



Discussing Trends and Challenges in the Process of Migration in Punjab

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Abstract:

Politics in Punjab is dynamic in nature. It provides a wide canvass involving interplay of different socio-cultural and politico-economic factors. Its diaspora has directly and indirectly influenced the politics of the home state in various ways. The recent farmers' protests against the agricultural laws captured national and international attention as well as showcased various undercurrents in the politics of the state. Meanwhile, the protests against forceful closure of the distillery factory at Zira is just one amongst the others as the state has a long history of mobilization of the people around various issues at the grassroots level. The way people gave their mandate against traditional parties in the 2022 Assembly Elections and against the AAP in 2024 Lok Sabha Elections, speaks volumes about the volatility of the politics in the state. Indeed, politics in Punjab is in a state of flux. Out of various concerns and issues migration is one of the vital problems facing the society at different levels in the state. It has set to jolt Punjab decisively. Though it is not a new phenomenon in the state, migration in contemporary times is different than that in the past. It is distinct in terms of the magnitude and factors that drive it. There is no unanimity among the scholars regarding explanation of this exodus towards abroad. Equally significant fact is that migrants from other parts of the country are inline to fill the gap. This in and out bound migration is set to change social, economic, political and cultural milieu in the state. It is against this background, that a modest attempt has been made to analyze the process of migration and its possible impact on Punjab and its society.

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I. Introduction:

The state of Punjab has witnessed several violent phases that obstructed the life and its boundaries in the past. The partition of the country in 1947 was one of the major setbacks. Not only geographically it squeezed but its social and political order also underwent drastic change. However, its people due to their strong determination stood against these challenges and endured the hardships of life with confidence. In 1966, Punjab was reorganized. Haryana, Chandigarh and parts of Himachal Pradesh were carved out of Punjab. For the first time, Sikhs emerged as a majority in the state due to change in Punjab's boundaries. However, Sikh population declined in the following years and, this slump in the population continues till date. Shiromani Akali Dal among other organizations played a pivotal role in reorganizing of Punjab in 1966. Though Sikh politicians dominated the political life of the state thereafter, but a wedge between the centre and state continued to inflate thereafter. The successive central governments including of Nehru and Indra Gandhi failed to connect with people. They afraid that any concession to the Sikhs may not sow the seeds of separatism. Coupled with it, Punjab shares a long border with Pakistan, this further heightened center's anxieties. The political discourse that emerged in post reorganisation phase speaks the volume of this distrust that reflected in every gesture of successive central governments towards Punjab. The recent protests in Punjab either it is by the farmers or by other organisation on any local or national issue are the reminders that people in the state are restive and annoyed by the failure of governance and undue intervention. Especially farmer's protest attracted not only national but global attention. This protest was unique in many terms that contributed in making Indian democracy a functional one. National media and the other vested agencies though mostly attempted to malign this peaceful protest by labeling them as separatists but fighting spirit of the

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people forced the government to take back the laws. Even politically, Punjab experimented on the electoral front. It is evident, it gave four Parliamentary seats to AAP in 2014 when Modi wave swept the country. In the Punjab Assembly Elections 2017, its people voted to AAP against the traditional parties but could not form the government. It was only in 2022, it provided absolute majority to the AAP. Thereafter, the declining popularity of AAP in Punjab further reinforces this fact, the parties that do not work as per the expectations of the local people will not sustain in Punjab. This showed that people of Punjab never bow before the pressure. The secular character and benevolence of the people of Punjab actually provides them strength.

Economically Punjab remained weak since 1947. Actually, it is an agrarian state where agriculture constitutes substantial part of its GDP. When India met with dreaded starvation and drought, Punjab emerged as a ray of hope. This may be attributed to the soil fertility of the state and well-functioning irrigation system. This was the time when India approached America for food supply. Though the latter provided wheat to India under its PL-480 scheme but one must not forget that it was unfit wheat for human consumption. America was supposed to dump the same in the sea. Anyhow, Punjab was ushered in to green revolution in 1960s, thanks to the unprecedented support of the central regimes. Though Punjab emerged as food bowl of India but successive central and state governments failed to elevate state's economy to industrialization. Instead, mono culture of wheat and paddy crop pattern damaged the ecological balance in the state. This may attributed to the ever readiness of the people who employed excessive machinery, fertilizers and pesticides. On the other hand, Punjab spiraled into violent phase in 1980s. The militancy swept the state where people of Punjab bore the brunt of state and militant's servility. Meanwhile, state's economy suffered a lot in this phase and swamped under the mounting debt. The present financial health of Punjab that is ridden with massive unemployment rate, stagnated agriculture and industrial growth etc. are hall marks that made the situation vulnerable in the state. The scholars even opine that centre does not intend Punjab to go away from agriculture. India's food security looms large over the state in the wake of soil fertility and irrigation system Punjab has. In short, Punjab is in deep crises now. Its present and future does seem as bright as compare to its past. Migration is one such problems Punjab is facing today that is set to cost it very dearer in multifaceted ways.

Punjab when annexed by the Britishers in 1849 met with a different fate. The colonial masters introduced many modern practices in the state that broke the traditional system of governance, including basics of the economy. They also encouraged the fomenting in the society for their petty interests. One of the key intrusion was the conversion of natives into Christianity. This resulted in the establishment of Singh Sabha Movement in 1870s along with such organizations by Hindus and Muslims in the state. Meanwhile, Britishers recognized the valor of Punjabis and especially of the Sikh people. They recruited them in the armed forces. During the 1st and 2nd world wars, they deployed these soldiers in the war from England side. This provided a chance to Punjabis and Sikhs for going to far-flung places in the world. This was the first phase of migration, as many soldiers stayed there at the foreign shores. In this phase, Punjabis and Sikhs settled in East Asia, including Singapore. This momentum did not stop even in the 1947 onward. As England financially tormented in post-world war period, it encouraged in-bound migration. Many Punjabis first went to England where they worked very hard in furnaces and mines. Later Punjabis turned towards other parts of the world, including America, Canada, Australia, Italy etc. Even during the militancy period, people went abroad by taking asylum. The sorry state of affairs in the post militancy phase further encouraged out-bound migration in the state. However, migration in the present phase surpassed all the previous trends and records. Students from the Punjab actually are leading the drive of exodus. Even, other sections of the society are not behind. Many people are leaving their government jobs. Hence, not only brain drain but resources are flowing to foreign shores. The narrative that generally defends migration is the worsening socio-economic and political situation in Punjab. Even they accuse the education system that neither enables the students as competent nor provides them employment. The menace of drugs that has spread its tentacles in the state further provides them clue to move. Coupled with it, the poor financial health of Punjab's economy where agriculture and industry are crises ridden leaves no other option to migration. However, scholars admit these factors that work as catalyst to migration but the youth and their parents actually embraced escapism route, they allege. The way youth of Punjab have alienated from work culture itself highlights shortcut tactics are more attracting them.

Nevertheless, the youth and their parents cannot be blamed entirely if they decide to migrate. Actually, state in India in general and at the global level in particular has turned from welfare to regulative mode. The global south by compulsions and by choice are emulating what is prevalent in the developed countries. Though the latter too face perennial problems but somehow they have the capability to manage the situation. But in the countries like India where large portion of the population is already bereft of economic benefits, hence the situation is alarming. It is evident if one pay attention to the unemployment rate in the country besides other factors. It is this situation that forced the people to think beyond the government assurances. Those who can afford are going abroad for studies. It is argued that the total expenditure on one student in India is comparatively non profitable investment if his or her studies in the foreign countries assessed in terms of employment and other dividends are concerned. Since it is an age of hyper-information where certain lobbies unnecessarily create hype and tarnish the image of Punjab, so parents and youth must think rationally while deciding to migrate.

On the other hand, in-bound migration is another cause of concern for Punjab. It is seen that large numbers of migrant laborers from northern states of India are in line to work and settle in Punjab. Since each Indian has empowered constitutionally to reside in any part of the country, including in Punjab but this unmanaged inflow of migration will surely push Punjab into conflicting zone. It may be evident that Punjab's unemployment rate is already higher than national level. On the other hand, migrant labour has also captured approximately 70 percent unskilled market in Punjab. Once locals edged out in the wake of cheap labour will foster fault lines in the society. Moreover, the cultural differentiations will further add fuel to social harmony. The last but not the least is the fact that Sikhs are majority in Punjab though this composition is fast receding in the wake of multiple factors, they observe this process as a plank to outnumber them in their own state. Many a times, voices surfaced to ban the purchase of land in Punjab by the outsiders on the par with Himachal Pradesh speak the volume of rising hostility towards migrants.

In the concluding remarks, it is said that migration is an integral part of human civilization. Wherever opportunities exist people move to avail them. Of particular note, people also move under compulsion as in case of Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. The fears of persecution or volatile situation in such countries actually encourages such migration. The migration from Punjab is also driven by the global and internal factors, though it is a voluntary migration. Most of the countries in the Western hemisphere need migrants in the wake of their declining population growth rate and for cheap labour. They very smartly adopted such migration policies where the doors of their educational institutions were opened for international students. On the one hand, this will pump money in their economies and at the same time, they may train the young minds for their easy adaptability in the local system. So, to migrate abroad is not always bad decision. But the way students and even people from the age group of 15-45 are moving out is a major concern for the Punjab government. It is a double whammy loss actually. On the one hand, brain drain is taking place and drain of resources from the state/country is another loss. At such a situation, parents and especially youth must have look at the rich history of Punjab that how it overcome the crises. Emphasis must be on the inclusive education, including to develop entrepreneur skills as is the case in China that has emerged as economic superpower in the world. In short, government's intervention is inevitable at this time.

Last but not the least is that the global economic slowdown gripped most of the western countries, immigration emerged a burning issue over there. This has resulted in tightening the rules over migrants. Canada, say for instance, modified its migration policy in 2024 in the wake of mounting financial affordability and housing crisis. Under this policy, a cap over the temporary residents has been planned to ensure sustainable growth besides change student's working hours followed by permanent residence. Even in the ongoing presidential electoral campaign, immigration has emerged as key issue. Though youth in Punjab disheartened amidst such policies, but it is time for the governments to modernize and equip the infrastructure and human capital in the country for the better future.

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