

BRAIN GAIN OR BRAIN DRAIN? RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL MIGRATION FROM PUNJAB, INDIA

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Abstract

Educational migration is a defining global phenomenon of the 21st century, representing a significant movement of human capital across international borders. Beyond individual ambition, these flows serve as a critical indicator of national economic health, social aspirations, and the perceived quality of education systems. According to the World Migration Report, the scale of this movement is immense, with the total number of international migrants reaching 272 million in 2019, accounting for 3.5 percent of the world's population. For students, the pursuit of internationally recognized qualifications, coupled with the promise of better career opportunities, has transformed higher education into a global market place. This paper examines the increasing trend of educational migration from Punjab. The authors introduce migration as a global phenomenon, noting that India is a major sending nation for international students, with educational migration being a significant form of movement driven by aspirations for better, quality education and internationally recognized qualifications. Further focuses on Punjab, a state with a long history of international migration, highlighting that both socio-economic factors like agrarian crisis and poor quality of higher education within the state are pushing youth to seek opportunities abroad, leading to a significant "brain drain." Punjab has a long and storied history of international migration, driven for decades by economic and social factors. However, the recent surge in migration for educational purposes represents a new and alarming chapter. This is no longer a gradual trend but a mass exodus of the state's youth, fueled by a complex interplay of hope for a better future abroad and disillusionment with the opportunities at home. The scale of this movement, when quantified, reveals a critical contemporary crisis for the state. Finally, the source asserts that injudicious state policies favoring the rapid, private expansion of higher education, which has created issues with access, equity, and affordability, are a major cause of this crisis and subsequent youth emigration. The analysis concludes that this trend is a direct outcome of injudicious neo-liberal state policies that have failed to retain and nurture local talent, leading to a state of "despondency, despair and decay" and posing severe long-term social, political, and economic risks for Punjab.

Key Words: Higher Education, Punjab, Educational Migration, Quality, Access and Equity

Introduction

Migration is the movement of persons from one place to another with the intentions of settling permanently or temporarily. Migration is a global phenomenon involving the movement of people from their usual residence to new locations, either within a country or across borders. The United Nations defines long-term migrants as individuals residing outside their country of origin for at least 12 months. Over the last 50 years, global migration from developing countries to developed countries has steadily increased. According to the World Migration Report, the total number of international migrants in 2019 was 272 million,

accounting for 3.5 percent of the world's population. Of these international migrants, 48 percent were women and 52 percent were men (WMR, 2020). Migration is influenced by many push factors (e.g., poverty, conflict, unemployment) and pulls factors (e.g., better opportunities, education, healthcare, and security). International migration has become increasingly common, with millions of people leaving their home countries for better opportunities abroad. This trend is especially evident in India, where economic liberalization and growth have opened up new opportunities for those with the means and expertise to seize them (Gupta et al., 2023).

Educational migration, a major form of international migration, involves the movement of students to abroad for better and quality education. It has gained momentum due to globalisation, rising career aspirations, and the appeal of internationally recognised qualifications (Jeena & Afnitha, 2025). India is the second most significant sending nation after China and has emerged as a major force in the market for international students. With their percentage of international student enrollments doubling from 3 percent in 2000 to over 6 percent in 2009, Indian student flows have increased significantly (UNESCO, 2009). India is both a regional host country as well as a leading sending country with regard to international student migration. The number of students seeking higher education in foreign countries has been growing consistently over the years. It has increased by nine times between 1963 and 2006 this increase being particularly significant in the last decade (Varghese, 2008). The top five destination countries for international students are US, Australia, Canada, UK and New Zealand grew in 2014 by 12.6 percent and in the year of 2015, it grew faster at 17.8 percent. Except for UK, where the numbers continue to decline, India sent more students to all destination countries. And India's numbers to all these countries grew at a faster rate than the overall international student growth (except UK again) (MMA, 2016). According to the reports of Ministry of External Affairs, Indian students are now pursuing higher education in more than 240 countries all over the world. While traditional destinations like the UK, US, Australia, and Canada remain favoured, emerging destinations such as Uzbekistan, Philippines, Russia, Ireland, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan are gaining increasing attention. Again 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. In 2022, approximately 750,000 Indian students went abroad for higher education, a significant rise compared to 450,000 in 2017 and 260,000 in 2020. Additionally, India surpassed China as the leading source of international students in the United States in 2022 (Nagpal, 2024).

Table-1
 Number of students migrated from India (2017-2022)

Years	No. of Students
2017	4,50,000
2020	2,60,000
2022	7,50,000

Source: Ministry of External Affairs of India

Education and migration share a strong relationship as the better educated person has bright chances of assimilating in the socio-economic environment at the place of destination (Browne, 2017). The migration of highly educated people is often called the 'brain drain' because migrants, after acquiring an education in their native country, move to international destinations and give their services. The International Organization of Migration (2011) defines brain drain as the transfer of human capital from developing countries to developed countries. These migrants have the skills, savings and efficiencies available in developing countries (Agnihotri et.al,2022)

Educational Migration from the state of Punjab

Punjab, a state in the north Indian region, has a long history of international migration. Earlier, the economic expansion programme of developed countries especially the economic boom in England has allowed much more diversified labour emigration from Punjab (Varghese and Rajan, 2010). The green revolution in the state leading to development of the state however created a new dilemma for its people. Being an agricultural state, most of the people in the state depend upon the agriculture sector for their livelihood. The Green Revolution has put great positive impact on the productivity and the income of the people at a very early stage, but with the passage of time this development has become a crisis. The unhappy downward turn of Punjab economy can be traced to 1984-85, when it became a 'revenue deficit state' from the status of 'revenue surplus one'. The crisis-ridden agrarian economy and decelerating industrial sector in Punjab offers only small number of employment opportunities (Ghuman, 2016). As a result 1970s and 1980s saw streams of migrations from Punjab basically for economic reasons. The cases of illegal migration of Punjabi Sikhs have increased during the period of militancy in Punjab from mid 1980s to late 1990s. Punjab, along with, the other states, continuous to participate in the supply of migrants to the gulf countries, with dalit households participating more than the land-owning dominant castes of rural Punjab (Kapuria and Birwal, 2017).

The state of Punjab ranks second in terms of international migration, while Kerala has the first rank.ⁱ Emigration from Punjab has been consistently growing over the last many decades. Now, Punjab ranks among the top states in India where large-scale emigration has occurred. As per the Annual Report (2018-19) of the Ministry of External Affairs, Punjab had a share of 6 per cent emigrants in the year 2018. At the state level, the socio-economic differences exacerbate the incidence of emigration, as 13 per cent households in rural areas and only 6 per cent households in urban areas showed a likelihood of sending migrants to international destinations (Nanda & Veron, 2015).

The phenomenon of Educational migration and brain drain from Punjab has emerged as significant dimension of migration from the state and has reached to an irreversible proportion in recent years. As per the record of bureau of immigration, 2.62 lakh students from Punjab migrated abroad from January 2016 to February 2021. On an average, 140 students flew from the state daily and in the year of 2019, the daily average of students left the country was 201 and the state has become the number one in sending the students abroad. The young child of every 20th household on an average has been leaving the country since 2016 and it has also drained a large chunk of wealth from the state (that is estimated as 3930 crore rupees with an average Rs. 15 lakh per student).ⁱⁱ

What Caused for Educational Migration from Punjab?

Here the question arises, what caused for such a huge educational migration from the state? There are many factors that played role in this phenomenon of educational migration from the state. The one is related with the socio-economic conditions prevailing in the state which further connects with unemployment. The second one is related with the higher education system itself. The lack of employment opportunities and agricultural crisis in the state on the one hand (Saha, 2012; Gill, 2016; Singh & Kahlon, 2016) and the poor quality of higher education (Saha, 2009; Wickramasekara, 2013) on another hand pressing the young minds to move toward other developed countries for better employment opportunities. Due to failure of the state to nurture the potential of youth and provide employment, the talented young students have taken the path to move out of the state with a dream of better possibilities.

An Outcome of Unsustainable Higher Education in the State

The development of higher education sector in the Punjab state has shaped up in a different manner after the post-economic reform period. The state witnessed a significant increase in the number of universities and colleges since last two- decades. The economic reforms of 1991, has pronounced a decline in the role of the government and public spending across the board, and increased the role of profit-pursuing private actors in every domain. In fact, there was no policy on private higher education. This laissez faire, that is, non-intervention by the state and the absence of any policy, which had been the characteristic feature of the couple of decades beginning with the 1990s (Tilak 2004), helped in the rapid growth of private higher education and the emergence of large-scale markets in higher education. If one looks the nature of expansion in higher education institutions, it will be clear how the state has deliberately facilitated the entry of private players in the sector of higher education. Till 1996, there were only four universities in the state but with the entry of private players in education field, this number increased from 4 to 26 within a time span of ten years i.e. from 2006 to 2017.

Table-2
Number of Different Types of Universities in Punjab

Type of University	Number	Percentage
Central University	1	3.00
State Public Universities	9	28.00
State Private Universities	15	47.00
Deemed Universities(Government)	1	3.00
Deemed Universities(Private)	1	3.00
Institution of National Importance	5	16.00
Total	32	100.00

Source- *All India Higher Education Report (2019-20)*

In order to encourage private participation in higher education, the Government of Punjab notified The Punjab Private Universities Policy, in June, 2010 which has led to the rapid growth of private universities in the state. Same is the case of expansion in the number of degree colleges; there are 1006 degree colleges in Punjab which are imparting higher education in the fields of science, commerce and arts. Surprisingly, among these colleges, mere 199 (20 percent) are government colleges, 171 (17 percent) private aided colleges and 636 (63 percent) privately managed self-financing colleges

Table- 3
Number of Colleges in Punjab (Management-wise)

Institutions	Number	Percentage
Government Colleges	199	20.00
Private Aided Colleges	171	17.00
Private Unaided Colleges	636	63.00
Total	1006	100.00

Source- *All India Higher Education Report (2019-20)*

As far as the growth of professional colleges in Punjab is concerned, the number of Engineering/Technology and Architecture colleges increased from 2 in 1970-71 to 3 in the period of 1990-91 adding only one college. This number has increased to 16 in 2000-01, to 84 in the period of 2010-11 and then to 103 during the year of 2015-16. Certain parochial tendencies like the involvement of politicians in managing private colleges and universities, private – political nexus, the affiliation of owners of private institutions with the political parties and the privileges of dominant caste/ status in the state has made the domain of higher education system into adverse position. Consequently, the growth of higher educational institutions in the private sector and neglect of the public institutions both resulted into the birth of iniquitous and unsustainable system of higher education in the state (Kaur & Kaur, 2022).

Where does this expansion led to?

Despite the huge expansion, the sector has been facing the issues of access and equity. The irony of the state policies in higher education is that when the system was publicly funded, the higher education sector was small with limited access and only the privileged took advantage of the system. When the system expanded and the less privileged starting getting access to higher education, many governments started reducing subsidies in higher education and introduced cost recovery measures resulting in widening of inequalities (Varghese, et. al., 2018). This reflection can be easily viewed from the state of Punjab. Even though in Punjab, the GER in higher education during the year of 2019-20 was 28.2 percent in which the male students covered 25.1 percent and female students 32.1 percent but the following data table shows that the GER decreased from the last year i.e 2018-19. The accessibility to higher education by various groups in terms of caste and gender also shows a big gap (AISHE 2019-20). The GER for Scheduled Castes is 18.8 in which the male students covered 15.8 percent and female students' 22.4 percent.

TABLE-4
Gross Enrolment Ratio in India and Punjab

Year	India			Punjab					
	All			All			Scheduled Caste		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
2011-12	20.8	22.1	19.4	23.0	22.4	23.6	8.4	8.0	8.4
2015-16	24.5	25.4	23.5	27.0	25.8	28.5	18.0	17.7	18.4
2018-19	26.3	26.3	26.4	29.5	25.5	34.3	21.1	17.8	25.2
2019-20	27.1	26.9	27.3	28.2	25.1	32.1	18.8	15.8	22.4

Source: All India Survey of Higher Education Report (Various Years) MHRD, New Delhi

A number of studies have shown the regional disparities in accessing the higher education in the state. Ghuman et. al (2006) found through their study in Punjab that the rural students, passed-out from the typically rurally located schools, constituted only 4.07 percent of the total students

in all the universities of the state. In another study, Kaur (2023) have found that the major reason of exclusion of rural students from higher education is the privatization of the higher education. A sizeable proportion of urban people in Punjab would not be having access to higher education because of exorbitantly high fee and funds of private institutions.

Issue of Quality of Higher Education

The expansion of higher education in terms of growth of institutions and GER cannot assure the inclusion of young minds to higher education. The growth in expansion shows only the number of students which are enrolled in higher education, what about those ones who have been silently excluded from the system? Those who got enrolled have been getting the education of a meagre quality because the colleges have paucity of teachers, good infrastructural and teaching learning facilities. The cost of higher education in the private institutions is out of the reach of majority particularly when chance to get employment after education stands bleak. The major issue is related with the employability of those who have graduated and post-graduated within the state, as the neo-liberal agenda of privatization followed by the state has largely led to the jobless growth. Consequently, the young minds are leaving the state for the purpose of getting higher education in abroad along with employment. The exclusionary nature of the expansion and the affordability issue in the private institutions has resulted into being the strong factor behind the migration choice of the youth (Kaur & Kaur, 2021).

Impact on Higher Education System

The sustenance of higher education system in the state is also under threat, as almost all universities including private institutions have been getting affected, with many of them claiming the fall in admission up to 20 percent. Even colleges which have been most sought, till the last few years, are seeing the drop-in admissions (Kaur, 2018). The educational migration has generally affected the admissions in professional courses such as engineering, management etc. and not the general higher education courses because a large number of aspirants of educational migration are coming from the aspirational middle class of the society which was earlier the stakeholder in the professional education. The changed nature of state from welfare state to neo-liberal one has put the state back and pushed the private players in higher education which has led to the privatization of higher education. Due to poor quality and commoditization, higher education in the state has lost its credibility. The current happening of Russia- Ukraine war has exposed the dark side of our higher education system especially the professional education, which shows that almost 18000 students have left the country for medical education. Because, the medical education is not affordable even for the middle income families here in India.

Socio-Cultural Impact of Brain Drain from the state

The brain drain from the state encompasses serious socio- cultural repercussions. What does the future of the state have when the state is losing its youth on such an alarming pace? The phenomenon of migration of the youth is mainly due to two reasons; first, the agricultural crisis in the state coupled with the lack of suitable employment opportunities and the second is rising aspiration for better socio-economic development (Singh and Kaur, 2018). A large chunk of the desperate youth from the humble background systematically going out of the higher education as well as from the state. Even the middle class with limited resources is managing hard to finance wards' education in the abroad with a dream for better job opportunities. So, along with the socio-economic reason, the injudicious state policies towards higher education have major hand in this brain drain. The youth of any country are the most expensive resource because of their training in terms of material cost and time, and most importantly, because of lost opportunity

(Dodani & Laporte, 2005). This phenomenon of internationalization of education on the one hand has helping the foreign developed countries to deal with the challenge of demographic deficit through promoting the inflow of foreign students as Rizvi (2006), argued that facing a shortage of the highly skilled workers needed to sustain their own economic growth in knowledge-based economies and on the other side led to the brain drain from the state. Developed countries like Australia and Canada, view international education as a major avenue for recruiting highly skilled migrants and it is also noticeable that the students from Punjab state are preferably migrating to these countries.

The phenomenon of youth migration will have very adverse social, political and economic consequences in the future but the state seem oblivious to this emerging crisis. Since education is widely regarded as a major determinant of long-term economic growth, it is argued that the migration of people with high levels of human capital is highly detrimental to the societies from which they emigrate. Demographic dividend plays an important role in economic development. Samita Behl (2017), reveals that at the time of migration, approximately 78 per cent of the migrants belonged to the age up to 30 years or below. This age group is considered the most energetic and talented, having new ideas for income generation. The migration of the young generation translates into a significant loss of human resources, with the direct benefit accruing to the recipient countries that have not forked out the cost of educating them.

Conclusion

The higher education sector of Punjab is in the crisis, which is primarily an outcome of the injudicious policies of the state government embraced during the economic reforms period. At present, the future of the state, its strength, its cultural capital, social cohesion all is at stake. In fact recycling the statistical figures in terms of number of institutions, enrollment ratios, figures and facts cannot conceal the actual poor status of higher education in the state. The neo- liberal policies of development are seen to be drastically failed in the state because the state could not retain its youth manpower within the state. Such an exclusionary model of development has impacted the students of poor and the disadvantaged section of the society the most who neither afford the abroad migration nor getting the higher education opportunities within the state. Improving education and skill sets of the youth, meeting aspirations for employment, mainstreaming marginalized through support for social sector schemes are some of the areas where efforts are required of the policy. The retention of youth and nurturing of their talent deserve priority on the state policies. It needs a revamp in the policies and overhaul in the system of higher education.

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