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The Social and Cultural Push Behind Indians Moving Abroad

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THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PUSH BEHIND INDIANS MOVING ABROAD

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ABSTRACT

When we talk about social and cultural issues that lead to people leaving a country, there is a myopic focus by researchers on individual issues like religion, ethnic violence, homophobia, etc. but there is rarely an all encompassing take on such issues which explores the complex interplay of society and culture. So in this paper, my focus was on a group of young people from India, all first generation migrants to countries mostly in the west, and studied the myriad of social and cultural factors that is causing youngsters to leave India and whether there is a greater role of 'pull' or 'push' in these situations. Is there light at the end of the tunnel, is there willingness to return?

INTRODUCTION

It is an established fact that India has a migration problem, whether it is intra-national migration from impoverished states of India to other, more stable states or inter-national migration from India to abroad for the search of a better life (Satish, 2025). In this paper, I have focused solely on the latter, that is inter-national migration from India to abroad,

particularly among the younger generations, who are a bulk of those migrating recently. In my paper, I aim to highlight the social and cultural factors that lead to the decision to move abroad, unlike most of the research articles that highlight solely on economic, financial, employment issues. As a sociology student, it is my duty to shed a light on how the interplay of society, culture and individual behaviour lead to a person's decision to leave their country and seek a life outside.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration is the movement of people away from their usual place of residence to a new place of residence, either across an international border or within a State. There is no universally agreed definition of "migration" or "migrant", but there are several widely accepted definitions that have been developed in different settings (Migration India 2011). For example, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs defines a long-term migrant as a person who lives outside their country of origin for at least 12 months.

"Decision to migrate mainly depends on the extent to which the migrant I connected to ethical and social groups at home and in the terminus". Migration networks role are multiple - reducing social, psychological and economic costs, increases adaptation and job access (India corner shop network in USA, UK) (Canada truck system) (Blumenstock, et al., 2023).

Earlier, migration was limited to individuals, solely focused on maximising personal utility or income. But now, with establishment of strong social linkages, motivations have evolved, shifting from purely income factor to a broader emphasis on social relations involving households, families, friends and entire communities (Turrey, 2025).

Opposed to the main focus on economic reasons for migration, only 20% respondents are recorded to have earning and expenses as reasons for migration, while 15% list environment and sanitation and 14% list presence of friends and family as the reason for their migration, directing towards the importance of society for people's decision to move to a new place (Sahai, Bailey, 2022).

Caste plays a big reason for societal and cultural reasons to move abroad, as on one hand trend of moving abroad was started by upper caste people who had the resources and knowledge to move, however, with time, people from lower castes also aspired to move abroad to escape the social stigma attached with the belonging to a lower / depressed caste and the daily complexities of operating in a caste system (Arokkiaraj, 2022; Singh & Rawat, 2020).

Homophobia is another cause for the societal push to move to a place with more acceptance and flexible laws. Section 377, though now repealed worked to create great phobia towards these communities (Pal, Pathak, et al., 2024). Though western countries are not absolutely free from homophobia and related violence, most of the countries allow union of same sex couples.

A diverse country like India is bound to have religious conflicts and it is explored by various works on how many communities are targeted by it. Examples of exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from 1989 to 1991 and later, due to Muslim driven violence (Razdan, 2024) and the Sikh violence that led to huge community of Sikh immigrants abroad has been explored in literature (Zaid, 2024).

The above literature has explored all these factors to a great depth individually but lack a clear understanding of how these push and pull factors combine and affect the psyche of an individual who decides to move abroad. The role of culture and lifestyles of the country of immigration plays a huge role in the changing demographics and it is many times

underplayed by studies which tend to place a myopic focus on economic and remittance factors.

METHOD

For this paper, extensive study of literature, analysis of trends in migration from both government sources and international agencies was done, along with first hand research through surveys via google forms amongst people who have moved abroad due to various social and cultural reasons.

Official government websites such as Census of India, Ministry of External Affairs helped in measuring accurate data on migration patterns and specific countries where Indian diaspora are in great numbers, along with the phases in which there were large scale migrations.

Literature review helped in looking in depth the specific issues that plague the Indian society which leads to people / communities moving abroad. Moreover, the prevalent caste / community dynamics that migrants from Indian encounter are explored in this.

Google forms' responses, that are focused on first generation migrants, especially of the younger generation provided enriching first hand information on the social and cultural factors for moving abroad. This had various variables such as age groups at which the respondents moved abroad, the countries they moved to, the 'push' and 'pull' factors that made them disillusioned with the home culture and attracted to abroad, the absence / presence of social / family networks in the country of immigration, specific reasons that led them to move abroad, whether they will be willing to move back to India if such issues are resolved, description on what exactly they find as a 'liberal' culture and whether it is

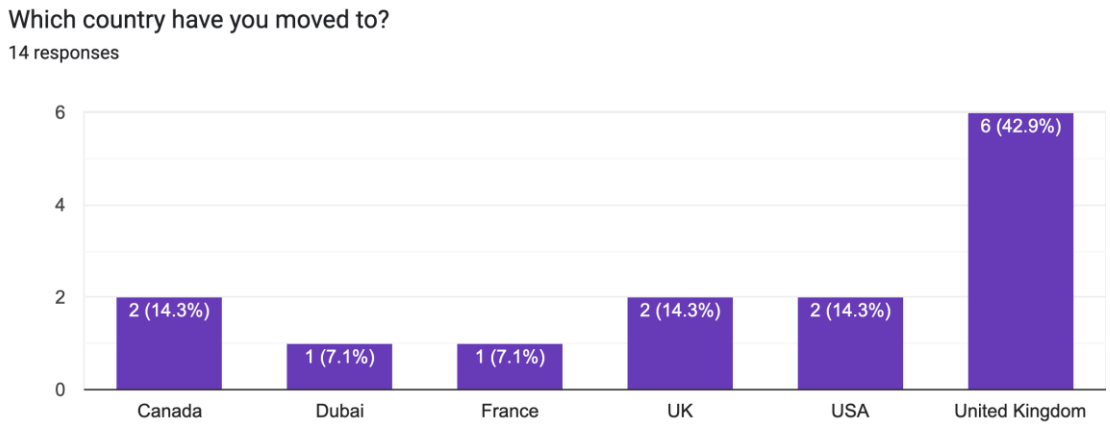
what they are witnessing after moving abroad and in the end how important were social and cultural reasons in their decision to move.

Both qualitative and quantitative research and analysis is done as the data is arranged in graphs (pie charts, bar graphs), numerical data for demographics and when it came to descriptive / opinions on the respondents' specific issues with the culture of India or struggles they have faced on the hands of Indian society - descriptive analysis is done as it better captures their thoughts and feelings.

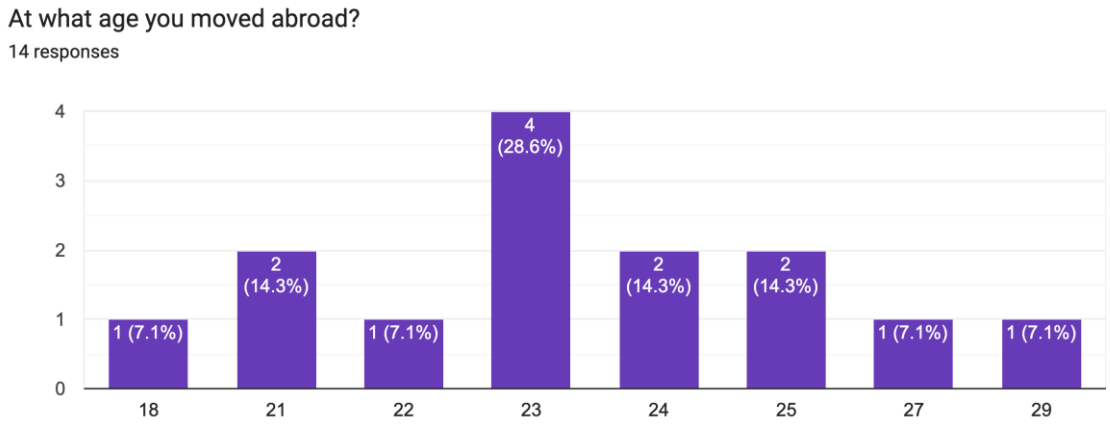
RESULTS

In the survey done consisting of 14 respondents currently living abroad, 13 questions were asked, 10 objective and 3 descriptive.

The first question was "which country have you moved to", the answers stated 5 different countries, of which 4 were western / liberal countries and one was UAE, signalling the strong tilt towards the west in moving abroad.



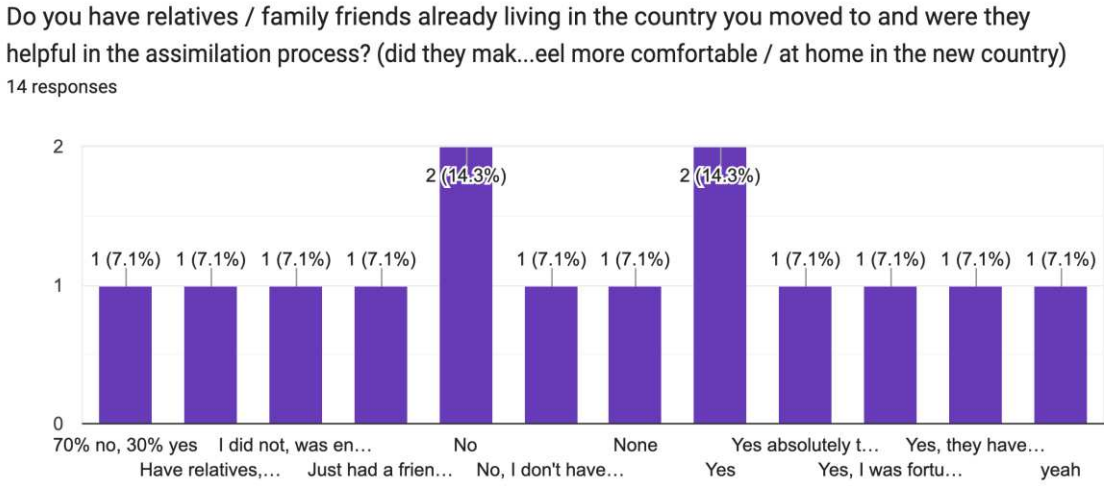
Since the research is aimed at younger generation, the respondents belonged to age bracket of 18 to 29, all below 30 years of age.



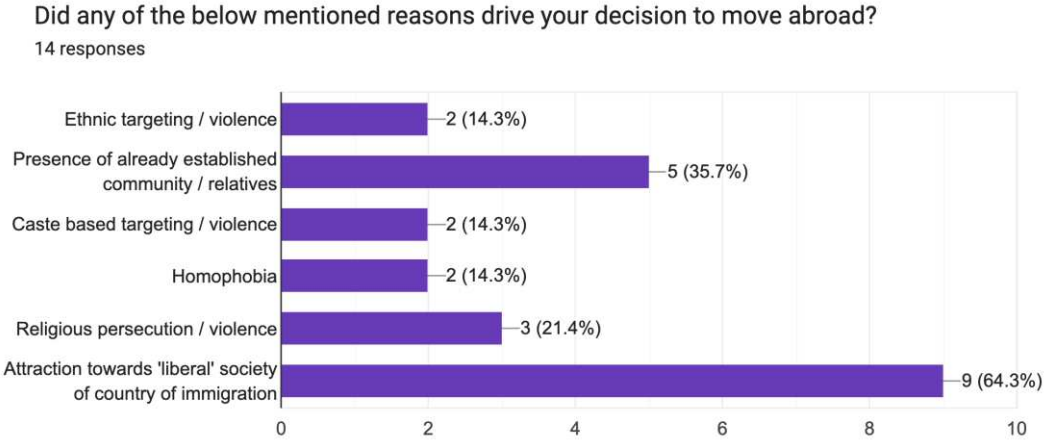
The third question was "what are the 'push' factors that drove you abroad (in other words, what did you not like regarding the society and culture of India?". The answers were of descriptive nature and majority stated lack of individuality, freedom and poor lifestyle as the reason, while some stated the high competitive education scenario in India as their reason. Many respondents also stated that the push factors were not as strong as the 'pull' to the western countries.

The fourth question was "what are the 'pull' factors that drove you abroad (in other words, what attracted you about the country you moved to?". The answers were of descriptive nature, majority of answers tilted to the liberal lifestyle and good work life balance as the reason. Many stated better infrastructure, weather and global outlook as the reasons.

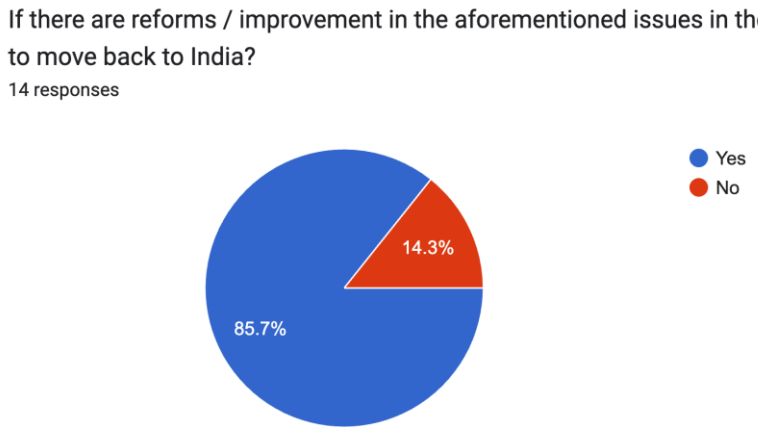
The fifth question was "do you have relative / family friends already living in the country you moved to and were they helpful in the assimilation process? (Did they make you feel more comfortable / at home in the new country)" and 8 respondents said 'yes' while 6 said 'no'. However, in the 'yes' category there were variance on how helpful the presence of relatives or family friends proved to be in their assimilation process, as out of 8 that said 'yes', 2 stated having family or relatives proved to be of no special advantage in their shift abroad.



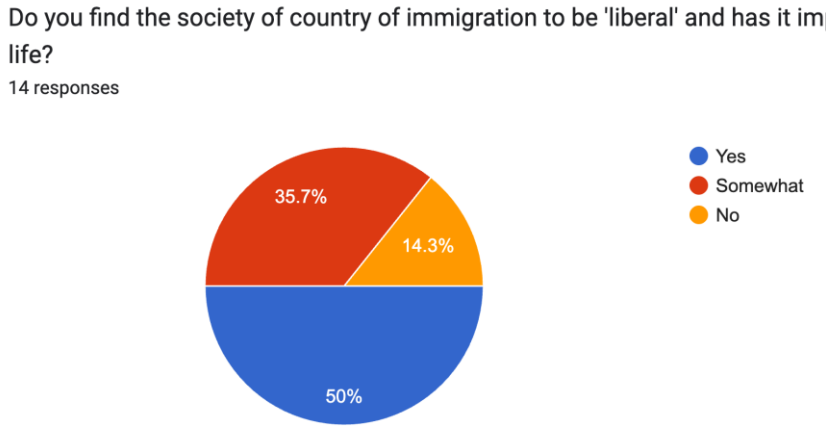
The sixth question was “did any of the below mentioned reasons drive your decision to move abroad” in which 6 broad categories were given out which the respondent had to choose (the figure below has these options). The overwhelming majority (64.3%) chose “attraction towards ‘liberal’ society of country of immigration” as the option, while the second most chosen option (35.7%) was “presence of already established community / relatives”. The third most common reason (21.4%) was “religious persecution / violence” while “ethnic targeting / violence”, “caste based targeting / violence” and “homophobia” all received the same number of votes (14.3%).



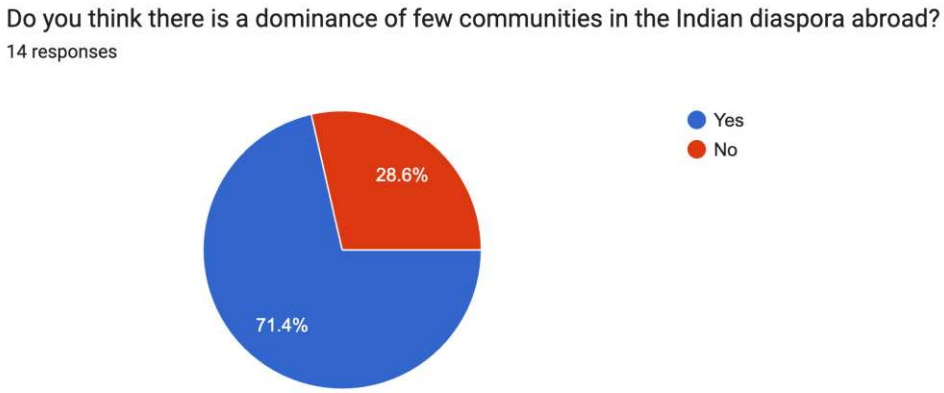
The seventh question was “if there are reforms / improvement in the aforementioned issues in the future, would you be willing to move back to India?”. The majority (85.7%) responded ‘yes’ while ‘no’ (14.3%) made up a small fraction.



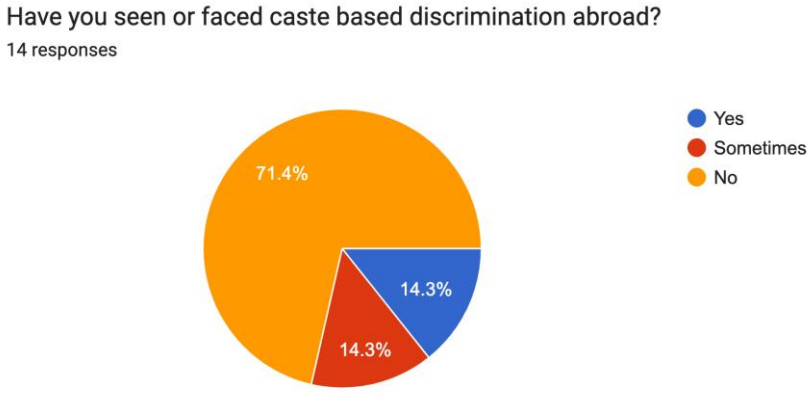
The eight question as “do you find the society of country of immigration to be ‘liberal’ and has it improved your day to day life?”. The responses were - 50% responded ‘yes’ while 35.7% responded with ‘somewhat’ and 14.3% with ‘no’.



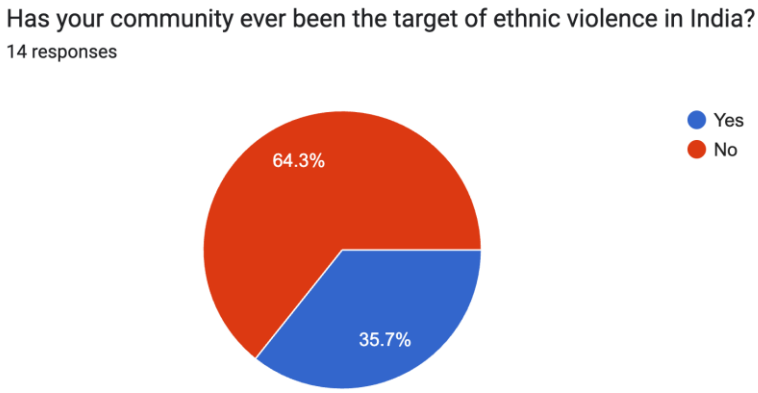
The ninth question was “do you think there is a dominance of few communities in the Indian diaspora abroad?”. Most of the respondents (71.4%) agreed while a smaller fraction (28.6%) disagreed.



The tenth question was linked to the previous one with prevalence of some dominant communities abroad and whether they bring about the same dynamics as India there. The question was “have you seen or faced caste based discrimination abroad?”. 71.4% responded with ‘no’, 14.3% with ‘sometimes’ and 14.3% with ‘yes’.

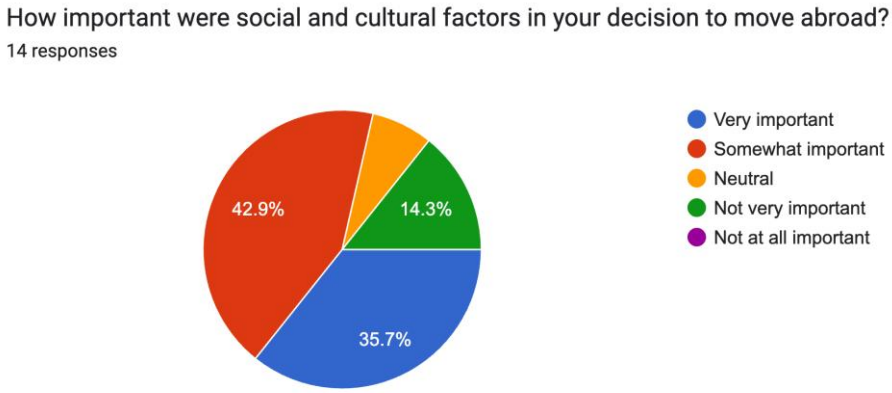


The eleventh question was “has your community ever been the target of ethnic violence in India?”. 64.3% responded with ‘no’ while 35.7% responded with ‘yes’.



The twelfth question was of descriptive nature asking "what exactly means 'liberal' to you? The answers varied from case to case but most agreed that freedom of thought, speech and expression make up the foundation of 'liberal'.

The thirteenth and final question as "how important were social and cultural factors in your decision to move abroad?". The majority agreed with it being important, though varied in how important it was. 42.9% responded with 'somewhat important', 35.7% with 'very important', 14.3% with 'not very important' and 7.1% with 'neutral'.



DISCUSSION

There is an overwhelming majority of respondents that agree that social and cultural reasons are a defining factor in their decision to move abroad. This is especially relevant when most national and international agencies overlook these factors and focus on economic / employment aspects of migration.

Majority of respondents reside in western countries like Canada, United Kingdom and United States of America, which directly correlates with the most commonly stated reason for them moving abroad i.e. the pull to a liberal society of abroad. This shows how important freedom of thought, expression, safety in day to day life is to the common person.

Quality education, a good lifestyle, personal freedom are all cited as the biggest contributor to a 'liberal' life abroad as opposed to restriction in clothing choices, nagging nature of society and lack of exposure in the home country of India.

The presence of social networks turned out to be one of the biggest factors in moving abroad because of the cushioning they provide for a new migrant, first in terms of cultural assimilation, absorbing the culture shock and later in employment stages. Most respondents of my survey stated to having relatives in the country they moved to but in rare cases there was no positive correlation of having relatives and ease of assimilation abroad.

The presence of ethnic violence was part of the decision to move abroad but to a relatively lower degree, a possible reason can be that most victims of ethnic violence, such as Kukis and Nagas are freshly targeted and thus due to destruction of their property and income have financial constraints in moving to a new country.

Religious persecution was another factor recorded in the research. 21.4% of the respondents cited the issue for their decision to migrate, which makes it the third most common reason in the study. Kashmiri Pandit community which was the victim of large scale religious persecution from 1989 to late 1990s, have been displaced to an enormous

degree. Though the majority of it is internal displacement, i.e. to other states of India with majority Hindu population such as Maharashtra, Punjab, Delhi, etc., a sizeable portion also moved internationally. Approximately 6000 people of the community live in Canada according to 2016 Canadian census and a community of 250-300 people in Singapore.

Similarly, the Sikh migration also saw a steady increase in the years after the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, mostly to the United Kingdom, United States of America and Canada.

Moreover, caste based targeting / violence and religious violence / persecution is another factor that was felt by the respondents to leave the country, though not to a great degree. However, an interesting find was that just by leaving the country there is no clear escape from caste based discrimination as 30% of respondents witnesses or faced the same issue abroad. A possible reason is that the upper castes first had the resource and opportunities to move abroad so they already had created a strong base in these countries of immigration, to which the lower castes only recently got the opportunity to move to, so it was only natural that similar social dynamics spread abroad as well (Arokkiaraj, 2022).

Homophobia is a prevalent issue in India which creates great social and personal burdens on not just individuals belonging to LGBTQ+ community but also for the people associated with them. In my respondent list, 2 people reported homophobia as the reason for moving abroad, which though not a big portion of the group, was still reflective of the archaic laws existing today in India that limit young people's liberty and freedom of expression. Though article 377 of Indian Penal Code which criminalised consensual same-sex relations was removed in 2018 under Navtej Singh Johar vs Union of India, Indian laws are still not friendly to the LGBTQ+ community, marked recently by the Supreme Court judgement against same-sex marriage in 2023.

Thus, many Indian queer individuals migrate internationally to countries where homosexuality is legalised and societal attitudes are more liberal (Pal, Pathak, et al., 2024).

The above points prove that there are still a great deal of social and cultural issue that plague India, however, it does not mean that the young people are completely disillusioned with the country. In the questionnaire, an outstanding majority was in favour of returning to the home country if there are improvements seen in the aforementioned issues in the future. There is a great deal of attachment and affection towards the home soil and the issues 'pushing' people to new countries are seen as temporary and 'fixable' than some irreversible truth that is set in stone.

CONCLUSION

With ever increasing international migration by the young generation of India and the resulting backlash by the host countries seen recently, it is important for the readers to understand that there is always a myriad of factors at play in people deciding to leave one's country and come back as well. It is the duty of not just the government but also the society at large and individuals in particular to make the social fabric of India as accommodative and accepting as possible so that no one leaves out of feeling isolated or helpless in their own country. The west does not have a monopoly over liberalism and there will always be a debate whether terms like conservatism or traditionalism is imposed on Asian countries like India by the west arbitrarily but it is only when you truly analyse the behaviour and migration patterns of the young people and the reasons they provide for it that you understand that there is certainly improvements to be made in the society and culture. However, there is light at the end of the tunnel for 'ghar waapsi' as people are always drawn to the homeland.

ETHICS AND DECLARATION

The authors of the above research paper, hereby declare that:

1. The study has been conducted in accordance with the guidelines prescribed by the International Sociological Association (ISA) Code of Ethics.
2. The research paper is our original work and has been prepared by us in accordance with the institutions' requirement.
3. This study was approved by the Institute Ethics Committee (IEC) of Malaviya National Institute of Technology Jaipur.
4. Participants were fully informed about - The purpose and objectives of the research, study procedures and expected duration of participation, potential risks and benefits associated with participation, their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, how their data would be collected, used, and stored.
5. Informed consent was obtained from all the individuals participating in the study.
6. Any information of the participants other than their responses for the study are kept anonymous.
7. Human ethics and consent to participate declarations: not applicable.
8. All sources, data and references used in this thesis have been acknowledged and cited properly.
9. The research paper has not been submitted elsewhere.
10. Funding: not applicable.
11. Clinical trial number: not applicable.

It is affirmed that this declaration is made with full integrity and in compliance with the institutions' policies.

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