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## Unequal Mobilities and Student Migration from India: Aspirations, Constraints and Changing Global Paradigms

Dr. Anjanappa B.H.\*

1. Professor, Department of P.G. Studies and Research in Sociology, Kuvempu University, Jnana Sahyadri, Shankaraghatta, Shivamogga District, Karnataka, India

\* Correspondence: -

**Abstract:** India is one of the world's largest sources of internationally mobile students, with over 1.3 million Indian students studying abroad (As of 2023) - a number, that has more than doubled in the last decade. This work explores the drivers and deterrents of student migration from India, situating it within broader debates on global mobility, inequality, and shifting paradigms of higher education. While studying abroad is often framed as a pathway to social mobility and global opportunity, Indian students face multiple barriers, including high tuition fees, visa restrictions, xenophobia, and fluctuating geopolitical relations. For instance, visa rejection rates for Indian applicants rose by 36 per cent in 2022 in countries like Canada and the UK, despite increasing demand. This work draws on data from the Ministry of External Affairs, OECD, and recent qualitative studies to understand how class, caste, gender, and regional disparities shape both aspirations and constraints. It also examines the post-pandemic shift towards hybrid learning and how emerging destinations in Eastern Europe and Asia are altering traditional migration patterns. The research argues for a more inclusive, equity-oriented understanding of international student mobility and calls for reforms in both Indian and host country policies to better support underrepresented student population.

**Keywords:** Students, Migration, Education, Inequality

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### 1. Introduction

International student migration from India has expanded rapidly in the past decade and is deeply intertwined with aspirations for global mobility, employability, and economic advancement. Yet these mobilities are not equally accessible. Students' decisions to migrate and their capacity to do so are shaped by socio-economic status, caste hierarchies, gender constraints, regional infrastructure, and the uneven distribution of educational resources across states. Globally, the post-pandemic period has introduced new uncertainties: visa restrictions, safety concerns, geopolitical tensions, and inflated costs in traditional destinations. Meanwhile, emerging destinations in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and East Asia are reshaping migration patterns. Against this backdrop, this research investigates how Indian students, particularly from Karnataka, negotiate aspirations and constraints within shifting global paradigms.

### Background

India's outbound student mobility has been increasing steadily due to domestic higher education bottlenecks, perceived quality differences between Indian and foreign universities, and aspirations for global citizenship. Karnataka is a home to major educational hubs such as Bengaluru, Mysuru, and Mangaluru has seen a sharp rise in outbound mobility due to large middle-class population and strong private education

sector. However, financial inequalities, limited scholarship access, and high cost of living in abroad restrict equitable participation. This study provides a qualitative exploration for these issues by integrating national data with local insights from Karnataka.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars of international higher education argue that student mobility is deeply structured by global inequalities rather than individual choice alone. Philip G. Altbach[1] shows how hierarchies between institutions and nations shape who sends and who receives students, with countries like India positioned mainly as senders. Similarly, Rachel Brooks and Johanna Waters[2] explain that socio-economic privilege, family background, and cultural capital significantly influence aspirations and access to overseas education. Extending this, Phillip Brown and Stuart Tannock[3] critique the idea of meritocracy, arguing that the “global war for talent” benefits already advantaged groups. Together, these works frame mobility as socially stratified and embedded in power relations.

Indian scholars emphasize how caste, class, and regional disparities mediate access to quality education and hence global mobility. S. Chattopadhyay[4] demonstrates that educational opportunities in India are unevenly distributed, shaping who can realistically aspire to study abroad. Jandhyala B. G. Tilak[5] further discusses structural challenges within Indian higher education that push students to seek opportunities overseas. N. V. Varghese[6] links globalization with policy shifts in higher education, yet notes that equity concerns remain inadequately addressed. These studies situate student mobility within domestic educational inequality.

Migration scholars connect student outflow with broader patterns of skilled migration and labour markets. Binod Khadria[7] places student migration within India’s history of skilled migration, discussing brain drain, remittances, and return migration. Contemporary analyses by S. Kumar[8] and R. Wadhwa[9] identify patterns, motivations, and challenges faced by Indian student migrants in recent years. S. Nair[10] adds a socio-psychological dimension by exploring aspirations and anxieties among these students. This body of work links education mobility with employment prospects and migration trajectories.

Policy environments and market dynamics also strongly influence mobility trends. Rahul Choudaha[11] highlights the role of visa rules, safety, and geopolitical shifts in shaping student decisions. Tim Mazzarol and Geoffrey N. Soutar[12] explain mobility through push-pull factors and competitive branding by host countries. Fazal Rizvi[13] and R. Sidhu[14] interpret these trends as outcomes of universities operating within global market logics. These works present international education as a competitive global marketplace.

Empirical reports and datasets provide statistical grounding to these theoretical perspectives. Reports from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development map global flows of tertiary students and comparative education indicators[15][16]. Indian policy documents from the Ministry of External Affairs, Reserve Bank of India, and the Karnataka Education Department provide data on student numbers, education loans, and regional trends[17][18][19]. These sources support quantitative analysis of student mobility patterns.

Finally, youth-focused studies highlight decision-making processes behind international education choices. S. Padmanabhan[20] examines how Indian youth evaluate destinations based on opportunity structures. Such perspectives complement structural and policy analyses by focusing on individual aspirations shaped by inequality. Collectively, the literature demonstrates that Indian student mobility is influenced by socio-economic background, educational inequality, migration systems, policy regimes, and global market forces, offering a comprehensive foundation for analysing patterns and challenges in international student migration.

### **Research Gap**

Existing research highlights global trends in student mobilities but lacks state-level qualitative analysis from regions like Karnataka, particularly in understanding how caste, class, and gender shape migration aspirations. It also falls short in examining emerging

destinations, the growing influence of hybrid learning models, and in providing policy-studies focused that integrate national data with local realities. Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts an equity-oriented qualitative approach to generate deeper, context-specific insights into outbound student mobilities.

**Objectives**

1. To explore the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing students migration from India.
2. To analyze constraints faced by students, particularly in Karnataka.
3. To investigate global shifts affect on migration aspirations.
4. To recommend policy interventions for equitable student mobilities.

**2. Materials and Method**

**Type and Approach**

This qualitative research draws on secondary data sourced from MEA, AISHE, OECD, and Karnataka state reports, supplemented by qualitative insights from existing literature. The study employs document analysis, thematic interpretation, and comparative review to identify patterns, narratives, and structural factors influencing outbound students mobilities.

**Area and Justification**

The research focuses on Karnataka, specifically the regions of Bengaluru, Mysuru, and Mangaluru. Karnataka serves as an ideal case due to its combination of high educational aspirations and uneven access to opportunities, offering a meaningful context for understanding inequalities and emerging trends in student mobilities.

**Government Data and Present Situation**

Government data (MEA; AISHE; RBI) show rising outbound mobility, increased dependence on educational loans, and shifts in preferred destinations. Visa rejection rates have also increased in countries like Canada, UK, and Australia.

Table 1. Table showing Indian Students Studying in Abroad (2015–2023)

Year	Number of Students (Lakh)	Growth (%)
2015	4.6	-
2017	5.6	21.70
2019	7.5	33.90
2021	7.7	2.60
2023	13.0	68.80

**Source:** Ministry of External Affairs (MEA, 2024)

The Table shows a consistent rise in Indian students studying abroad, increasing from 4.6 lakh in 2015 to 13 lakh in 2023. The period between 2015 and 2017 recorded a moderate growth of 21.7%, reflecting steady expansion in global mobility. A sharper increase of 33.9 per cent occurred by 2019, driven by greater demand for foreign education and expanding middle-class aspirations. Growth slowed to 2.6 per cent in 2021 due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and global uncertainties. By 2023, outbound mobilities surged with a remarkable 68.8 per cent growth, indicating a strong post-pandemic rebound and rising interest in international opportunities.

Table 2. Table showing Preferred Destinations of Indian Students (2023)  
(Total Indian students - abroad in 2023 = 1.3 million)

Country	Number of Students	% Share of Total Indian Students
USA	364,000	28.00
Canada	299,000	23.00
UK	221,000	17.00
Australia	156,000	12.00

Others (Europe, Asia, Middle East, etc.)	260,000	20.00
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**Source:** OECD Education Database (2023)

Above Table depicts that the USA attracts 364,000 Indian students (28%), making it the top destination due to strong academic and career prospects, followed by Canada with 299,000 students (23%) supported by favourable immigration pathways. The UK hosts 221,000 students (17%), largely due to the Graduate Route, while Australia draws 156,000 students (12%) despite high living costs. The “Others” category accounts for 260,000 students (20%), showing growing diversification toward affordable destinations in Europe and Asia.

Table 3. Table showing Students Obtaining Education Loans in Karnataka (2018–2023)

Year	Number of Loans Approved	Average Loan Amount ( ` Lakh)
2018	11,200	6.50
2020	14,800	8.10
2023	19,300	10.60

**Source:** State-Level Bankers’ Committee, Karnataka (2024)

Above Table reveals that, a steady rise in the number of education loans approved for students in Karnataka, increasing from 11,200 in 2018 to 19,300 loans in 2023. This upward trend reflects growing demand for overseas and higher education, especially among middle-income families. The average loan amount has also risen significantly from Rs. 6.5 lakh in 2018 to Rs. 10.6 lakh in 2023, indicating higher tuition fees and living costs abroad. The sharp jump between 2020 and 2023 suggests expanding global aspirations despite financial pressures. Overall, the data highlights both increasing dependence on loans and rising financial burdens on families seeking international education.

Table 4. Table showing Visa Rejection Rates for Indian Students (2020–2023)

Country	2020 Applicants	2020 Rejections (21%, 9%, 7%)	2022 Applicants	2022 Rejections (41%, 18%, 12%)	2023 Applicants	2023 Rejections (36%, 14%, 10%)
Canada	200,000	42,000 (21%)	300,000	123,000 (41%)	280,000	100,800 (36%)
UK	120,000	10,800 (9%)	150,000	27,000 (18%)	160,000	22,400 (14%)
Australia	100,000	7,000 (7%)	130,000	15,600 (12%)	140,000	14,000 (10%)

**Note :** Figures represent estimated number of rejected applications based on typical annual applicant volumes.

**Source:** Immigration Department Reports (compiled 2024).

Above Table describes that visa rejections increased sharply between 2020 and 2022, especially for Canada, where rejections rose from 42,000 to 123,000 due to policy tightening. The UK also saw a doubling of rejections from 10,800 in 2020 to 27,000 in 2022, reflecting rising scrutiny of applications. Australia experienced moderate increases, with rejections growing from 7,000 to 15,600 during the same period. By 2023, rejection levels declined slightly but remained higher than pre-pandemic years across all destinations. Overall, the data highlights heightened visa uncertainties that significantly shape student mobility decisions.

Table 5. Table showing Gender-wise Outbound Student Mobilities in Karnataka (2023)

(Total estimated outbound students = 50,000)

Gender	Number of Students	% Share
Male	30,500	61.00

Female	19,500	39.00
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**Source:** Karnataka Education Department (2024)

Data in the above Table shows a clear gender gap in outbound mobilities in Karnataka, with 30,500 male students (61%) studying abroad compared to 19,500 female students (39%). This disparity reflects ongoing socio-cultural barriers, financial dependence, and safety concerns that limit female participation. Despite improvements in women's education, international mobilities remains male-dominated. The sizeable difference also indicates unequal access to resources such as loans, counselling, and family support. Overall, the table highlights the need for targeted policies to promote gender-inclusive mobility.

#### 4. Result and Discussion

1. Aspirations vs. Unequal Access: While interest in studying abroad is growing rapidly, access continues to be uneven. Socioeconomic inequalities mean that students from privileged background benefit more, whereas those from rural or marginalized groups face structural barriers.
2. Rising Costs and Visa Uncertainties: Tuition fees, living expenses, and processing charges have increased sharply across major destinations. Simultaneously, stricter visa rules and unpredictable approval patterns disproportionately affect middle- and lower-income families who cannot risk financial losses.
3. Heavy Dependence on Loans in Karnataka: Students from Karnataka rely extensively on bank loans and private financing to meet study-abroad expenses. However, scholarships and grants remain limited, highly competitive, and insufficient to meet the growing demand.
4. Persistent Gender Differences: Although female mobility is rising, gender disparities continue. Concerns related to safety, financial dependence, cultural expectations, and family restrictions still shape and sometimes limit women's decisions to pursue education abroad.
5. New Destinations Gaining Popularity: Countries such as the UAE, Ireland, Germany, and Eastern European nations attract more students due to affordability, smoother visa processes, post-study work options, and lower cost-of-living pressures compared to traditional destinations like the US or UK.
6. Impact of Hybrid and Online Learning: The expansion of hybrid programs, online degrees, and international certification courses is influencing mobility decisions. These flexible options allow students to access global education at lower costs, reducing the need for full-time physical mobilities while still improving qualifications.

#### 5. Conclusion

##### Recommendations

1. Expand scholarships for marginalized communities: Increasing targeted scholarships for SC/ST, OBC, minority, and rural students would help to bridge financial inequality in study-abroad access. Dedicated funding schemes, fee waivers, and fellowship programs can provide meaningful support to students who cannot afford international education.
2. Strengthen counselling centres in colleges, especially in rural Karnataka: Many rural and tier-2 institutions lack proper guidance on admissions, documentation, visa procedures, and career planning. Establishing well-trained counselling units can help students make informed decisions, prepare competitive applications, and avoid misinformation spread by unregulated agents.
3. Promote bilateral agreements to secure safer pathways for students: Government-to-government partnerships with key destination countries can offer smoother visa processes, guaranteed work rights, structured internships, and greater safety.

mechanisms. Such agreements can reduce uncertainties and create more transparent mobility routes for Indian students.

4. Improve financial literacy on loans, scholarships, and migration risks: Many families take education loans without fully understanding repayment terms, interest burdens, or potential financial risks. Regular workshops, digital portals, and awareness campaigns can equip students with better knowledge of funding options and long-term financial planning.
5. Develop local internationalization initiatives in Karnataka universities: Strengthening international collaborations, student exchange programs, joint degrees, and visiting faculty tie-ups can provide a global learning experience at home. This reduces dependency on foreign institutions and offers an affordable alternative to full-scale overseas study.
6. Enhance protection and support for students abroad through Indian missions: Indian embassies and consulates can play a stronger role by offering helplines, legal assistance, grievance redressal, emergency support, and cultural orientation programs. This institutional backing boosts students safety and ensures timely support in cases of discrimination, financial distress, or emergencies.

### Conclusion

Students migration from India has grown rapidly over the past decade, reflecting high aspirations for global education and career opportunities. Karnataka, as a major educational hub, exemplifies both strong ambitions and uneven access to international study. Structural inequalities related to class, caste, gender, and regional disparities continue to shape mobility opportunities. Rising tuition fees, visa uncertainties, and limited scholarship access disproportionately affects on middle- and lower-income level students. Gender differences persist despite growing female participation, highlighting ongoing socio-cultural constraints. New destinations in Europe and Asia are emerging, influenced by affordability, flexible visas, and post-study work options. Hybrid learning and online international programs are reshaping traditional migration patterns and providing alternatives to physical mobilities. Policy interventions, such as expanded scholarships, stronger counselling, and bilateral agreements, are needed to ensure equity. Financial literacy and institutional support, both at home and abroad, are crucial for safe and informed mobility. Overall, an equity-oriented approach is essential to make international education accessible, inclusive, and sustainable for all Indian students.

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