canada. Thus, one of the key challenges for migration policy in India is to inculcate in young people the ability to take a long-term view of their education and migration journey.

Conclusion

In conclusion, young people from Punjab migrating to Canada with a student visa are not merely looking to get an education abroad. They use the student visa route to attain permanent status in Canada. While this may not be the goal of all student migration from India, it is increasingly recognized that Indian youth migrating from different regions of India to destination countries such as Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom view student migration

as the first step to permanent residency.^{12, 13} This is especially true in the case of Punjab. Migration policy in India must recognize this and orient itself to facilitating the long-term settlement of young Punjabis in Canada. At a systemic level, this entails recentring the conversation on youth migration in Punjab on the long-term implications of student migration for young people’s career development and life plans. While there is a continued need to regulate the immigration industry and make it incumbent upon agents to be transparent with clients, it is equally important to empower young people to make more informed decisions. Young people with limited social networks in Canada, low levels of awareness about the immigration process and those migrating right after high school are more susceptible to being misled by agents. Migration policy in India can focus on giving young people the tools to navigate their migration journey more effectively.

The Government of India can regulate information flow and use the narratives of migrants in Canada to generate awareness and understanding of the long-term implications of decisions made in the pre-migration stage. Several new immigrants in Canada have set up YouTube channels to help better inform prospective migrants about what life in Canada looks like with the express intention of addressing misinformation.¹⁴ This information flow is beneficial not just for those respondents who do not have access to a social network in Canada but even for those who

¹² Janet B. Ilieva, Manjula Rao and Pat Killingley, *Mapping International Student Mobility from India at the State and City Level* (British Council, 2023).

¹³ Michiel Baas, “Students of migration: Indian overseas students and the question of permanent residency”, *People and Place*, 14(1):8–23 (2006).

¹⁴ Naimul Karim, “Pierre Poilievre says new immigrants are warning people off Canada – but are they?”, *Financial Post* (18 August 2023).

do. As emerges in the case of Respondent 3's brother when prospective migrants interact with known migrants, these migrants are invested in maintaining their status as successful migrants and selectively reveal only those aspects of their experience that further this imagery. In speaking with people only in their social network, prospective migrants are likely to receive a selective view of Canadian life. However, hearing about the struggles and decision-making processes of unknown migrants will expand the perspective of prospective migrants. While these policy implications stem from an analysis of student migration from Punjab to Canada and other migration pathways for Indian international students will present their own specific challenges, they indicate the need to place how youth navigate migration at the centre of designing youth-centric migration policy. Specifically, it is important to attend to the challenges faced and coping strategies deployed by young people in the pre-migration stage to formulate tools and programmes to better prepare prospective Indian international students for post-migration challenges.