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The Allure of Migration: Punjab's Aspiration and Indo-EU Mobility Framework

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The dream of young men in Punjab is to migrate to the USA. In some cases the dream can turn into a nightmare. Illustratively, the image of Punjab youth, returning to India in handcuffs aboard deportation from the United States had generated widespread public concern. Many of these youths had undertaken their journeys through irregular migration channels — commonly known as the ‘donkey route’ — after their families invested life savings, sold ancestral land, or mortgaged property in the hope of securing a future abroad. Their return, marked by detention rather than dignity, underscores the human cost of irregular migration in an era of tightening immigration regimes worldwide.

Irregular migration has become a significant policy challenge across advanced economies, even as it remains an important economic lifeline for many developing ones. According to World Bank indicators, net migration from India was approximately 6 lakh persons in 2024, while remittances accounted for 3.52 per cent of GDP. States such as Punjab, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu have long been major sources of overseas migration, though the character of migration from Punjab has increasingly shifted from skilled and semi-skilled mobility towards high-risk irregular pathways.

For a country with a youthful demographic profile, migration in itself is not the central concern; the deeper challenge lies in unsafe, illegal, and exploitative migration that endangers lives and erodes household wealth. The motivation of this note arises here: the forced return of Punjab’s youth reflects aspiration in the absence of legal pathways. The pressing question is not whether the state’s youth will seek opportunities abroad, but how irregular migration can be converted into structured, lawful, and skill-based mobility that matches aspiration with safety, legality, and dignity. The India–EU trade agreement concluded in January 2026, with its framework on mobility, lends this question both fresh urgency and a concrete institutional opening. This provides an opportunity to adventurous youth of Punjab.

The discussion is organised as follows. Section 2 examines the drivers of migration in Punjab. Section 3 sets out the legal window created by the Indo–EU mobility framework. Section 4 identifies the sector-wise opportunities in Europe to which Punjab’s skill base corresponds. Section 5 concludes by drawing these threads together with recommendations for a state-led, legal, and skill-based migration strategy.

2. Punjab: The Allure of Migration

Several villages in Punjab are increasingly described as semi-abandoned or ‘ghost villages’, a consequence of large-scale international migration, with many of their larger houses now occupied only by ageing parents or elderly couples. The pattern of migration from the state is multifaceted, with preferred destinations including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United

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States, and the Middle East. It is driven primarily by the search for employment, higher wages, an improved standard of living, and study-to-work pathways.

Punjab's agrarian economy increasingly exhibits disguised unemployment, as rapid mechanisation has reduced the capacity of agriculture to absorb labour and has altered established production practices. Both academic studies and the popular press point to a rise in contract farming, with migrant labour from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh now performing most field operations, including tilling and harvesting.

Urbanisation and real-estate-led growth have drawn youth further away from agriculture. At the same time, structural transformation has remained limited, as manufacturing growth is constrained by high capital requirements, infrastructural gaps, and a shortage of entrepreneurial and technical skills. As a result, many young people from Punjab find it comparatively easier to enter transportation, logistics, security services, and other low- and semi-skilled occupations abroad, particularly in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Recent years, however, have also witnessed a discernible trend of reverse migration, driven largely by slowing growth in Western economies, rising living and medical costs, and tightening immigration regimes. This emerging pattern also reflects India's changing macroeconomic context: the country has recorded strong growth in recent years and now ranks among the world's largest and fastest-growing economies, having emerged as the fourth largest.

Even a casual observation of major cities and towns in Punjab reveals a sharp increase in hoardings advertising IELTS and other foreign-language testing centres, alongside visa consultancy services. Such centres increasingly portray overseas education and migration as lucrative opportunities and as a stepping stone to long-term settlement abroad, often operating in tandem with informal networks that facilitate migration routes and channels.

3. A New Legal Window: The Indo–EU Mobility Framework

Against this background, the India–EU trade agreement concluded on 27 January 2026 offers a structured and legal alternative to irregular and uncertain migration pathways. Beyond tariff liberalisation, the agreement incorporates a Comprehensive Framework on Mobility, with an emphasis on expanding skill mobility as an enabler of sustainable, inclusive, and mutually beneficial growth for India and the European Union. It seeks to facilitate the legal and regulated movement of professionals, students, and service providers, subject to the domestic laws of individual EU member states.

As part of the initiative, a pilot European Legal Gateway Office has been established in India to serve as a one-stop hub of information and to support the movement of workers to the EU. Digital tools are also being deployed to modernise and simplify Schengen visa procedures.

The framework establishes clearer and more predictable pathways for mobility across several categories:

- **Academic and research mobility:** existing instruments such as the Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration (SPARC) complement the framework by supporting exchanges of students, academics, and researchers between Indian and European institutions.

- **Intra-Corporate Transferees (ICTs):** employees of Indian companies with operations in the European Union may be transferred legally, with provisions that also allow accompanying dependants.
- **Contractual Service Suppliers (CSS):** Indian firms may deploy employees to the EU under commercial contracts across 37 sub-sectors, including information technology and professional services.
- **Independent Professionals (IP):** market access is provided in 17 sub-sectors, including information technology, research and development, and higher education.
- **Students and post-study employment:** the framework eases Indian students' access to EU educational institutions and expands post-study employment opportunities, enhancing employability and skill development.
- **Social security coordination:** progress towards social security arrangements aims to reduce double contributions and provide greater certainty for cross-border workers.

Importantly, the framework does not promote open-ended migration. It emphasises regulated, skill-based, and contract-linked mobility, and thereby offers the legal, predictable, and structured pathways that many young people in Punjab seek.

4. Sector-Wise Opportunities in Europe

Europe's demographic ageing and sector-specific labour shortages create opportunities for calibrated and legal workforce mobility from regions with compatible skill bases. Punjab's economy, with its strong base in agro-processing and in hand-made products such as sports goods, hand tools, and engineering goods, aligns well with European requirements in mechanical and electrical engineering, quality assurance, and shop-floor supervision. In information technology and digital services, the state's expanding pool of engineering graduates and IT professionals offers potential for roles in software development and applied artificial intelligence, among others.

Punjab's established capabilities in food processing and agro-logistics correspond closely with European demand in logistics and supply-chain management, particularly warehousing, cold-chain handling, and distribution.

The state's concentration of higher-education institutions and research centres provides a base for engagement in education and research services, including vocational and skill-based roles. Opportunities in wellness and traditional medicine may also be explored on a regulated basis, in accordance with the domestic frameworks of host countries. Taken together, these openings can help connect job-seekers and employers in a sustained manner, advancing the mutual and inclusive development of regions across India and the EU.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Migration is not, in itself, a failure of the state. Historically, international migration has contributed to remittances, entrepreneurship, and upward social mobility in Punjab. What is unacceptable is irregular migration that culminates in detention, deportation, indebtedness, and humiliation. The Indo-EU framework does not remove every barrier to mobility — visa issuance and quotas remain within the sovereign control of EU member states — but it establishes a rule-based, legally structured channel through which skilled Indian workers can

contribute to European labour markets. For Punjab, this represents a strategic opportunity rather than a constraint.

Realising that opportunity requires a coherent, state-led response rather than reliance on private agents and fragmented coaching centres. Six measures merit priority:

- **Adopt a state-led mobility strategy.** The State Government should assume a central coordinating role in managing international labour mobility, so that overseas pathways are legal, transparent, and aligned with labour-market demand.
- **Establish a Punjab–EU Labour Observatory.** A dedicated observatory should map sector-specific skill shortages across European countries — Germany for engineering, the Netherlands for logistics, Ireland for digital services, and Italy and Spain for agri-processing — with the mapping updated annually.
- **Align skill development with EU standards.** Industrial Training Institutes, polytechnics, and engineering colleges should be revamped to meet European requirements, with language training in German, French, or Spanish embedded within technical programmes.
- **Create legal migration facilitation cells.** State-backed cells across district headquarters should guide youth on regulated routes and reduce dependence on unregulated intermediaries.
- **Promote corporate and industry partnerships.** Indian firms with EU operations should be encouraged to set up training centres in Punjab, widening the scope for legal mobility through intra-corporate transfers.
- **Strengthen social-protection awareness.** Prospective migrants should be educated about labour rights, contracts, social security coordination, and return-migration options.

The recent forced returns from the United States should serve as a critical inflection point. Punjab can either allow aspiration to continue flowing through unsafe and unregulated channels, or institutionalise legal global mobility as a deliberate extension of its development and employment strategy. By aligning education, skill development, and migration governance with emerging international standards, the state can transform migration from a desperate gamble into an informed professional choice. The Government of Punjab can assist their youth to explore rewarding opportunities provided by the Indo-EU mobility Framework.

Equally important, legal mobility abroad must be matched by the creation of opportunities at home. Under the banners of Make in India, Vocal for Local, and Startup India, Punjab's youth can be encouraged to produce value-added goods within the state for both domestic and foreign markets. The state's strengths in agro-processing, sports goods, hand tools, light engineering, and food processing, supported by an expanding digital network and improving rail, road, and port connectivity, open access to markets worldwide without requiring young people to leave. The objective, ultimately, is not to push youth out, but to ensure that those who choose to migrate do so legally and safely, while those who remain find meaningful opportunity within Punjab itself.