

Parental Perspectives on Youth Emigration from Amritsar, Punjab

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Abstract

Youth emigration has become a defining feature of Punjab's socio-economic landscape, with Amritsar emerging as a key hub. While many studies have focused on emigrant youth, little attention has been paid to parental perspectives, despite their central role in financing and supporting migration. This study, based on a cross-sectional survey of left-behind parents in Amritsar, examines their motivations, knowledge and vulnerability during their children's migration. Findings reveal a paradox of youth agency and vulnerability. While migration is largely youth-initiated, it represents a high-cost, high-risk family investment. Parents identified both economic hardship and unstable employment, alongside peer pressure and social prestige, as key drivers of migration. The process is privatized, dominated by agents and coaching centers, while many parents remain uncertain about their children's long-term plans and struggles abroad. A marked rural-urban divide was evident in access to information, credit, and support networks, exposing rural families to greater risks. These findings underscore the need for state-led counseling services, streamlined visa support, and affordable credit mechanisms. Strengthening official information channels, accredited migration centres and digital literacy programmes could empower families to make informed decisions.

Keywords: Youth, international migration, left-behind parents, Punjab.

I. Introduction

International mobility of youth, whether for education or work, has emerged as a defining feature of 21st-century globalization, reshaping demographic landscapes and forging new transnational connections (International Students, 2024). According to the *IOM World Migration Report 2024*, the number of international migrants in 2020 was estimated to be almost 281 million globally, accounting for 3.6 per cent of the world's population. Within this global narrative, India is at the top of the list of countries, with 18 million Indians living outside their country of birth (International Organization for Migration, 2024). According to the *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, from 2016 to 2021, a total of 15,997,722 Indians went abroad either for studies or employment. Among them, Punjab has emigration deeply woven into the cultural and economic fabric (N. Kaur et al., 2024), and thus alone contributed 5 per cent of this number with 478,374 individuals migrating for employment and 262,011 for education.

The emigration of Punjabis has a long history, dating back to undivided India and expanding to North America, Europe, Oceania and the Middle East forming a Punjabi global diaspora of 2.0–2.5 million people. This established a powerful social precedent for seeking fortunes abroad (Singh et al., 2023) and further intensified into something that can be described as an emigration "fever" among the youth (G. Kaur, 2018; G. Kaur et al., 2021). Initially driven by economic aspirations, migration patterns have included skilled, unskilled and contract-based labour. This contemporary "craze" is propelled by a potent "polycrisis" at home, a protracted agrarian crisis that has strangled farm profitability and left rural families in deep distress (Bhargava, 2022; G. Kaur et al., 2021; L. Kaur, 2022). A staggering urban youth unemployment rate of 18.8 per cent is one of the highest in India according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (Times of India, 2024); a pervasive sense of systemic decay marked by widespread corruption (Bhargava, 2022; L. Kaur, 2022); and, perhaps most viscerally, a pervasive fear of the

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region's drug epidemic which parents see as a direct and existential threat to their children's future (Sharma et al., 2023).

In order to cash in on the intense and widespread desire in the state to emigrate, a new generation of entrepreneurship and avenues of earning have sprung up in rural and urban Punjab that primarily cater to the immediate needs of the prospective migrants by locating their destinations, finding institutions and courses for professional education, preparing for language proficiency, undertaking documentation, submitting applications for emigration, offering services for the acquisition of a passport and processing of a visa, making arrangement for departure and arrival of the migrant and so on (Nanda et al., 2021). The IELTS coaching centres and visa consultancy agencies have become prominent features in the Punjab's cities with many students enrolling in them reflecting the strong desire among the youth to secure a future abroad. While the Doaba region initially led this trend, the craze for study visas has surged in Majha, particularly in Amritsar, leading to a sharp rise in IELTS institutes and visa consultants (Vaid, 2018).

A significant number of studies have examined the drivers of youth emigration or focused on the experiences and aspirations of the youth themselves. However, there is a dearth of studies on the perspectives of the parents, who are the primary financers, and the emotional support system for the youth emigrant during this process. In the Indian, specifically Punjabi context the decision to emigrate is rarely individualistic. It is a collective family decision in which the parents are central from conception to its execution (K. J. Kaur & Sinha, 2023). Parents are the ones who have to weigh their children's aspirations against their own anxieties, liquidate their ancestral assets to provide economic support for the emigration and also bear the profound emotional weight of separation that comes after the emigration. Thus, their motivations, sacrifices and perceptions are indispensable to the holistic understanding of this phenomenon.

The understanding of the large-scale exodus of youth from regions like Amritsar cannot be comprehensive unless there is a deep dive into the pivotal role of parents from their involvement in the initial decision-making to the entire process of emigration and their perceptions of their children's lives abroad. Thus, this study seeks to fill the gap by addressing the primary motivations compelling parents in Amritsar to encourage, support and fund their children's emigration. It further goes on to assess the parents' understanding of the complex logistical processes involved in the transnational move, particularly with the increased number of emigration agents across the state, and their perceptions of the children's lives abroad and the challenges they face in a new country.

To answer these questions, this study first explores the parental role in decision-making and motivations for emigration. Subsequently, it assesses the parents' knowledge of their children's entire process of emigration. Finally, it examines the parental perceptions of their children's experiences abroad with particular attention to the opportunities, challenges, and risks that transnational mobility entails. Together, these inquiries aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how parental aspirations, knowledge and perceptions are shaped and reshaped by youth emigration from Amritsar.

II. Data and methods

Study area

The study was conducted in the Amritsar district in the Majha region of the Punjab. Amritsar, known as a major cultural and religious centre and the site of the Golden Temple, has emerged as a hotspot for international youth emigration. According to the *Punjab Migration Survey of 2011*, Majha households (16.6%) recorded a higher spread-out desire to move out as opposed to the other two regions, which goes on to show the traces of a "catch-up effect" in the region, fueled by more awareness and spread of education (Nanda et al., 2021). Further, a recent study by Punjab Agricultural University, Majha region had the highest emigration with 20.51 per cent households having at least one migrant member with more than 30 per cent households with one member migrant in Amritsar (Sharma et al., 2023). Amritsar's proliferation of IELTS centres and travel agencies reflects this trend, making it an

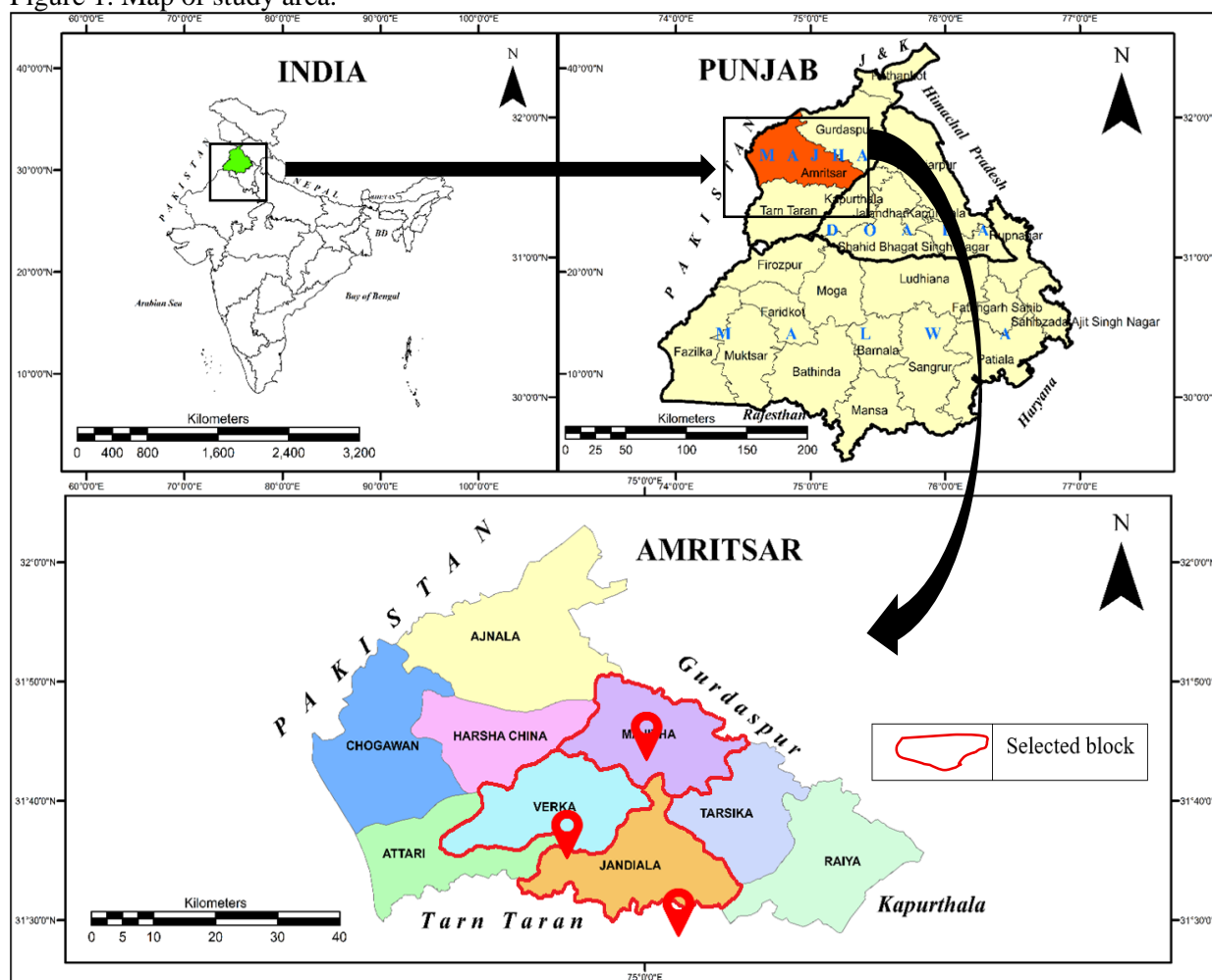
appropriate site for examining the effects of youth migration on left-behind parents.

Study design and sample

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design with a mixed-methods approach, collecting primary data from 388 parents left behind, 176 of whom were rural and 212 of whom were urban. The sample size was calculated as 385 households, using 95 per cent confidence level, 5 per cent margin of error and 50 per cent population proportion.

A systematic multistage sampling was adopted to select the three blocks and villages in Amritsar, whereas purposive sampling was used to select the surveyed households per the eligibility criteria. First, three blocks- Majitha, Jandiala Guru, and Verka- were selected using systematic sampling. In each block, three villages were chosen based on the criterion that they had at least 10 international migrant households, using data from the block-level *Village Directory*. Nine villages were covered with 22 households surveyed in each village. Further, for the urban sample, Amritsar city in Verka, Jandiala Guru in Jandiala and Majitha city in Majitha were selected using Probability Proportional to Size (PPS) sampling. Household selection was done using purposive sampling, while identifying households with eligible parents with children who had emigrated when they were aged 15-29 years³ for either work or education and had emigrated to other countries between six months and ten years before the survey. Across the 388 eligible households, there were 517 migrants across ages and destinations, but the study focused on one emigrant child who fit the inclusive criteria.

Figure 1. Map of study area.



³ According to National Youth Policy, 2014, a person between age group 15-29 years is considered youth which has been the criteria for this study

Sample profile

The left-behind parents in the study were mainly aged between 50 and 59 (57.7%) and were married (91.5%). There were 55 per cent males and 45 per cent females, and the majority had an education up to matriculation (60.6%). While 44.3 per cent were involved in non-economic activities, 29 per cent were in tertiary activities and 15.5 per cent in the primary sector. Among the respondents, 82.5 per cent belonged to the above poverty level and 65.5 per cent were Sikhs. The detailed sample profile has been given in *Supplementary Table 1*.

III. Results

Migrant profile

At the time of emigration, the youth emigrant population was predominantly male (83%) with females accounting for only 17 per cent. A large proportion (69%) was aged below 25 years, while the remaining 31 per cent were between 25 and 30. Marital status indicated that only 11 per cent were married at the time of departure. However, this proportion at the time of survey increased to 26 per cent, reflecting a gradual shift toward family formation after emigration. Educational attainment also showed transformation with nearly 44 per cent youth emigrants having completed education only up to the higher secondary level at the time of emigration. The profile at the time of the survey showed a rise in those with technical and non-technical higher education or diplomas, suggesting that many emigrants pursued education after emigration. Further, a shift was observed in occupational status with initially 27 per cent students and 29 per cent engaged in non-economic activities. However, 20 per cent were currently employed in the secondary sector and nearly half (49%) in the tertiary sector. Overall, the primary purpose of migration for the youth was work-related as evidenced by the fact that nearly 90 per cent emigrated with employment as their main purpose.

Table 1. Demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the emigrants

Demographic characteristics	At the time of emigration		At the time of survey	
	N	%	n	%
Sex				
Male	322	83.0		N/A
Female	66	17.0		
Age				
< 25 years	269	69.3	83	21.4
25-30 years	119	30.7	183	47.2
30+ years			122	31.4
Marital status				
No	344	88.7	288	74.2
Yes	44	11.3	100	25.8
Educational status				
Up to matriculation	18	4.6	18	4.6
Higher Secondary	161	41.5	139	35.8
Non-technical higher education/ diploma	152	39.2	168	43.4
Technical higher education/ diploma	57	14.7	63	16.2
Occupational status				
Primary sector	38	9.8	7	1.8
Secondary sector	35	9.0	78	20.1
Tertiary sector	98	25.3	190	48.9
Non-economic activities	111	28.6	36	9.3
Student	106	27.3	77	19.9
Duration of emigration				
Less than 2 years		N/A	120	30.9
3-5 years			166	42.8
Over 6 years			102	26.3
Total	388	100.0	388	100.0

Process of youth emigration

A youth emigrant's journey abroad is not a single event, but a complex, multi-stage process that must be meticulously planned and executed, significantly involving the family and parents. The following section will systematically unpack this process through the lens of parents, focusing on their role in decision-making, financial planning and their knowledge of the emigration process of their children.

Initiation and agency

While a youth's emigration decision is shaped by individual aspirations, family support and other socio-economic conditions, understanding the decision's driver helps assess the dynamics between the parents and the children. Our findings reveal that the decision to emigrate abroad was predominantly initiated by the emigrants themselves (87.6%), suggesting a strong individual will and motivation to pursue opportunities abroad (Figure 2(a)).

Parental narratives revealed that such decisions were not always collaborative in nature. One father's account illustrates how a son's insistence on emigration overrode parental preferences and disrupted intergenerational plans:

"The decision to go abroad was not mine, it was entirely my son's. He insisted on it. Honestly, our father-son relationship was not very close. I never wanted my only son to move away from me, but he did not listen. I had a good flour mill business here, and I wished that he would take it forward. But he had no interest at all, and eventually, he left for abroad." - Father, 58 years, lives in urban areas

In contrast, a smaller set of narratives also highlighted situations where parents initially played a more direct role in encouraging emigration, particularly in response to low employment opportunities, which has been demonstrated in the following account:

"Initially, it was my decision to send my daughter to Canada, as she was not interested in going abroad at first. However, after completing her graduation and struggling to find suitable employment, and realizing that the few jobs available paid very low salaries, she herself decided that moving to Canada would be the better option." - Mother, 44 years.

While one in ten parents initiated the conversation, there were eight out of ten parents who said that the final decision to emigrate was taken by both the parents and children together, indicating that parents, while supportive, were less likely to instigate migration.

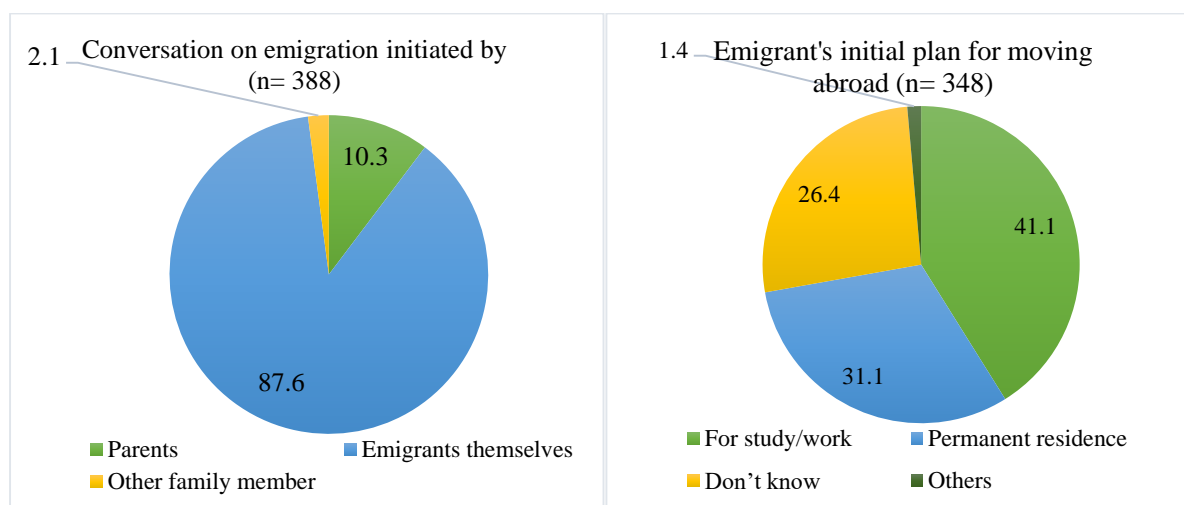


Figure 2(a): Individuals who initiated conversation on emigration as reported by the parents.

Figure 2(b): Emigrants' initial plans when moving abroad as reported by parents.

According to 41 per cent parents, the initial plan was for the emigrants to study or work abroad, whereas 31 per cent said that their children planned for permanent residence abroad (Figure 2(b)). One in four parents was unsure about the children’s long-term plans moving abroad.

Factors for youth emigration

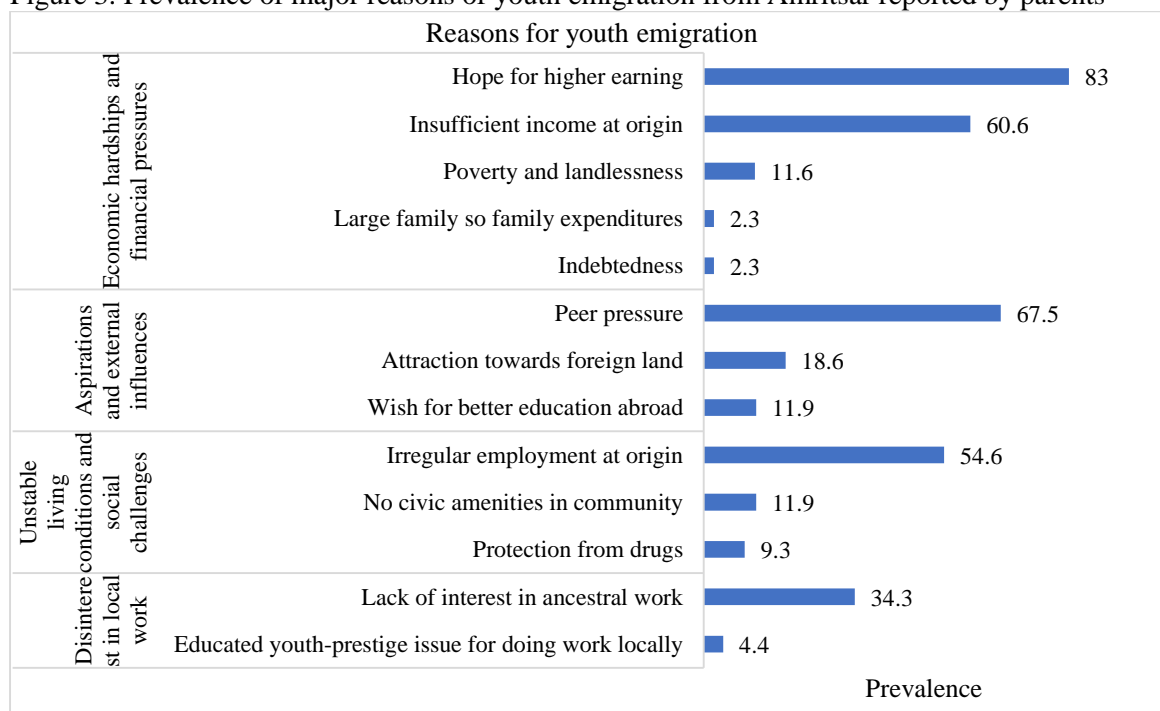
According to the parents, youth emigration from the Punjab has been shaped by economic hardships, aspirations and social pressures. The dominant reason for emigration was economic motivations such as hope for higher earnings (83%) and insufficient income at origin (61%) (Figure 3). For many parents, emigration was perceived less as ambition and more as a response to limited livelihood prospects at origin:

“In Punjab, children are not getting the true value of their hard work. Even after studying so much, they struggle to find good jobs. And when they do get employment, the salaries are often so low that it becomes difficult to manage household expenses. That is why my son, out of frustration, made up his minds to go abroad.”- Mother, 59 years.

External influences including peer pressure (68%) and attraction to foreign lands (19%) also influenced the decision to emigrate. Social challenges such as irregular employment (55%) and lack of interest in ancestral work (34%) were equally significant. While economic aspirations drive emigration across rural and urban areas, urban emigrants were more influenced by peer pressure, attraction towards foreign countries and pursuing education abroad. In contrast, rural emigrants faced higher financial distress, employment instability and social challenges like drug-related concerns (Supplementary Table 2).

“Our biggest worry is the growing drug problem here in the Punjab. We constantly fear that our son might get caught in that trap and that’s why we feel it’s better to send him abroad where the environment is safer. Things here are only getting worse, crime is increasing, law and order is weakening, and there’s always the risk of children falling into bad company. All of this weighs heavily on us as parents and that’s why we support his decision to move abroad.”- Father, 55 years.

Figure 3. Prevalence of major reasons of youth emigration from Amritsar reported by parents



Parents identified hope for higher earnings as the leading reason for children's emigration, reflecting the strong economic aspirations driving youth emigration (Table 2). Irregular employment and insufficient income at origin were also significant, pointing to unstable livelihoods as push factors. Peer pressure, while less prominent as a primary factor, was ranked high as a tertiary reason, particularly in urban areas, because of the greater social influence. As one father explained, unemployment combined with peer comparison and social media exposure reinforced the desire to emigrate:

“The biggest issue here is unemployment. Our child studied so much, but still couldn't find a decent job. On top of that, when he sees his friends who have gone abroad, working hard, buying expensive cars and posting pictures on social media, he too feels motivated to go. This kind of peer comparison and exposure has become a major reason why children like ours want to migrate.” - Father, 51 years.

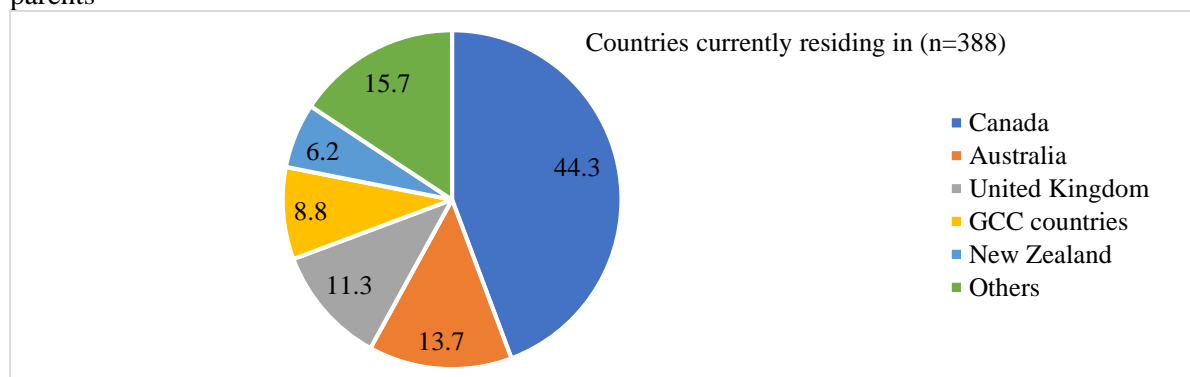
Table 2. Percentage distribution of the rankings of reasons for the emigrants to move abroad reported by parents

Ranking of the reasons for emigration	First	Second	Third
Hope for higher earning	36.5	22.3	21.6
Irregular employment at origin	23.9	16.8	7.3
Insufficient income at origin	13.5	18.4	13.9
Peer pressure	7.8	14.3	29.8
Lack of interest in ancestral work	7.3	11	8.9
Wish for better education abroad	4.7	1.9	1.3
Attraction towards bright light of	2.9	4.7	9.2
Poverty and landlessness	2.1	2.2	3.2
Indebtedness	1.3	0.5	0.6
Large family, so family expenditure	-	0.3	0.6
No civic amenities in the village	-	6.3	2.2
Educated youth-prestige issue for doing work locally	-	1.4	1.3

Destination selection

Emigration from the Punjab has been directed towards destinations shaped by economic opportunities, education and established family networks abroad. Over the last decade, Canada emerged as the most dominant destination (44.3%) for Punjabi youth, largely due to its favourable immigration policies (Figure 4). Further, countries like Australia (13.7%) and the United Kingdom (11.3%) also attracted the youth, especially those from urban areas (Supplementary Table 3). In contrast, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries were more popular among the rural youth, mostly due to the lower migration costs and easy employment opportunities available (Supplementary Table 3).

Figure 4: Prevalence of emigrant youth by the countries they are currently residing in reported by parents⁴

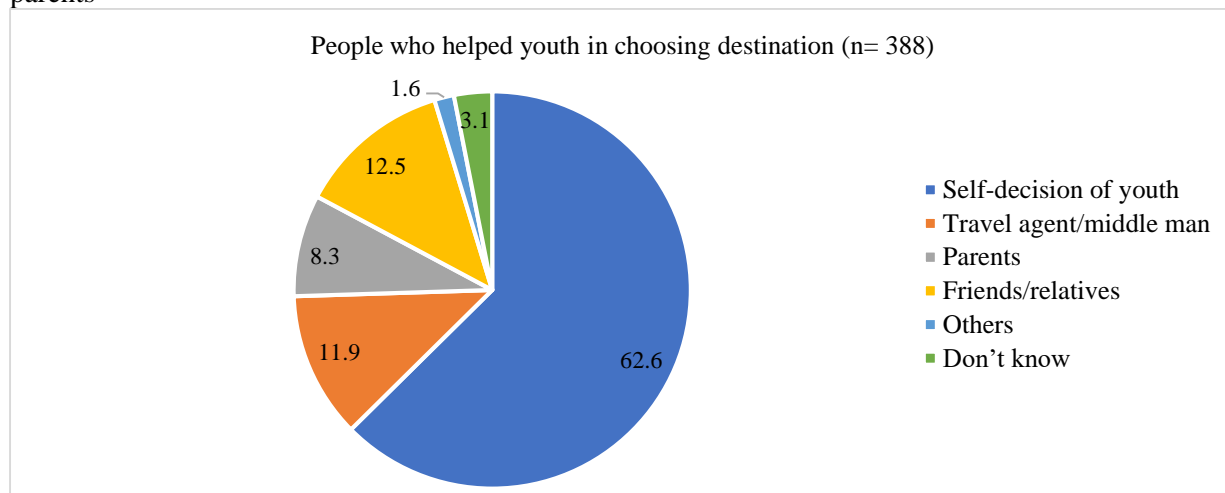


Note: Other countries include United States, Singapore, Germany, Malaysia, Portugal, Italy, France, Argentina, Cyprus and Romania.

⁴ Information was collected on both the initial and current destination countries. Only three parents reported a change in destination, with transitions occurring from GCC to Canada, Australia to New Zealand and New Zealand to Canada.

Parents reported that the decision to choose the destination was mostly done by the youth themselves (62.6%), pointing towards the role of personal aspirations and individual research. However, travel agents and intermediaries (11.9%) also had an influence (Figure 5), particularly among the rural youth (Supplementary Table 4), reflecting the reliance on intermediaries due to the limited access to information or networks.

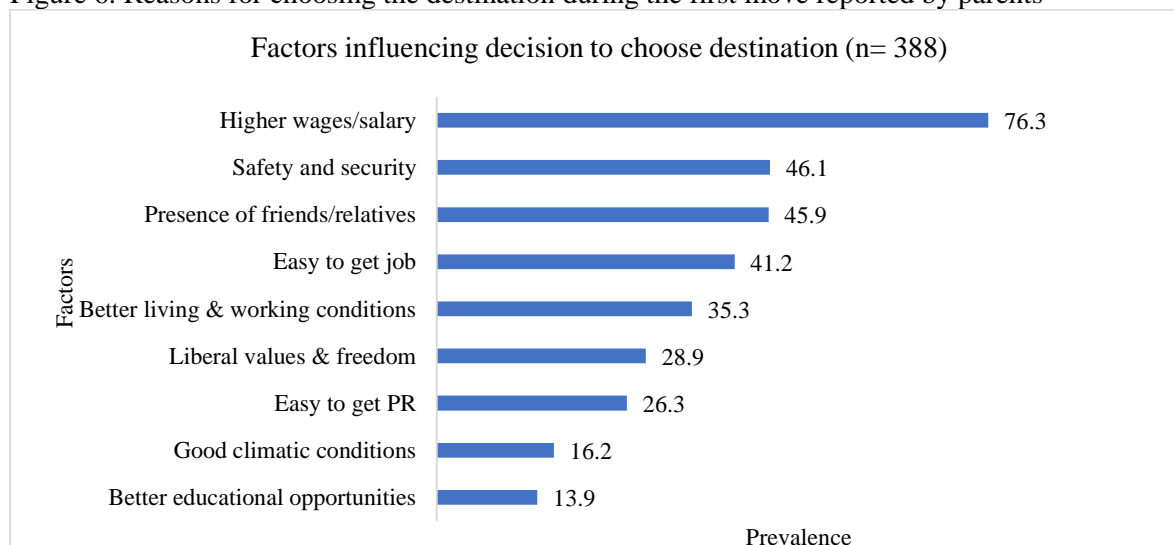
Figure 5. Distribution of people who helped in choosing the destination for the first move reported by parents



According to the parents, the decision to choose the destination was mostly influenced by the ability to earn higher wages/salary (76.3%), followed by safety and security (46.1%) and the presence of friends/relatives (45.9%) (Figure 6). Ease of getting a job, better living and working conditions, liberal values, and freedom and ease of getting permanent residence were also factors that influenced the decision of choosing the destination of the youth emigrants.

Comparing between rural and urban parents, while a higher prevalence of rural parents focused on factors such as the ease to get a job and presence of friends and relatives in the destined country, urban parents gave additional focus to living conditions, liberal values, safety and security, and better educational opportunities as factors to choose the destination country (Supplementary Table 5). Further, while economic and employment opportunities, and quality of life were the primary reasons for migration to New Zealand, Australia, Canada and GCC countries, Canada was singled out for its lenient migration policies and clear permanent residency pathways as per the parents (Supplementary Table 6).

Figure 6. Reasons for choosing the destination during the first move reported by parents



Pre-migration information and counselling

While the choice of destination reflects the youth's aspirations and opportunities available abroad, the process of preparing for migration is also shaped by the information sources and counselling received by the youth emigrants and their parents. According to the parents, the main sources of information on eligibility, procedures, possible destination and other emigration-related issues was their friends and relatives abroad (34%), travel agencies (28.9%) and acquaintances with prior migrants' experience (15%) (Table 3). Strikingly, less than 2 per cent of the parents were aware of any resources that helped their children to prepare for the journey abroad or to seek assistance regarding any problems during emigration, reflecting a significant information gap.

Regarding pre-migration counseling, only 22 per cent of the parents reported that their children received pre-migration counselling in India largely from coaching centres and agents (89%). Nearly half of the parents stated that their child did not receive any pre-migration counselling, while 31 per cent were unsure whether such support was accessed. Around three-fourths of the parents reported that their children emigrated in the first attempt, while 11 per cent did not even know how many attempts their children made to emigrate. As one father described, reliance of agents and informal networks often limited parents' direct involvement or awareness of migration process:

"We did the entire process through an agent. The place where our son prepared for IELTS was run by someone we knew and they guided us through the whole process." - Father, 52 years.

Table 3. Understanding the counselling process of the emigrant youth reported by parents

Indicators	Total	
	n	%
Main source of information on emigration		
Friends/relatives abroad or in India	152	39.2
Recruitment/travel agents/migration agencies	124	31.9
Others who have migrated abroad	59	15.2
Others ⁵	53	13.7
Pre-migration counselling/briefing in India		
Yes	86	22.2
No	180	46.4
Do not know	122	31.4
Received counselling from		
Private agencies	1	1.2
Coaching centers	41	47.7
Agent	36	41.9
Friends/relatives/acquaintances	8	9.3
Number of attempts		
One attempt	290	74.7
Two-three attempts	55	14.2
Do not know	43	11.1
Total	388	

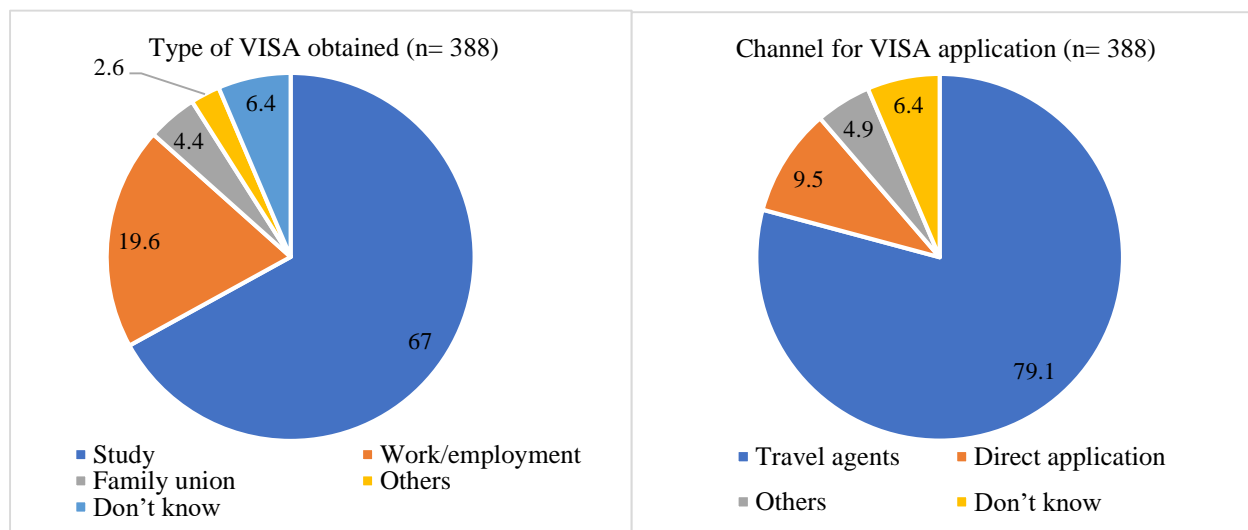
Visa Application

The visa application is a critical stage in the migration journey and often requires external support due to the complexities of this procedure. Around 67 per cent parents said that their children went abroad on study visas and 19.6 per cent said that they took work visas (Figure 7(a)). In urban areas, a higher proportion of parents responded that their children took study visas, whereas work visas were more common among the rural emigrants (Supplementary Table 7). Over three-quarters of the

⁵ Others include advertisement in newspaper, television, seminar, meeting, representatives of foreign universities and others

parents said that their children relied on migration consultants and travel agents to manage their visa applications, thus underscoring the importance of professional intermediaries (Figure 7(b)). Directly applying for a visa was more commonly reported by urban parents (12%) than by rural parents (6.3%) (Supplementary Table 7).

Figure 7(a): Type of Visa obtained by youth emigrants as reported by parents. Figure 7(b): Major channels of visa applications by youth emigrants as reported by parents.



According to the parents, most emigrant youth sought assistance obtaining a visa (66.5%) with 87.9 per cent of this support specifically related to application processing (Table 4). Immigration consultancies and travel agents were the primary providers of such help (85.7%), far exceeding the role of friends or relatives. Interestingly, even when formal agents were chosen, information about them typically circulated through informal networks with 67.4 per cent parents reporting that they learned about agents through friends and relatives. The heavy reliance on the agents suggests the necessity of professional expertise and consequently the limited ability of the state or institutional channels to offer direct and accessible guidance to the prospective emigrants.

Table 4. Understanding the visa seeking process followed by emigrant youth reported by parents

Indicators	Total	
	n	%
Sought help to obtain visa		
Yes	258	66.5
No	33	8.5
Do not know	97	25.0
n	388	
Nature of help sought		
Visa processing	227	87.9
Perusal of refusal case	22	8.5
Others	9	3.6
Help sought from		
Immigration consultancy/travel agents	221	85.7
Relatives & friends in Punjab or abroad	37	14.3
n	258	
Information about travel agents from		
Friends/relatives network	149	67.4
Personal contact	44	19.9
Others	26	11.7
Do not know	2	0.9
Total	221	

Financial expenditure during emigration process

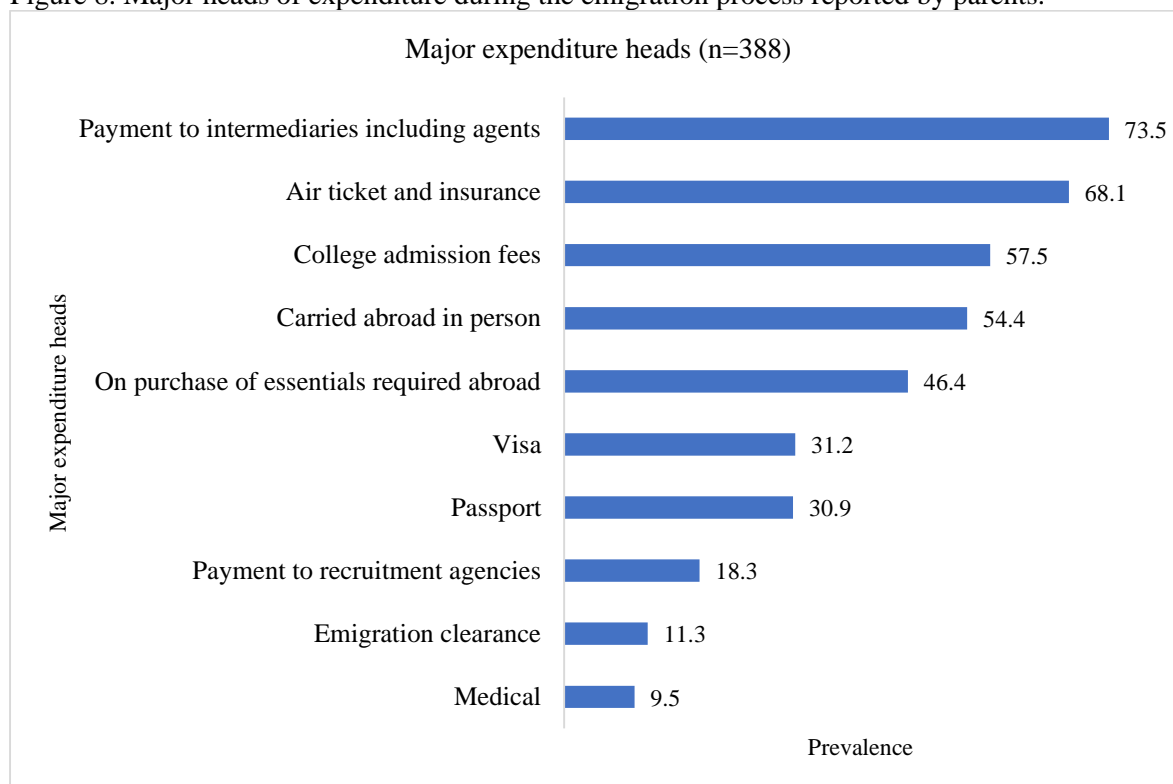
International emigration requires substantial financial investment and often places a significant economic burden on families as they navigate the high costs of visa applications, travel, tuition fees, and settlement expenses. The average cost of youth emigration was 15.10 lakhs according to the parents, but this varied substantially according to socio-economic background, education and the destination country (Table 5). The cost of emigration was higher for youth with higher educational qualifications, particularly among the non-technical graduates. Further, parents who owned land and were above the poverty line spent more on the emigration of their children than those who did not own land and/or were below poverty line. The highest expenditure was reported for study visas and migration to countries such as the Canada, New Zealand, Australia and United Kingdom, reflecting the settlement costs and tuition fees for those going for education. In contrast, work/employment visas and Gulf destinations involved lower expenses. This highlights the difference in financial burden due to both the pathway chosen and the opportunities available.

Table 5: Average expenditure on emigration reported by parents by their background characteristics

Background characteristics	Mean (in lakhs)	SD (in lakhs)
Educational status at the time of emigration		
Up to matriculation	3.4	6.24
Higher Secondary	14.5	9.07
Non-technical higher education/diploma	17.1	6.19
Technical higher education/diploma	15.5	9.29
Type of area		
Rural	14.18	8.87
Urban	15.87	8.10
Any member owns land		
Yes	16.59	8.22
No	13.08	8.44
Poverty status		
APL	16.91	7.43
BPL	6.59	7.97
Emigration details		
Country currently residing in		
United Arab Emirates	1.56	1.16
Canada	18.46	5.06
Australia	16.38	7.21
New Zealand	17.38	5.88
United Kingdom	16.95	6.38
Others	9.83	11.5
Type of visa obtained		
Work/employment	5.32	6.90
Study	18.42	5.10
Family union	15.35	9.28
Others	14.5	12.29
Total	15.10	8.49

Expenditure during emigration was composed of payments to intermediaries and agents (73.5%) (Figure 8), particularly among the urban households (Supplementary Table 8), underscoring the reliance on professional facilitation in managing the migration procedures. The other major cost components were air tickets and insurance (68%) as well as college admission fees (57.5%), highlighting the financial burden of mobility and education abroad. Other significant shares of expenditures were spent on essentials carried abroad, passports, and visas.

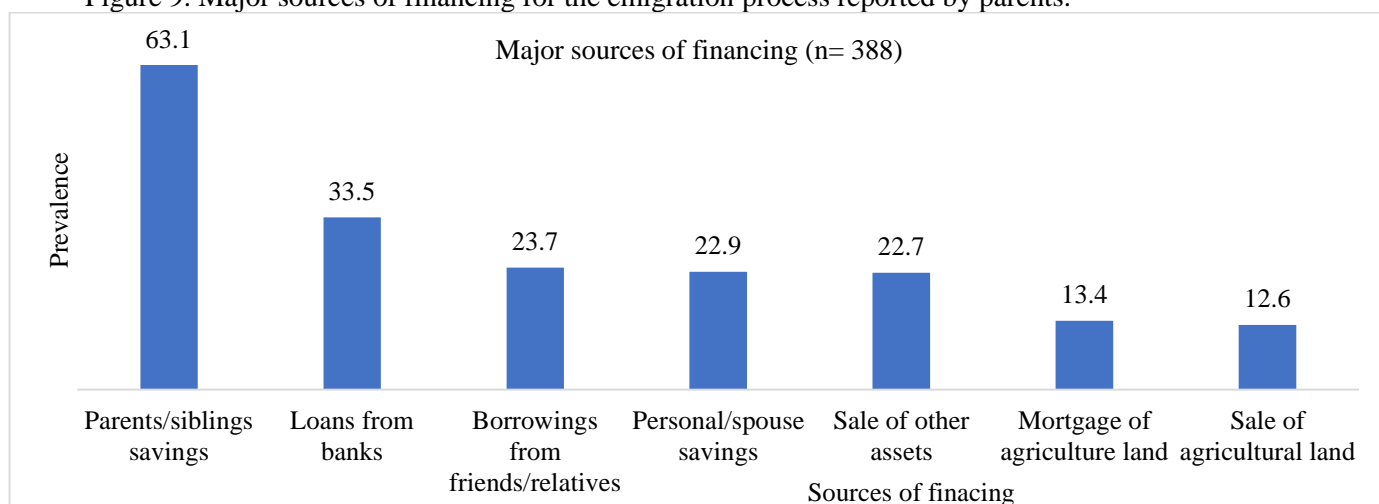
Figure 8. Major heads of expenditure during the emigration process reported by parents.



The financing for these expenditures on emigration was largely driven by savings of parents and siblings (63.1%), followed by loans from banks (33.5%) and borrowings from friends and relatives (23.7%) (Figure 9). Parents of urban emigrants often relied on bank loans reflecting the greater access to formal financial systems. In contrast, rural parents depended more on borrowings from relatives, sale of land and mortgage of agricultural assets (Supplementary Table 9). As one mother explained, financing emigration of their child required piecing together multiple sources of funds, placing considerable strain on the family:

“The total expenses came to around 18–20 lakhs of rupees which included our child’s college fees, tickets and other costs. Arranging this money was very difficult for us. We borrowed some money from relatives. I even sold my jewellery and for the rest we had to take a loan.” - Mother, 50 years.

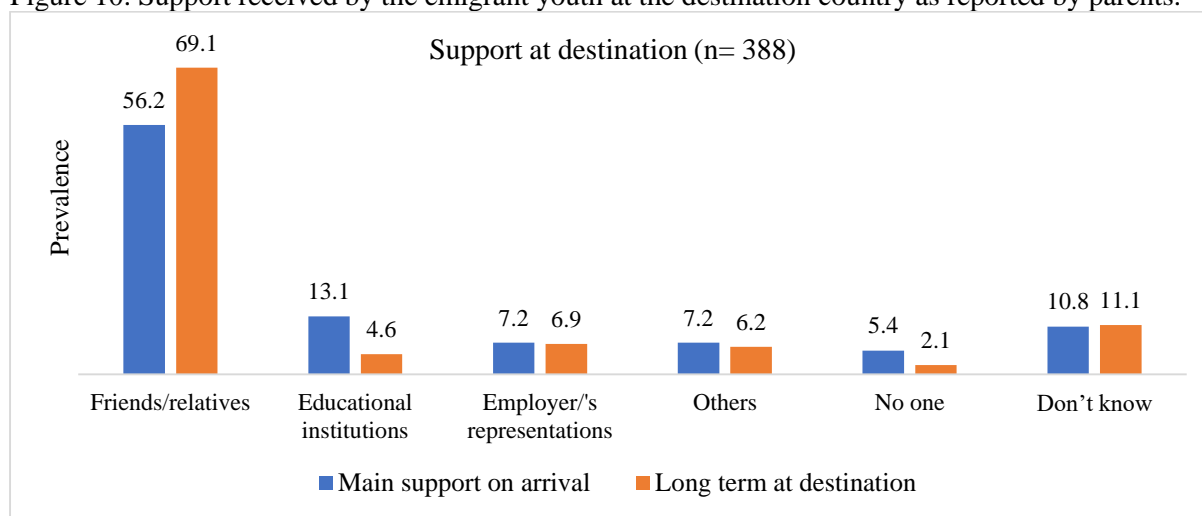
Figure 9. Major sources of financing for the emigration process reported by parents.



Parents' perceptions of emigrants' experiences at destination

Migration, especially for the first time, presents numerous challenges of adjustment and adaptation, making it essential to understand the sources of support available to emigrants. Parents reported that the primary sources of support for emigrant youth upon arrival was friends, relatives and family members, accounting for over half (56.2%) of the cases (Figure 10). Long-term support relied heavily on personal networks with 69 per cent parents indicating that emigrants continued to depend on friends and families abroad. Institutional or formal sources of assistance such as employers and educational institutions played a relatively minor role, while reliance on agents was negligible. A significantly higher proportion of rural parents were unsure of the support received by their children compared with the urban parents (Supplementary Table 10).

Figure 10. Support received by the emigrant youth at the destination country as reported by parents.



According to the parents, most emigrants (73.5%) had secured either a job offer or college admission before departure (Table 6). For those without such arrangements, support strategies included engaging in part-time work (56.2%), undertaking informal and odd jobs (29.1%), or taking up multiple jobs (24.2%). Around 23 per cent also obtained financial assistance from their parents in India. At the same time, a higher proportion of urban parents sent financial assistance to their children and a relatively larger share of rural parents reported not knowing how their children managed financially abroad (Supplementary Table 11). Almost one in two parents responded that they did not know about their children's problems in finding employment abroad. Among those who knew, the major difficulties in finding employment were lack of prior work experience (27.5%) and absence of recommendations or networks (22.7%). As one mother reflected, limited parental awareness of their children's difficulties abroad was often shaped by the emotional distance and normalization of hardship as part of the emigration experience:

“It's normal. Life at home is easy and comfortable, but abroad you have to manage everything on your own. Here, we take care of most things, but their children have to do everything themselves. They face many problems, but often, we think, they don't us all their problems” - Mother, 49 years.

Table 6. Parents' Perspectives of emigrants' employment and financial management abroad

Indicators	Total	
	n	%
Had a job offer/college admission before leaving		
Yes	285	73.5
No	35	9.0
Do not know	68	17.5
Ways to support themselves abroad		
Supplemented with a part-time assignment	218	56.2
Worked in the informal sector/undertook odd jobs	113	29.1
Worked in more than one job	94	24.2
Obtained financial assistance from India	90	23.2
Others	16	4.1
Do not know	55	14.2
	n	
	388	
Main difficulties in finding a job		
Do not know	150	54.9
Lack of experience	75	27.5
Lack of recommendation	62	22.7
Lack of educational qualifications	36	13.2
Language problem	14	5.1
Indian qualifications/experience not recognized	6	2.2
Discrimination	6	2.2
Others	47	17.2
	n	
	273	

When parents were asked if their children had ever faced problems abroad, 23.2 per cent stated that they did not know whether their children faced difficulties, whereas 27.8 per cent reported affirmatively (Table 7). Among those who did report that their emigrant children were facing problems, the major problems cited were food (70.4%), climate (56.5%), accommodation (38.9%) and employment contract (23.2%). Regarding current difficulties, only 9 per cent parents believed that their children were still facing problems, mostly related to employment contracts, work permits and payments or salaries. However, rural parents were more uncertain than urban parents about their children's struggles (Supplementary Table 12), as explained by a father who lived in rural areas:

"In the beginning, children find it hard to adjust because life there is different and very busy with people not having much time to talk. Over time they get used to it. But being far from home is never easy."- Father, 53 years.

Viewing migration through parents' perspectives reveals a stark paradox: though youth drive the decision, emigration relies heavily on family finances, informal networks and agents. This pathway underscores families' financial and emotional burdens while exposing critical information gaps and vulnerabilities.

Table 7. Parents' perspectives on problems faced by emigrants in the destined country

Indicators	Total	
	n	%
Ever faced any problem during his stay at destination		
Yes	108	27.8
No	190	48.9
Do not know	90	23.2
	n	388
Problems faced		
Food problem	76	70.4
Climate	61	56.5
Accommodation	42	38.9
Job contract/permit concerns	33	30.6
Hostile work environment/payment issues	21	19.4
Others	22	20.4
	n	108
Currently facing any problems at the destination		
Yes	33	8.5
No	234	60.3
Do not know	121	31.2
	n	388
Kind of problems faced		
Work permit-related	14	42.4
Employment contract	15	45.5
Payment/salary	8	24.2
Others	9	27.3
	n	33

IV. Discussion

The decision of the youth to emigrate presents a compelling paradox: while youth exhibit considerable agency by initiating the conversation to emigrate themselves, they are deeply dependent on their parents and families to shoulder the economic burden and the risks. While pursuing opportunities abroad expresses their ambition to achieve upward socio-economic mobility, it is immediately constrained by the realities of a high-cost and high-risk emigration process. An average expenditure of over Rs 15 lakhs changes migration from a simple personal choice to a major, high-stakes investment by the family. As the migration costs increase through the visa fees, agent commissions, education and settlement expenses, parents are forced to provide the finance from their savings, loans, land mortgages, or informal borrowings. Research on South Asian migration has highlighted that such journeys are deeply embedded in household strategies and collective economic gambles, rather than just being individualistic endeavours (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019).

As perceived by parents, the motivations for emigration extend beyond economic hardship and unstable employment opportunities, encompassing aspirations for social prestige and peer-driven influences, thus creating a complex interplay of opportunity and risk. Economic deprivation and insufficient livelihood have been well-established drivers of migration (Posso et al., 2023), more specifically due to the Punjab's agrarian distress and the scarcity of desirable local employment opportunities for the educated youth (G. Kaur, 2018; G. Kaur et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2023). While urban emigrants were more influenced by peer pressure, attraction towards foreign countries and pursuing education abroad, rural emigrants faced higher financial distress, employment instability and social challenges like drug-related concerns. The powerful influence of peer pressure and social prestige attached to foreign settlement highlights that individuals migrate to escape poverty and improve their standing within their social sphere (Carling & Schewel, 2020; Stark & Taylor, 1991). Adolescents who are exposed to peer success stories of their migration experiences are more likely to view migration

as a normative or desirable career path (Singh et al., 2023). In the Punjab, this craze for going abroad has become a cultural phenomenon, a rite of passage, and a symbol of success, status and modernity for the entire family (G. Kaur, 2018; Nayak & Jaswinder, 2023). The parental perspectives in this study have captured that while parents observe youths' aspirations fueled by peer pressure and pursuit of prestige, they are also aware of the economic foundations underpinning these decisions.

A notable trend that emerged was the privatization of migration journey wherein youth and their parents have increasingly been reliant on visa consultants, IELTS coaching centres and travel agents to navigate the complex migration procedures which account for over 70 per cent of emigration expenses, as per the parents. This corresponds with the overall patterns of informal privatization of migration services in the Punjab where information asymmetries lead to malpractices. A report by the Ministry of External Affairs revealed that 92 per cent travel agents in the Punjab were operating illegally, often charging exorbitant fees and offering unlicensed services that crippled families' financial stability (Malik, 2025). Alongside formal intermediaries, decisions and choices around emigration were also shaped by transnational social networks. Parents' narratives underscore the lack of formal guidance due to which they entrust the entire migration process to intermediaries leading to higher costs and risks. This under-regulated environment is often rife with the potential for fraud and misinformation, a well-documented issue in South Asia, leaving families to navigate a high-risk landscape with little to no formal protection (Rajan & Percot, 2020).

An interesting paradox that emerged from the study was that although the primary motivation for emigration among youth was employment, the majority migrated on a student visa. This contradiction arises because the direct labour-migration channels are often inaccessible: work visas require high skills, employer sponsorship, or stringent eligibility, whereas the student visas are relatively easier to obtain. Over time, studying abroad has evolved into a strategic migration pathway rather than a purely educational pursuit, as it offers legal entry, post-study work opportunities, and potential permanent residency (K. Sharma & Peng, 2025). The findings from this study further revealed that the decision to emigrate for the youth is seldom driven by academic aspirations or the perceived quality of education at the destination, but the factors such as higher earning potential, safety and security, ease of finding employment, and the presence of family and social networks play a more decisive role in shaping destination choices. Thus, the study visa serves less as a route for education and more as an accepted and practical way to achieve long-term migration goals.

Furthermore, the findings highlight a stark urban-rural divide at every stage of the emigration process, revealing significant inequalities in access to information and financial capital. Urban parents benefit from greater access to reliable information, formal credit and social networks, enabling them to apply directly for visas or to seek institutional financial support. By contrast, rural families with limited connectivity for information, fewer formal channels of finance and weak support systems become more dependent on intermediaries. While urban parents often turn to bank loans for financing, rural parents have to borrow from relatives, sell land, or mortgage their agricultural assets. The extended reliance on informal financing and agents leads to rural youth facing higher vulnerability and raises the economic stakes of emigration.

A particularly stark finding was that the parents, especially rural parents, explicitly stated that they did not know crucial details regarding their children's long-term plans, support systems and struggles abroad, highlighting the information gap within transnational families. It might not result from parental indifference, but rather a consequence of the children keeping a form of "strategic silence" to maintain autonomy or shield their families from the hardships of settlement process (Sabatier, 2008). Emigrants might deliberately withhold information about the employment or housing difficulties, creating an image of success, due to the immense financial investment made for their emigration. Such parental "not knowing" underscores the emotional cost of migration where the families which make heavy financial and social sacrifices are simultaneously distanced from their children's lived realities abroad. This silence is not trivial; it signals both structural barriers to communication and intergenerational concealment strategies that complicate the idea of parental involvement in migration trajectories.

The study's primary strength lies in its unique focus on the parental perspective, offering a crucial, ground-level view of the financial and emotional mechanics of migration from the family unit left behind, uncovering the hidden anxieties and information gaps that migrant-centric studies may overlook. While the absence of the emigrant youth's experiences and motivations are filtered through their parents' perspectives, future studies could approach a dyadic approach. However, it is important to acknowledge that the study focuses on Amritsar to provide a depth into a key hub of youth emigration, and may not be generalizable to all of India and even Punjab.

V. Conclusion

This study highlights the centrality of parental perspectives in understanding youth emigration from Amritsar, Punjab, showing how families simultaneously act as enablers, financiers and interpreters of their children's migration journeys. The findings highlight the need to expand state-led accessible and transparent counselling, affordable credit mechanisms and visa support in order to reduce the reliance on private agents, especially for rural households. Strengthening official information channels and digital literacy could curb exploitation and enable more informed decisions.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, India. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants in the study.

Availability of data and materials

The study utilizes primary data collected by the corresponding author as a part of PhD research. Due to confidentiality, the data is available with the author and can be made available at suitable request.

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Supplementary Material

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the left behind parents interviewed in the study

Socio-demographic characteristics	n	%
Age		
40-49 years	105	27.1
50-59 years	224	57.7
60+ years	59	15.2
Sex		
Male	213	54.9
Female	175	45.1
Marital status		
Currently married	355	91.5
Widowed	33	8.5
Current educational status		
Up to matriculation	235	60.6
Higher secondary education	108	27.8
Non-technical higher education/ diploma	40	10.3
Technical higher education/ diploma	5	1.3
Type of occupation		
Primary sector	60	15.5
Secondary sector	44	11.3
Tertiary sector	112	28.9
Non-economic activities	172	44.3
Poverty level		
APL	320	82.5
BPL	68	17.5
Place of residence		
Rural	176	45.3
Urban	212	54.6
Religion		
Sikh	254	65.5
Hindu	128	33.0
Others	6	1.5
Total	388	

Table 2. Prevalence of major reasons of youth emigration from Amritsar by place of residence, reported by parents.

Reasons for emigration	Rural		Urban	
	n	%	n	%
<i>Economic hardships and financial pressures</i>				
Hope for higher earning	150	85.2	172	81.1
Insufficient income at origin	110	62.5	125	58.9
Poverty and landlessness	23	13.1	22	10.4
Large family so family expenditures	4	2.3	5	2.4
Indebtedness	5	2.8	4	1.9
<i>Aspirations and external influences</i>				
Peer pressure	110	62.5	152	71.7
Attraction towards foreign lands	28	15.9	44	20.8
Wish for better education abroad	14	7.9	32	15.1
<i>Unstable living conditions and social challenges</i>				
Irregular employment at origin	99	56.3	113	53.3
No civic amenities in community	21	11.9	25	11.8
Protection from drugs	25	14.2	11	5.2
<i>Disinterest in local work</i>				
Lack of interest in ancestral work	72	40.9	61	28.8
Educated youth-prestige issue for doing work locally	7	3.9	10	4.7
Total	176		212	

Table 3. Prevalence of emigrant youth by the countries they are currently residing by place of residence reported by parents.

Country	Rural		Urban	
	n	%	n	%
Canada	70	39.8	100	47.2
Australia	18	10.2	36	16.9
United Kingdom	20	11.4	24	11.3
GCC countries	21	11.9	14	6.6
New Zealand	12	6.8	12	5.7
Others	35	19.9	26	12.3
Total	176		212	

Table 4. Prevalence of people who helped in choosing destination for the first move by place of residence reported by parents.

Helped in choosing destination	Rural		Urban	
	n	%	n	%
Self-decision of youth	106	60.2	137	64.6
Travel agent/middle man	27	15.3	19	8.9
Parents	10	5.7	22	10.4
Friends/relatives	21	11.9	28	13.3
Others	3	1.7	3	1.4
Don't know	9	5.1	3	1.4
Total	176		212	

Table 5. Reasons for choosing the destination during the first move by place of residence reported by parents

Factors	Rural		Urban	
	n	%	n	%
Higher wages/salary	135	76.7	161	75.9
Safety and security	66	37.5	113	53.3
Presence of friends/relatives	83	47.2	95	44.8
Easy to get job	79	44.9	81	38.2
Better living & working conditions	43	24.4	94	44.3
Liberal values & freedom	41	23.3	71	33.5
Easy to get PR	51	28.9	51	24.1
Good climatic conditions	16	9.1	47	22.2
Better educational opportunities	16	9.1	38	17.9
Total	176		212	

Table 6. Reasons for choosing the destination during the first move by country reported by parents

Reasons	Canada		Australia		United Kingdom		GCC countries		New Zealand	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Higher wages/salary	139	81.8	44	81.5	29	65.9	21	60	22	91.7
Safety and security	86	50.6	42	77.8	19	43.2	0	0	22	91.7
Presence of friends/relatives	106	62.4	24	44.4	20	45.5	7	20	10	41.7
Easy to get job	81	47.7	25	46.3	11	25.0	13	37.1	7	29.2
Better living & working conditions	60	35.3	30	55.6	16	36.4	0	0	19	79.2
Liberal values & freedom	57	33.5	20	37.1	18	40.9	1	2.9	9	37.5
Easy to get PR	98	57.7	3	5.6	1	2.3	0	0	0	0
Good climatic conditions	24	14.1	18	33.3	8	18.1	0	0	8	33.3
Better educational opportunities	22	12.9	11	20.4	12	27.3	0	0	4	16.7
Total	170		54		44		35		24	

Table 7. Channel for visa application and type of VISA obtained by place of residence reported by parents.

Indicators	Rural		Urban	
	n	%	n	%
Channel for visa application				
Travel agents	138	78.4	169	79.7
Direct application	11	6.3	26	12.3
Others	13	7.4	6	2.8
Don't know	14	7.9	11	5.2
Type of visa obtained				
Study	99	56.3	161	75.9
Work/employment	46	26.1	30	14.2
Others	14	8	13	6.1
Don't know	17	9.7	8	3.8
Total	176		212	

Table 8. Major heads on which the money was spent on during emigration process by place of residence reported by parents

Major expenditure heads	Rural		Urban	
	n	%	n	%
Payment to intermediaries including agents	122	69.3	163	76.9
Air ticket and insurance	109	61.9	155	73.1
College admission fees	82	46.6	141	66.5
Carried abroad in person	88	50.0	123	58.0
On purchase of essentials required abroad	69	39.2	111	52.4
Visa	52	29.6	69	32.6
Passport	53	30.1	67	31.6
Payment to recruitment agencies	37	21.0	34	16.1
Emigration clearance	23	13.1	21	9.9
Medical test	17	9.7	20	9.4
Total	176		212	

Table 9. Major sources of financing for the emigration process by place of residence reported by parents

Major sources of financing	Rural		Urban	
	n	%	n	%
Parents/siblings savings	102	57.9	143	67.5
Loans from banks	30	17.1	100	47.2
Borrowings from friends/relatives	43	24.4	49	23.1
Personal/spouse savings	34	19.3	55	25.9
Sale of other assets	26	14.8	62	29.3
Mortgage of agriculture land	46	26.1	6	2.8
Sale of agricultural land	33	18.8	16	7.6
Total	176		212	

Table 10. Parents reporting “don’t know” about support at destination for youth emigrants by place of residence

Indicators	Rural		Urban	
	n	%	n	%
Don’t know about main support on arrival	32	18.2	10	4.7
Don’t know about long term at destination	32	18.2	11	5.2
Total	176		212	

Table 11. Ways of emigrants supporting themselves abroad by place of residence reported by parents

Indicators	Rural		Urban	
	n	%	n	%
Supplemented with part-time assignment	88	50.0	130	61.3
Worked in informal sector/undertook odds jobs	54	30.7	59	27.8
Worked in more than one job	45	25.6	49	23.1
Obtained financial assistance from India	27	15.3	63	29.7
Others	5	2.8	11	5.2
Don’t know	32	18.2	23	10.9
Total	176		212	

Table 12. Parents reporting “don’t know” about problems at destination of youth emigrants by place of residence

Indicators	Rural		Urban	
	N	%	N	%
Don’t know about problems ever faced during their stay at destination	49	27.8	41	19.3
Don’t know that they are currently facing any problem at the destination	62	35.2	59	27.8
Total	176		212	