

CHAPTER EIGHT

Peace, Security, and Employment: A South Asian's Perspective of Life in Canada in the Post-Pandemic World

Sarah Alam

ABSTRACT

Canada has a long history of immigrants; millions of people throughout Canadian history have migrated to Canada and continue to choose Canada as their new home. In recent years, Canada has seen a rising number of South Asian refugees, migrants, and international students. This article examines the complex factors contributing to the increasing number of South Asians residing in Canada, including migration, foreign policy, humanitarian crisis, human rights, development, Canadian migration policy, international student policy, and national security. This article explains some reasons why the number of South Asian people choosing to settle in Canada is rising. On the other hand, the article also highlights some of the challenges that new South Asian residents experience while settling in Canada in the post-pandemic world. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment level in Canada increased, similar to the period of the 2008-2009 recession. The current unemployment rate in Canada is 10 percent, which estimates that nearly two million people are out of work. Growing unemployment, price hikes, and the rising cost of living significantly contribute to settlement challenges for new residents. The global recession of 2023 and the increase in petroleum prices are impacting Canada's rising interest rates, and economists warn that this will further escalate inflation, the housing crisis, and unemployment within Canada. Amid the global economic crisis affecting Canada, the war in Ukraine, the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and the recent strained relations between India and Canada have all had a growing impact on peace and security in Canada and its consequences for the South Asian population residing in the country. For South Asians aspiring to settle in Canada, this article uses an ethnographic lens to provide a holistic picture of South Asian lived migrant experiences in Canada in the post-pandemic world.

KEYWORDS: Migration, South Asians, Covid-19, Economic Crisis, Post-Pandemic World

Migration is considered a natural phenomenon that has been prevalent since ancient times. Throughout history, people have migrated from one place to another to survive and settle in new regions. Over time, migration is widespread due to globalization, faster communication, and shorter travel times between countries. Additionally, technological advancements have led to shorter distances and more convenient mobility. However, all migrants cannot be grouped into a single category. Some people migrate voluntarily for different purposes (education, family reunification, work, and environment).

In contrast, others are forced to migrate to protect themselves and survive due to persecution or war in their home countries (Yu, S. et al., 2021). Any form of migration can have a profound impact on both the sending and receiving countries. Migration has several advantages and disadvantages, resulting in brain drain for sending countries and straining the labor market for the destination country. However, Canada has been a prominent recipient of migrants, both forced and voluntary, for years. Due to its welcoming migrant policies, it has become a favored destination for refugees, migrants, and international students.

Over the past few decades, a significant influx of people has been observed moving to Canada, largely due to more favorable Canadian migration policies compared to those in other countries. Many people consider Canada their preferred country of residence, with thousands more aspiring to relocate to Canada from various parts of the world, particularly the Asian continent, which includes South Asia as its sub-region. Canada, a multicultural nation, is often the strongest motivator for international students and migrants to settle in the country. Between 1999 and 2008, Canada admitted 2 million immigrants through its federal skilled workers program, nearly 1.2 million asylum seekers, and 284,285 refugees. Most of the last two groups have settled in Toronto and Montreal (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2009). Independent or family-class immigrants generally migrate to re-establish themselves (Gravel, Battaglini, Riberdy, Guay, & Unité Écologie humaine et sociale, D.S.P. [de Montréal-Centre, 2000]). According to the 2021 Canadian census, the number of migrants in Canada was approximately 8.3 million, accounting for approximately 23% of Canada's total population (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2022). According to worldwide statistics, this data represents the eighth-largest immigrant population in the world (Pison, Gilles, 2019).

According to the National Statistics Office of Canada, in 2021, 621,565 international students held study permits for various levels of study. In 2015, 352,330 international students held study permits, thus facing a 43% increase in the international student population from 2015 to 2021. Throughout Canada, the migrant and international student populations have increased significantly in the last few decades. As Canada receives immigrants and international students from nearly 200 countries, Statistics Canada estimates that by 2041, immigrants will represent 29.1% and 34.0% of Canada's population, compared with 23.0% in 2021 (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2022). Since the 1970s, the largest settlement of people in Canada has been from the Asian Continent. The influx of Asians to Canada was primarily influenced by the revision of the 1976 Immigration Act, which was subsequently maintained as a government policy. According to 2021 census data from Statistics Canada, over one in every five Canadians was born abroad, while nearly 22.3% of the Canadian population identified as visible minorities. The term "visible minority" is often used in statistics to identify racialized (non-white) and non-Indigenous people, as defined by Canadian law. This term includes several sub-categories based on ethnicity, race, or country of origin. According to the 2021 census, nearly one in four Canadians identified themselves as part of a visible minority community, as defined by the Government of Canada

(Statistics Canada, 2022). The “visible minority” category is based on individuals’ self-identification regarding their racial or ethnic background. This designation includes non-white and non-Indigenous Canadians under twelve sub-categories: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arabic, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, Japanese, visible minorities with “multiple” identities, and, in the other choices section, “not included elsewhere.” The term “visible minority” lacks a universal consensus regarding its usage. The United Nations considers the term too homogeneous, as it encompasses a broad and diverse variety of groups. The term minority is also heavily criticized as it does not apply to regions where racialized people constitute a majority (Clayton, 2015). Regardless of the criticism over the usage of the Visible Minority terminology, Statistics Canada continues to use this term to represent the racialized population living in Canada. According to the 2021 census, approximately 26.53% of people identified themselves as a visible minority. Since the 2016 census, the population of visible minorities has increased from 22% to 26.53%. The 2016 Census revealed that South Asians continue to be the largest visible minority group in Canada, with an estimated 1,924,635 people, representing nearly one-quarter (25.1%) of the visible minority population and 5.6% of the entire Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2016). South Asians are also the single largest visible minority group in Ontario, accounting for almost 29.6% of the visible minorities and 8.7% of Ontario’s total population (Statistics Canada, 2016). From 2016 to 2024, there has been more influx of South Asians pouring into Canada; as per a report published by Statistics Canada in May 2024, over 2.3 million Canadians reported South Asian ethnicity, which includes all of the distinct groups living in the Indian subcontinent, including Indian (1.3 million people), Pakistani (303,260), Punjabi (279,950), Sri Lankan (132,410) and Tamil (102,170).

The South Asian community living in Canada traces its origins to the Asian sub-region of South Asia, which comprises countries such as Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Most South Asian Canadians are international students, immigrants, or descendants of immigrants from these countries. The South Asian community comprises diverse sub-communities that vary in terms of religion, ethnicity, immigration histories, personal experiences, and linguistic backgrounds. However, despite several diversities within the South Asian community, South Asians living in Canada are portrayed as a homogenous group due to the shared history between South Asia’s most populous countries, such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, as together these countries formed the Indian Sub-Continent prior to the partition of 1947, and 1971 (Alam, S., 2021). A huge population of South Asians lives in Ontario. Canada is a diverse and multicultural country that has afforded South Asians the freedom to practice their religious and cultural traditions. Canada is one of the few countries offering international students a direct path to permanent residency. Thus, making it a favorable destination for migrants. Over the past few years, Canada has experienced a significant increase in international students, particularly from India (Alam, S., 2021).

In Ontario, several cities have been identified due to their large South Asian populations; for instance, Brampton is known for having a majority of its residents from India. Similarly, Mississauga and Milton have vast populations of people of Pakistani origin. The growing South Asian population in Canada faces several challenges. The paper discusses some of the challenges the South Asian community is facing in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada.

Methodology

The paper presents a cross-sectional and ethnographic study, drawing on existing data, literature, and the author's experiences, encounters, observations, and informal conversations with other South Asian migrants living in Canada. The existing literature reviewed for this paper includes several scholarly articles, books, recently published newspapers, blogs, and survey reports from Statistics Canada. Based on ethnographic observations and a literature review, the student researcher offers a critical lens on South Asian migration and theorizes the experiences of South Asians living in Canada.

About the Author

A researcher and a racialized migrant woman of color living in Canada as a migrant citizen hailing from a developing country within the South Asian region in the Asian Continent, I identify myself as a Muslim by birth and have lived most of my life in Pakistan. As a social activist, I have advocated for the rights of women and children in South Asia for several years.

Migration in the Post-Pandemic World

The phenomenon of migration dates back to the dawn of civilization and has experienced significant changes. Globally, migration and development are intricately entwined, with remittances as the foundation for wealth in the nations of origin. Migration patterns tend to vary due to global economic revolutions, internal economic reforms, and socio-political changes worldwide (Rajan, 2022). As Suhardiman et al. (Citation 2021: 89) observe, more than any other developmental process, migration emphasizes that we live in one world, where barriers to movement are barriers to progress.' The pandemic spread across the globe in weeks, bringing the world to a halt and leaving people stuck at their origin, destination, or in transit. The delicateness and unsustainability of temporary migration systems were evident as several workers were either forcefully returned to their country of origin, often suffering wage theft, or stuck at borders without access to health facilities, suitable shelter, and at times even sustenance (Lin & Yeoh, 2021; Suhardiman et al., 2021). In other instances, federal authorities resorted to chartering flights and making special provisions to bring in migrant workers in the agriculture, food, or care and service industries to ensure that such critical industries remained operational (Triandafyllidou, 2022). The pandemic raised questions about what temporary migration status means and what obligations and responsibilities states should have toward these vulnerable yet often essential migrant workers. Finally, the pandemic also exposed the vulnerability and precarious living conditions of many international students, a category previously seen as relatively secure in socio-economic terms and highly desirable for host countries. The pandemic has shown that, like temporary migrants, international students also faced both status challenges that seriously disrupt academic study (for instance, when their visas expired or borders closed and they were unable to return to universities in destination countries) and socio-economic precarity as part-time jobs (e.g., in the catering, retail or tourism industry) that provided crucial cash for their survival disappeared overnight (Sidhu et al., 2021; Wang, 2022; Prada-Trigo et al., 2022).

The recent global pandemic has posed several challenges for migrant workers. In Canada, the global pandemic had a profound impact on the Canadian economy, leading to labor shortages and increased unemployment. As the world began reopening post-pandemic to cope with some challenges, Canada opened its doors to international students, refugees, and skilled workers.

Canada joined the global race for talent and migrant workers, along with several important destination countries, including Singapore, the UK, Germany, and the Gulf countries, as they began reconsidering their temporary and long-term migration governance schemes. In 2022, according to Sean Fraser, the former Minister for Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship of Canada, immigration is critical for the country's long-term success. In line with the Liberal government's policies that tied immigration to economic growth, he introduced several measures to increase the number of people entering the country. Canada has added more than 470,000 new permanent residents in 2023, or roughly one percent of its population. However, the most significant jump in immigration numbers comes from temporary residents, especially international students and workers who land in Canada with the hope of acquiring permanent residency, whose ranks have doubled in just two years from 1.4 million in the second quarter of 2022 to 2.8 million in the second quarter of 2024, according to Statistics Canada.

However, as of 2024, several media critics argue that the Trudeau government's policies have contributed to the surge in asylum claims, particularly the decision to loosen visa requirements, which has resulted in an increased number of potential asylum seekers. Recent statistics indicate that over 144,000 people claimed asylum in Canada in 2023 (Belouizdad, 2024). This has raised concerns about the integrity of the immigration system and the provinces' ability to provide adequate support services to their residents. Canada is a modern country that offers unparalleled treatment to asylum seekers, including generous benefits and nearly automatic citizenship for those granted asylum. In many other territories, asylum seekers often struggle to receive sufficient food and shelter and are given a precarious status by unstable host governments (Belouizdad, 2024). Mexico is the top source country for asylum claims in Canada, yet the federal government has continued allowing Mexicans to enter the country with no visas. The people of India retain second place, and it is a top source country that allows temporary residents. The media have reported that many international students from India claim asylum in Canada (Belouizdad, 2024). The increased number of migrants, international students, and asylum seekers from 2022 to 2024 has burdened the Canadian infrastructure, posing several challenges for its economy (Belouizdad, 2024).

Post-Pandemic Peace, Security, & Employment in Canada

For a long time, Canada was regarded as one of the world's top 10 most peaceful countries. For the first time in almost a decade, Canada has dropped out of the top 10 most peaceful countries, according to the 2022 Global Peace Index (GPI) (Canada Loses Top 10 Spot on Global Peace Index due to "Anti-Government Sentiment," n.d.). The index, which ranks 163 independent states, countries, and territories based on their level of peacefulness, noted that Canada lost its ranking due to the nation's anti-government sentiment in response to measures aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19. While still upholding its standing as the most peaceful country in the region, ranking at 12th position as compared to the U.S. ranking 129, Canada's 4.8 percent decline was credited to significant increases in "political terror" as well as "violent demonstrations" indicators, with the former amplifying within a year.

The pandemic has pushed many countries towards economic as well as political crises while also heightening levels of anti-government sentiment and distrust for authorities, the report stated. "Countries that became progressively more peaceful experienced protests as well as violence aimed particularly at the government's handling of the pandemic (Canada Loses Top 10 Spot on Global Peace Index due to "Anti-Government Sentiment," n.d.).

Throughout the pandemic, a rift developed among Canadians, with the politicization of vaccines dividing the nation. The Liberal government was constantly criticized, and Canada experienced an upheaval from angry demonstrators nationwide. The Freedom Convoy truckers' protest gained much prominence against vaccine mandates. This marked a new turning point for the Canadians, as it was only the beginning of a series of protests that would erupt in major Canadian cities on various issues. The trucker's protests paved the way for an outburst of protests by different communities. The Middle Eastern crisis that erupted on October 07, 2023, and the 2022 rift between Canadian and Indian governments due to the killing of a Sikh leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, in British Columbia, has been a cause of increasing political demonstrations throughout the country. In recent years, Canada has also experienced a rise in crime rates. According to the crime severity index, which measures the volume and severity of police-reported crime, Canada experienced a 2% increase in CSI in 2023, marking the third consecutive year of increases.

Regarding robberies specifically, the data show that the non-violent CSI, which includes property crimes such as robbery, has increased tremendously in Canada, as per the statistics shared by the Government of Canada (2024). The increase in crime rates in Canada over the past few years has been attributed to several factors, including the influx of people, inflation, the housing crisis, and growing unemployment. As of August 2024, unemployment affected nearly 1.5 million Canadians, with an unemployment rate of 6.6%. It further increased in November 2024 to 6.8 %, an all-time high, according to Statistics Canada (2024). While employment (the demand for labor) grew by 51,000 in November 2024, the apparent supply of labor (measured by the "labor force" — people either working or actively seeking work) grew by 138,000. Even 51,000 new jobs could not keep up, resulting in higher unemployment despite higher employment (Stanford, 2024).

There were two reasons for the big jump in labor supply in November. Canada's population is still growing, despite recent federal government efforts to slow down the inflow of both permanent immigrants and temporary migrants. The latter surged dramatically after 2022, as employers turned to migrant laborers and temporary resident workers to address labor shortages posed by the pandemic (Stanford, 2024). The unusual combination of strong job creation and rising unemployment in November 2024 casts a spotlight on deeper issues raised by population growth and labor force participation in Canada. Under the Bank of Canada's rate hikes, Canada's labor market has been significantly worse than the unemployment rate suggests. Economic experts suggest that if the actual unemployment rates are reflected, the current unemployment rate would be 8.2 percent and not 6.8 percent. That is very high, more typical of a recession, even though Canada (narrowly) avoided a technical recession during the recent disinflation (Stanford, 2024). As a result, the people in Canada have developed considerable mistrust towards government policies, and many consider mass immigration post-pandemic to be a contributing factor to the current economic crisis in Canada.

Anti-Immigration Politics

Over the years, Canada has developed a reputation as a welcoming country for migrants and has become one of the most favorable destinations for people choosing to settle in the West, thanks to its high standards of living and the peaceful life it offers, characterized by diversity and inclusion. Canada, which takes pride in welcoming newcomers, has been facing a reckoning over a sharp rise in the number of "temporary residents," such as international students and workers, in recent years. A recent Statistics Canada report found that work permit holders have increasingly

concentrated in sectors that mainly offer low-paying jobs, such as accommodation and food services, which young Canadians and recent newcomers traditionally fill. It has created a sense of competition between the working class and migrant workers, which is felt even more acutely when inflation is high and jobs are scarce.

While it is valid to criticize Canada's immigration system, it becomes problematic when people start blaming the individuals who are coming here rather than a deliberate government policy that welcomed them and seems designed to keep wages low, says Christopher Cochrane, an associate professor of political science at the University of Toronto, Scarborough (Stanford, 2024).

Due to the ongoing criticism of the government's immigration policies, the government has announced and decided to take measures to curtail the flow of people. The government is making significant cuts to the number of immigrants admitted into Canada. The number of new permanent residents is expected to decrease by nearly 20 percent next year, while the number of temporary foreign workers allowed to come to Canada is also expected to decline. The government says the cuts would result in a 0.2 percent decline in Canada's population and alleviate "pressures on housing, infrastructure, and social services. The cuts come as Canada's political leaders increasingly blame immigrants for the country's housing and healthcare problems. Political discourse from Conservatives and Liberals routinely casts increased migration as the primary cause of Canada's housing and healthcare crises (Kukreja, 2024).

Media polls also suggest that a growing portion of the public believes that Canada has too many immigrants, and many blame them for a worsening housing crisis, a surge in the cost of living, and increased unemployment. In recent years, hate crimes reported by police have increased more from 2019 to 2023, as per the latest figures from Statistics Canada, with 44.5 percent of incidents in 2023 motivated by race or ethnicity. Hate crimes include anything from homicide and assault to mischief and public incitement of hatred (Backlash against immigrants challenges Canada's welcoming image, 2024).

The apparent growth in anti-immigrant sentiment contradicts a long-standing agreement in Canada that the country welcomes newcomers on humanitarian and economic grounds. A growing perception in Canada that immigration is to blame for some of the country's economic despair is fueling a xenophobic backlash, evidenced by a surge in reported hate crimes against visible minorities, as per media reports. Racist and xenophobic social media posts targeting immigrants and visible minorities in Canada have proliferated online in recent years.

Rise of Racism Towards South Asians in Canada

Although hate towards South Asians has a long history in Canada, in recent times, hate crimes towards South Asians have increased tremendously. In Canada, anti-immigrant and anti-newcomer hatred has often revolved around race, with racialized and ethno-religious groups, such as Sikhs and Muslims, becoming easy targets. In 2023, 44.5 percent of hate incidents in Canada were motivated by race or ethnicity, with South Asian and Black people facing higher rates of hate threats and assaults. Between 2022 and 2023, there was a significant increase in reported hate crimes against Muslims (Kukreja, 2024). In a recent encounter, a former international student from India who now works in IT on a work permit says the tone toward international students and migrants has shifted from viewing them as "COVID heroes" who helped keep the Canadian economy running during the pandemic to being blamed for the country's housing and affordability

crisis. She believes the blame game against migrants, many of them from India, is politically motivated and aimed at diverting public attention from government policy failures. “Canadians are their vote banks, so they want to make them happy by scapegoating us.” (Kukreja, 2024). In the past two years, the Canadian government developed a rift with the government of India over a Sikh leader who was assassinated in Canada; the Indian government has long shown its resentment towards the Khalistani activists residing in Canada. The assassination of the Sikh leader and the political rift resulted in clashes between the Indian community and sparked protests by both Hindus and Sikhs. The clashes that were witnessed recently also supported the anti-Indian and anti-South Asian resentment, with people in online spaces demanding that Indians move back to India, which was also fueled by some politicians supporting anti-immigration policies.

York University Professor Tania Das Gupta has observed a shift in public discourse, especially after some politicians began stating that immigrants contribute to the affordability crisis, framing migrants, especially international students, as interlopers. “They are not Canadians. They are outsiders. Moreover, they are using our services. They are using our housing. They are using our food banks. They are taking away jobs,” says Das Gupta (Gupta, 2023), who researches South Asian diaspora, migration, and labor issues. “These are old racist tropes that have been surfacing again. “In the popular psyche, migrants are now visualized as being South Asians,” (Gupta, 2023), especially people from India, the largest source country of migrants in Canada, Das Gupta says. “She noticed a shift in the rhetoric in the wake of 2023’s mass deportation of Indian students who claimed they were duped by an unscrupulous education recruiter and used fraudulent admission letters to apply for student permits to Canada, which she says feeds into the stereotypes that the group was taking advantage of Canada” (Gupta, 2023). Reena Kukreja, an associate professor of global development studies at Queen’s University, is researching the link between hateful discourse, its normalization, and how that manifests in abuse in people’s daily interactions.

Her research focuses on South Asian men working in the gig economy, such as rideshare drivers and food delivery workers, or what she calls “hyper-visible” jobs. (Kukreja, 2024). She says her findings show a “sharp rise in hate” some report they have experienced a rise in overt racism, such as slurs, while others say they feel it in more passive-aggressive behaviors from customers. “One of the guys told me it is the way they look at you and then slam the door shut; it is a continual reinforcement of two things: One is that Canada is a white-dominant country. Moreover, you do not belong here” (Kukreja, 2024). She says that while such microaggressions can be hard to prove as outright discrimination, it creates a “continual trauma that accumulates over time, where you feel as less worthy.” “The moment when hate becomes banal, it is perilous,” she says. “It becomes every day, which I am seeing right now” (Kukreja, 2024). In Canada, police-reported hate crimes against South Asians have increased every year since 2020, with 228 incidents in 2023, compared to 135 in 2020.

Nevertheless, these statistics likely only represent a fraction of what is happening, as many people do not report their experiences, and a comment like “Go back to your country” does not typically meet the threshold of a hate crime unless it precedes an act such as vandalism or assault, which could then be deemed hate-motivated.

Conclusion

Canada's humanitarian intentions, as manifested by the Liberal government, are admirable. However, good intentions alone are insufficient for effective and sustainable policies that benefit the people. The drastic changes within Canada's migration policies, first with generously welcoming people in 2022 and 2023 and then with drastic cuts in 2024, reflect that not enough

practical focus by the government has been made as to how to protect Canada's larger interests, making the most of limited resources, and maintaining a compassionate immigration policy for the long-term as well as tackling the crisis that will erupt in 2025, due to the changes in migration policies towards international students and temporary workers when their permits will expire. They will be forced to return to their country of origin. To maintain its image as an inclusive and diverse nation, Canada must develop holistic policies that are in the best interest of its public and do not give the impression of creating policies aimed at excluding a particular group or race.

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