



# AGRI MAGAZINE

(International E-Magazine for Agricultural Articles)

Volume: 02, Issue: 11 (November, 2025)

Available online at <http://www.agrimagazine.in>

© Agri Magazine, ISSN: 3048-8656

## Why Punjab's Youth Are Moving Away from Agriculture

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Punjab, once hailed as India's "Granary," is witnessing a concerning shift as its youth increasingly move away from agriculture the very sector that shaped its economic identity. Despite historical prosperity during the Green Revolution, the sector now faces structural stagnation, declining profitability, and changing aspirations among younger generations. This article examines the primary economic, social, and environmental reasons driving this exodus, explores its implications for the state's rural economy, and proposes policy pathways to re-engage the youth with agriculture.

### Introduction

For decades, Punjab has symbolized agricultural success in India. The Green Revolution of the 1960s transformed the state into a key food supplier, ensuring national food security. However, over time, the same system that once guaranteed prosperity has become unsustainable. The younger generation in Punjab increasingly perceives agriculture as an unprofitable, low-status, and risky livelihood. This trend is alarming for both Punjab's economy and India's food security. Youth migration away from farming either into cities, service jobs, or abroad has reached significant proportions. The question, therefore, is not merely *why* this shift is occurring, but what deeper transformations in the state's economic, environmental, and social fabric are fueling it.

### Economic and Structural Push Factors

The foremost reason for youth disengagement from agriculture is declining profitability. Input costs fuel, fertilizer, and labor have increased steadily, while crop prices have stagnated. Margins for small and medium farmers are often so thin that agriculture barely sustains families. According to a study by Singh (2020), the depletion of groundwater and rising irrigation expenses have drastically raised production costs, making farming less viable in the long term.

Land fragmentation has worsened the situation. Inheritance patterns divide holdings into ever smaller plots, leaving insufficient land for economic survival. For instance, a farmer owning two acres cannot mechanize effectively or achieve economies of scale. The resulting inefficiency reduces productivity and increases dependency on government procurement for wheat and paddy. This dependence also limits diversification into more profitable crops such as vegetables, fruits, or pulses.

Furthermore, industrial stagnation and lack of alternative rural employment have created a paradox. Youth reject agriculture but find few non-farm opportunities within Punjab. Without vibrant manufacturing or services sectors, their most viable escape is migration to Canada, Australia, or Europe where even low-skilled jobs pay more than farming at home. The Punjab Economic Survey (2023–24) highlights that remittances from abroad now play a crucial role in sustaining many rural households, reflecting how migration has become an economic strategy rather than a choice.

## Environmental Stress and Resource Degradation

Punjab's agricultural prosperity has come at the cost of its natural resources. Overexploitation of groundwater for paddy cultivation has led to a critical depletion of aquifers. The state's Central Ground Water Board estimates an annual decline of 0.5–1 meter in many districts. This environmental crisis not only raises costs but also increases uncertainty for young farmers. Moreover, excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides has degraded soil health, leading to stagnating yields despite high input use. Climate variability, including erratic rainfall and rising temperatures, further increases vulnerability. As Singh (2020) observed, these environmental stresses are prompting many farmers particularly youth to move away from water-intensive crops or to abandon agriculture entirely. In the face of such risks, farming appears less attractive compared to the perceived stability of urban or foreign employment. For young Punjabis, agriculture is increasingly viewed not as a career but as a last resort.

## Socio-Cultural and Aspirational Shifts

Beyond economic and environmental pressures, cultural and psychological factors also shape the youth's disinterest in farming. The traditional prestige attached to being a "zamindar" (landowner) has eroded. Today's generation values modern lifestyles, steady income, and technological engagement traits often associated with urban professions rather than agriculture. Many rural families also promote education with the hope that their children will leave farming. Ironically, this aspiration once seen as progress—now contributes to the erosion of the agricultural workforce. As Bhardwaj (2024) notes, Punjabi youth increasingly perceive migration and white-collar jobs as symbols of success, while farming is viewed as backward and uncertain. Social media and diaspora culture further amplify these aspirations. Stories of successful migrants encourage others to seek opportunities abroad rather than invest in agriculture. This mindset perpetuates a cycle where the best-educated rural youth disengage from farming, leaving it to older generations or migrant laborers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

## Institutional and Policy Challenges

Punjab's agricultural policies, while extensive in subsidies, lack innovation to attract youth. Programs focus heavily on input subsidies like free electricity and minimum support prices (MSP) rather than on modernization and value addition. There are limited incentives for agripreneurship, agro-processing, or agri-tech ventures that could appeal to educated youth. Moreover, the education–employment mismatch is severe. Agricultural education remains largely theoretical, with minimal exposure to modern practices such as precision farming, hydroponics, or climate-smart agriculture. Without training in these areas, youth find it difficult to view agriculture as a profitable or modern career option. The result is a systemic failure to make agriculture *aspirational*. As the Punjab Economic Survey (2023–24) points out, the state's economy has not sufficiently diversified to absorb skilled youth into productive sectors. Consequently, the outflow of talent continues unabated.

## Consequences of Youth Exodus from Agriculture

The withdrawal of youth from farming carries far-reaching implications:

- Ageing Farming Population:** With young people leaving, the average age of farmers in Punjab is increasing. This limits innovation, adaptability, and technology adoption in agriculture.
- Rural Economic Decline:** Reduced youth participation weakens rural demand and community development. Villages dependent on remittances often lose their productive base.
- Food Security Risks:** As farming becomes concentrated among fewer, older farmers, Punjab's contribution to India's grain supply may decline, endangering national food security.

4. **Cultural Erosion:** Farming in Punjab has deep cultural significance, tied to festivals, music, and identity. As youth disengage, these traditions face dilution.

## Pathways to Re-engage Youth in Agriculture

Reversing this trend requires reimagining agriculture as a modern, profitable, and sustainable profession rather than a subsistence activity. Several strategic interventions could help:

1. **Promote Agripreneurship and Agri-Tech:** Encourage youth-led startups in farm machinery, food processing, and digital agriculture. Training programs that link innovation with traditional farming can make agriculture more attractive.
2. **Diversify Cropping and Markets:** Move beyond wheat-paddy cycles to high-value horticulture, organic farming, and livestock-based enterprises. Market linkages and branding (e.g., "Punjab Organic") could enhance profitability.
3. **Sustainable Resource Management:** Incentivize water-efficient crops, drip irrigation, and crop diversification to reduce environmental stress and risk.
4. **Skill Development and Education Reform:** Revise agricultural curricula to integrate business management, sustainability, and technology. Partnerships with universities and agri-startups could create employment pathways within the sector.
5. **Policy Support for Young Farmers:** Provide start-up grants, affordable credit, and land leasing reforms that lower entry barriers for youth. Governments could also create "Agri Innovation Hubs" in rural areas to foster collaboration between technology firms and farmers.
6. **Change the Narrative:** Media and educational campaigns should reframe farming as a profession of innovation and national importance. Highlighting young success stories in agri-tech or organic farming could inspire others.

## Conclusion

The flight of Punjab's youth from agriculture is not merely a crisis of employment—it reflects a deeper transformation in the state's economy, ecology, and identity. The combination of declining farm profitability, environmental degradation, lack of diversification, and changing aspirations has made agriculture appear unattractive to younger generations. However, the future of Punjab's rural economy depends on reconnecting youth with agriculture through innovation, sustainability, and dignity. Making farming technologically advanced, profitable, and socially respected can transform it from a dying occupation into a dynamic engine of growth. The challenge is significant, but with visionary policy and youth engagement, agriculture can once again become a source of pride and prosperity in Punjab.

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