Punjab
CONCLAVE

2025

PROGRESSIVE INDEPENDENT PUNJABI

The Punjab Conclave is an independent, progressive platform uniting influential Punjabi voices to inspire innovation and drive change. A hub of thought leadership, it sparks impactful dialogues shaping the future

The Punjab Conclave is a premier platform for non-partisan dialogue, discussion, and thought exchange among the influential leaders and innovators of the Punjabi community. Conceived by veteran journalist Kanwar Sandhu, it aims to bring together notable figures from business, politics, and high-demand careers to address the most pressing and relevant issues of our time. Designed to inspire transformative conversations, the Conclave offers a unique opportunity for attendees to engage directly with industry leaders, pose questions, and participate in insightful dialogues that drive impact and progress.

Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria, Ontario's Minister of Transportation

Ruby Sahota, Canada's Secretary of State (Combatting Crime)

Dr. Harinder Sandhu, President and Chair of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario

PUNJAB CONCLAVE 2025: WHITE PAPER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

The Punjab Conclave 2025, convened by the author, Kanwar Sandhu, was conceived not simply as a conference but as a movement of reflection and reckoning. For Punjabi immigrants and settlers, trading nationalities sometimes becomes necessary, but switching homelands is not. The diaspora therefore remains tied to being Punjabi, at the core. Sandhu's opening remarks at the Conclave 2025 posed fundamental questions: *Who are we as Punjab and Punjabis? Where are we going? Who will think for Punjab, and what future awaits its diaspora?* These questions, built upon the groundwork of the Punjab Conclave 2024, framed the discussions that followed, urging participants to confront the state's internal challenges and its global connections.

The 2024 Conclave had laid out key debates on farming and healthcare by Dr. Swaiman Singh, good governance by Harkirat Singh, Deputy Mayor of Brampton, and environmental sustainability by lawyer Harminder Dhillon.

During the Conclave in 2025, the conversations expanded in scope and urgency, with notable participation from Hon. Ruby Sahota - Canada's Secretary of State for Combating Crime, Hon. Prabmeet Singh Sarkaria - Ontario's Minister of Transportation, and Dr. Harinder Sandhu - Chair and President of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario. Their interventions underscored that Punjab and its diaspora confront not isolated problems but interconnected, multi-faceted crises in the form of numerous problems. As Steve Taylor writes, in "The Diasporic Pursuit of Home and Identity: Dynamic Punjabi Transnationalism", that changes in Punjab, be it in terms of ownership and consumption, or culture and living conditions, affect how diasporic Punjabis imagine "home" (2014). On the other hand, the Punjabi diaspora "has significantly shaped and transformed Punjabi culture... [its] global disseminations... while also addressing the challenges such as cultural dilution and generational disconnect" (Singh 2022).

The 2025 Conclave focused on three domains: crime and public safety, where Punjab grapples with entrenched gangsterism and Canada faces diaspora-linked crime; mobility and infrastructure, with Punjab hindered by flawed land acquisition and absent urban transit while Ontario pursues large but contested projects; and healthcare, highlighted as a system under severe neglect despite successive schemes. This paper synthesizes the Conclave's debates into a structured analysis, situating Punjab's dilemmas within a wider comparative lens of governance, law, and development.

Punjab today faces the convergence of multiple crises that cut across security, governance, infrastructure, and healthcare. The rise of gangster groups - now numbering around ten - has coincided with the spread of narcotics, particularly among the youth, creating a cycle of crime and addiction that threatens to overwhelm law enforcement. In Canada, the Punjabi diaspora is

under increasing scrutiny as violent incidents multiply: in Peel Region, gangster-style shootouts saw a sharp rise between 2023 and 2024, while in Surrey, British Columbia, the first seven months of 2025 saw forty-three shootings, twenty-one of them linked to ransom demands. These episodes, though involving only a small fraction of the community, have fueled stereotypes that unfairly tar law-abiding South Asians with the same brush as criminals. Both India and Canada now face the same dilemma: how to strengthen enforcement without eroding the civil liberties that underpin democratic systems.

Infrastructure adds another layer of urgency. In Punjab, the land acquisition system relies on outdated valuations that often reflect only a fraction of true market value, leaving farmers aggrieved and projects delayed. Even when premiums are offered, farmers remain fearful of losing their livelihoods and way of life. Urban congestion in Ludhiana and Chandigarh is compounded by the absence of metro transit, stifling growth. In Ontario, by contrast, projects like Highway 413, the three-level 401 tunnel, and the Hurontario transit line are moving forward, yet public confidence is eroded by controversies such as the Eglinton Crosstown delays, Ontario Place redevelopment, and suspicions of favoritism in the Greenbelt and towing contracts. Canada's national picture is equally fraught: the single bridge over the Nipigon River remains the only road link between eastern and western Canada, an extraordinary vulnerability, while northern highways remain undivided and unsafe. Air travel, meanwhile, is among the most expensive in the developed world, with weak competition and poor service compared to Europe.

Healthcare, highlighted in the Conclave's prologue, illustrates institutional neglect at its starkest. Punjab has one government doctor for every 9,000 people, nine times worse than the global standard recommended by the World Health Organization, and only 300 government dentists serve the entire state, leaving millions reliant on costly private care. Hospitals are under-equipped, thousands of medical posts remain vacant, and trauma and emergency care systems are virtually absent. In Canada, the situation is less dire but increasingly strained: despite nearly 100,000 physicians nationwide, the country is short by some 30,000 family doctors, while licensing bottlenecks have left around 6,000 internationally trained dentists unable to practice. Nursing shortages are only beginning to ease, while public dental coverage remains partial and income based. Both systems reflect different versions of the same crisis: Punjab suffers from absence, Canada from misalignment.

Methodology

Methodologically, this paper is grounded in the deliberations of the Conclave itself, drawing on speeches, debates, and both formal and informal conversations among participants. It does not rely on abstract theorizing, except referring to certain scholarly insights, but on firsthand accounts

of crises as they are lived: gang violence rising in Punjab's villages and Canada's suburbs, farmers fighting for fair compensation in land acquisition, and citizens confronting a healthcare system that exists more on paper than in practice.

Moreover, incidents like the murder of Dimpi Chandbhan and the rise of Rocky Fazilka in Punjab, along with the sharp increase in shootouts in Peel Region, highlight not random acts of violence but deeper institutional cracks in the governance and law enforcement frameworks. By situating these lived experiences within a comparative policy lens, the Conclave aimed to ensure that urgency is translated into actionable recommendations rather than being lost as yet another fleeting debate.

The backdrop to the 2025 Conclave is therefore one of mounting disillusionment and fracture, but also of clarity. In Punjab, gangsterism and narcotics threaten to hollow out a generation, farmers remain suspicious of state promises, and hospitals are unable to meet even basic international standards. In Canada, diaspora-linked crime risks stigmatizing entire communities, infrastructure projects drag under the shadow of scandal, and healthcare systems bend under mounting strain. What unites these crises is not only their scale but the collapse of public trust in the institutions meant to address them. The Conclave did not merely catalogue these failures; it demanded renewal. It asked participants to see that the crises of Punjab and its diaspora are interconnected symptoms of governance under strain, and that decisive reform is not optional but imperative if decline is to be reversed and dignity restored.

Literature and Policy Context

The challenges raised at the Punjab Conclave 2025 do not exist in a vacuum. Punjab's present struggle was preceded by a decade of no-holds barred militancy with dangerous consequences across the globe. Even now its struggle with gangsterism and narcotics fits into a wider global debate on the intersection of organized crime, youth unemployment, and drug trafficking.

However, Punjab's present struggle with gangsterism and narcotics can also be understood through the lens of critical criminology, globalization theory, and post-conflict studies, which together highlight how localized violence and crime are deeply embedded in broader structural and transnational dynamics. As Jock Young in The Exclusive Society (1999) argues, crime is often the outcome of social exclusion, youth unemployment, and marginalization—precisely the conditions that have intensified in Punjab following the collapse of its agrarian economy and the erosion of state trust. Punjab's earlier phase of militancy in the 1980s and 1990s created a fractured post-conflict society, where, as Carolyn Nordstrom — in Shadows of War (2004)— notes, shadow networks and alternative power structures often fill the void left by weak governance. Today, these

structures have morphed into organized gangs and drug cartels, offering identity, income, and power to a disillusioned youth. This aligns with Phil Williams' (2001) view that transnational crime thrives in spaces of weak state oversight, distorted markets, and unaddressed youth crises. Punjab, with its porous borders, diaspora links, and history of political violence, has become a nodule in global criminal networks - mirroring a worldwide pattern where regions marked by economic stagnation and political disillusionment become fertile ground for organized crime. Thus, Punjab's crisis is not an isolated pathology, but part of a wider global debate on the intersection of organized crime, youth precarity, and post-conflict fragility.

States from Mexico to Italy have faced similar entanglements, where criminal syndicates move from local dominance to international networks once they intersect with lucrative illicit markets. Canada's experience with diaspora-linked crime echoes these patterns, as immigrant communities are often both scapegoated and disproportionately affected by organized violence, a trend studied in contexts ranging from Central American gangs in the United States to Albanian networks in Europe. The Conclave situated Punjab's and Canada's crises within this global arc: how to combat organized crime without criminalizing entire communities or eroding the democratic rights that distinguish open societies from authoritarian regimes.

Infrastructure debates likewise resonate beyond Punjab and Ontario. With agriculture as its mainstay, Punjab was slow to take to infrastructural and developmental projects. And when it did take the leap, its land acquisition processes hindered the projects. These dilemmas in fact mirror those seen across India, where compensation disputes, and opaque transactions stall critical projects. Globally, governments have experimented with models like land pooling in Gujarat or community profit-sharing in parts of Africa to balance growth with fairness. Ontario's controversies, whether in the Eglinton Line delays, Ontario Place redevelopment, or the Greenbelt scandal, speak to a different but related problem: even in advanced democracies, citizens lose faith when transparency in contracting is sacrificed, creating perceptions of favoritism and capture by vested interests. These cases align with broader policy literature emphasizing that legitimacy in infrastructure is as important as technical efficiency, because without public trust, projects stall or lose their intended developmental impact.

Healthcare, too, is part of a well-documented global crisis. Punjab's ratio of one doctor for every 9,000 people echoes broader deficiencies across South Asia, where underfunded systems are unable to scale with population demands. In contrast, Canada's shortage of family physicians despite high overall healthcare spending highlights a paradox common in developed nations: abundant resources but misaligned systems that leave large segments underserved. The Conclave underscored that whether in a developing or developed context, neglect of primary care creates cascading costs - social, economic, and political - that no system can afford for long.

By situating Punjab's and Canada's challenges within these wider patterns, the Conclave established that these are not isolated or parochial problems but part of a global struggle: how democracies ensure safety, development, and welfare without losing sight of fairness, rights, and trust.

Analysis of Findings - Crime & Public Safety

Punjab's gangster problem has grown from an episodic law-and-order issue into a structural threat that now challenges the authority of the state itself. What began in the mid-2000s as a fringe element escalated dramatically after the mid-2010s as gangs discovered a new lifeline in narcotics trafficking. By 2015, the phenomenon had shifted from isolated violence to a networked system of crime, drawing Punjab's youth into a nexus of drug use, extortion, and organized violence.

Today, about ten major gangster groups dominate the landscape, supported by hundreds of smaller cells. In the last three years, an Anti-Gangster Task Force has arrested more than 1,500 suspects and neutralized over 100, but these victories have done little to slow recruitment or dismantle the larger networks. The risk is clear: Punjab stands on the edge of cartelization, where localized gang rivalries fuse into alliances with global organized crime, echoing patterns seen in Mexico, Colombia, or Italy, where criminal syndicates entrenched themselves so deeply that states struggled for decades to regain control. Loïc Wacquant, in Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality, argues: "In disadvantaged urban areas, the underground economy often represents one of the few viable sources of income for marginalized individuals. Participation in criminal enterprises becomes an economic strategy rooted in the structural exclusion from legitimate labor markets" (2008: 97). While Wacquant highlights structural economic exclusion as the driver behind involvement in criminal economies, Jeff Ferrell's work highlights how gangs function economically as informal, alternative economies, offering income and social capital in contexts where formal opportunities are limited or inaccessible: "The gang is not simply a site of deviance but also a subcultural economy, where economic activities—legal and illegal—are interwoven with identity, status, and social relations. The criminal economy becomes a means of survival and resistance for marginalized youth excluded from the mainstream labor market" (2008: 53)

However, the proposed Punjab Control of Organized Crime Act, designed to confront this reality with stronger legal tools, yet carries fears of misuse and political hesitation, have left the law in limbo. Without decisive but lawful action, Punjab risks allowing its gangs to transition from a domestic menace into internationally connected syndicates with the financing, firepower, and

political influence to destabilize the state for a generation. The crisis is not confined to Punjab's borders. In Canada, diaspora-linked crime has placed Punjabi communities under a harsh spotlight, amplifying stereotypes and eroding public confidence. As Anecia Gill notes in A Case-Study in the Racialization of Crime: Conceptualizations of Indo-Canadian Gangs: "Generally, it is viewed that 'defects' in Indo-Canadian culture cause gang activity. This conceptualization is laden with racial overtones as Indo-Canadians are labeled deviant and subjected to surveillance in the name of public safety" (2022).

Both in the Peel Region and in Surrey, British Columbia, gangster-style shootouts have shaken neighborhoods that are home to one of the largest South Asian populations in North America. Such a scale of violence is more often associated with organized syndicates than suburban Canada. While only a tiny fraction of the diaspora is involved, the highly visible nature of these crimes makes it easy for broader Canadian society to conflate an entire community with its most violent elements. Arrest records showing a disproportionate number of South Asians in such incidents reinforce this perception, even though they mask the far larger truth: that millions of law-abiding immigrants are building businesses, raising families, and contributing to Canadian society. The result is a dangerous double bind - diaspora communities become both the victims of organized crime and the victims of stereotyping, facing suspicion from law enforcement and discrimination from the public. This mirrors patterns seen elsewhere in the world, where immigrant groups have been stigmatized for the crimes of a few, from Central American gangs in U.S. cities to Albanian networks in Europe.

In Canada's case, the challenge is particularly acute because both India and Canada share parliamentary systems yet diverge sharply in practice: Canada privileges the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, while India leans on preventive detention laws like UAPA. The effect is that Canadian enforcement often appears reactive and constrained, while Indian enforcement risks overreach - leaving diaspora-linked crime to fester in the gap between two legal cultures.

Canada's justice system is itself under strain, caught between the need for stronger enforcement and the imperative to safeguard civil liberties. The proposed reverse onus in bail hearings, which shifts the burden onto the accused to justify release, marks a significant departure from traditional presumptions of innocence. The guest at the Conclave, Secretary of State, Ruby Sahota, spelt out the clear intent: to prevent repeat offenders and violent criminals from cycling in and out of custody. A section of the public is asking for stricter provisions to combat crime, especially ransom calls, shootouts, home invasions and carjackings. Yet it also risks overwhelming detention systems with individuals unable to prove their case, regardless of their actual threat to society. At the same time, enforcement agencies such as the CBSA and RCMP have been granted sweeping new surveillance powers under the Stronger Borders Act, backed by a $1.3 billion investment in

helicopters, aerial monitoring, and expanded personnel. These tools allow unprecedented reach into private lives, raising alarms among advocacy groups about privacy infringements and creeping authoritarianism. Policymakers argue this is the price of security, invoking the social contract - that citizens must surrender certain privileges to ensure collective safety. But critics warn that without clear boundaries of scope, accountability, and oversight, these powers blur the line between targeted enforcement and blanket surveillance. The need for wider debate is imperative.

Adding to the uncertainty is the ambiguity surrounding "reasonable force" in Canadian self-defence law. While citizens are legally permitted to defend themselves, the lack of clarity on what constitutes proportional action leaves many hesitant - or confused - to act for fear of legal reprisal. As Cynthia Lee (2009) notes, jurors and defendants alike are rarely given clear guidance on whether the response to a threat was reasonably proportionate, even if the belief in danger was justified. This lack of clarity, echoed by theorists like Stephen Kershnar (2022), creates a grey zone where individuals fear legal reprisal for acting, even when their safety is at risk - highlighting a broader tension between legal theory and lived experience in high-risk environments. This vagueness undermines public confidence and risks discouraging lawful defense, underscoring the need for clarity or amendment in law, clearer public guidance that should balance empowerment with restraint - and of course reduction in crime.

The debate exposes a deeper philosophical fault line: Canada's Charter describes rights as guaranteed, but in practice they function as principles, privileges contingent on responsible participation in society. The contrast is stark when compared with the United States, where absolute property rights even allow homeowners to use lethal force against intruders. In Canada, by contrast, excessive force - even in self-defence - is punishable, underscoring a commitment to proportionality over absolutism. This rights-versus-principles framing highlights both the strength and vulnerability of Canada's system: it protects against overreach in theory, yet in practice leaves gaps that organized crime can exploit faster than the courts can respond.

It is thus not surprising that the new Government under Prime Minister Mark Carney is contemplating yet another legislation to amend the criminal code in the fall of 2025. This, it is hoped, would ensure that people accused of violent crimes are not in and out of jail within days.

Beneath the visible violence lies a deeper socio-economic fault line. The Conclave highlighted that crime is not only the product of disadvantaged backgrounds but also draws in youth from affluent families, demonstrating that wealth alone is not a safeguard when identity, belonging, and opportunity feel uncertain. In this context, enforcement-heavy approaches can create a vicious cycle: stronger policing may deliver short-term results but risks hardening marginalization, pushing offenders further from mainstream society and deeper into criminal networks. Globally,

jurisdictions that pursued enforcement without rehabilitation - such as mass incarceration policies in the United States - saw crime reemerge in cycles, with communities trapped in a revolving door of arrests, convictions, and re-offending. Canada now faces a similar risk if reverse onus laws and expanded surveillance are not balanced by pathways for reintegration. Rehabilitation is not a soft alternative but a strategic necessity: without programs that offer education, skills training, and credible exit routes from crime, enforcement becomes an endless loop that breeds resentment and recidivism. Punjab faces an even sharper version of this challenge. A decade of militancy left a bitter residue with dangerous and international ramifications. One full generation was either eclipsed or forced to leave home - only to trigger a separatist fringe abroad. Back home in Punjab, the drug epidemic has created a population of addicted youth vulnerable to gang recruitment, while its rehabilitation programs remain underfunded, ineffective, or outright failing. Without a systemic overhaul that treats prevention and recovery as seriously as enforcement, Punjab risks condemning a generation to a cycle of addiction, crime, and imprisonment. The Conclave made clear that the choice is not between strong laws and social support, it is about recognizing that lasting security demands both.

Analysis of Findings - Mobility & Infrastructure

Punjab's infrastructure ambitions are being choked not by a lack of vision but by deep flaws in how land is acquired and how farmers' futures are protected. At present, the state has thirty-seven highway projects covering nearly 1,400 kilometers, yet progress is repeatedly stalled because farmers, though often offered premiums over official valuations, reject compensation packages that they see as inadequate to safeguard their livelihoods.

Moreover, infrastructure expansion often collides with the embedded socio-economic value of land in agrarian societies (Levien 2013). It should also be noted that land in regions like Punjab is not merely an economic asset but a core element of identity, security, and social reproduction, particularly for smallholder farmers (Agarwal 1994). Even when monetary compensation exceeds official valuation, it often fails to account for the non-market dimensions of land—such as its role in sustaining multi-generational farming households or providing social status—which explains farmers' resistance to state-led expropriation (Hall, D., Hirsch, P., & Li, T. M. 2011. Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia. University of Hawai'i Press). These tensions are exacerbated by procedural shortcomings in the implementation of the Land Acquisition Act (LARR, 2013), which, despite its safeguards, has been criticized for reproducing coercive acquisition through bureaucratic discretion and valuation disputes (Bedi, H. P. 2020. Land, Law and Resistance: Legal Pluralism and Land Dispossession in Gujarat. Routledge).

Nevertheless, the heart of the problem is not the price of land on paper but the absence of viable

alternatives for those who depend on farming for survival. Not all landowners are large landlords; most are small and marginal farmers for whom the loss of land is the loss of identity, security, and the ability to provide for their families. Even when premiums are paid, there are no clear transition pathways or support systems to help farmers pivot toward new sources of income. This fuels resentment and mistrust, leaving farmers caught in a cycle where compensation looks generous in theory but feels like dispossession in practice. Infrastructure, which should be a driver of growth, thus becomes mired in disputes that erode confidence in the state's intentions and paralyze industrial development.

Against this backdrop, Punjab's failure to invest in urban transit is equally striking. Major cities like Ludhiana, Chandigarh, Amritsar, Jalandhar, and Patiala, population hubs that anchor the state's economy, still lacks metro or other public transit systems, forcing commuters into endless gridlock. This absence of rapid transit not only wastes time and productivity but actively constrains Punjab's economic potential, ensuring that even when highways are built, urban bottlenecks nullify their benefits. In his study, Jagmohan Singh (2022) argues that infrastructure (both physical e.g. roads, hospitals, and social e.g. schools, community centres) plays a critical role in growth, but the unequal provision undermines regional identity and equitable participation.

Even beyond the failures of land acquisition and metro planning, Punjab's broader transport system suffers from inefficiencies that multiply the costs of underdevelopment. The state's road transport relies heavily on buses, yet the system operates without basic clarity: bus stops are poorly defined, schedules inconsistent, and no centralized digital booking platform exists to manage routes or demand. Worse, the transport system has been hijacked by powerful and scandalous political transport lobbies, which have destroyed state public transport. This lack of structure translates into longer travel times, missed connections, and a system that discourages ridership rather than supporting it. Rail connectivity offers no relief, as Punjab remains dependent on the national railway system, with little autonomy to develop regionally focused solutions. The result is that travel between Punjab's major cities, which could be streamlined with just three or four efficient rail lines, remains slow and fragmented. Highway construction, often celebrated as a solution, is undermined by poor road discipline and weak enforcement of traffic laws. Highways designed for speed become sites of congestion and accidents because drivers lack proper training and licensing, and lane discipline is virtually non-existent. The paradox is stark: billions are invested in physical infrastructure, but without systemic reforms, clear transit rules, strong enforcement, and public education; the state gains little of the efficiency such investments should deliver. In effect, Punjab has built roads but not a system, leaving its citizens trapped in a cycle where infrastructure exists on paper yet fails in practice.

Ontario, by contrast, is pursuing some of the most ambitious infrastructure projects in its history. During the Conclave, the Ontario Minister, Prabhmeet Singh Sarkaria, dwelt at length on the

various projects under way. Yet the effort is overshadowed by a mounting crisis of confidence. Highway 413, pitched as the solution to crushing gridlock in the Greater Toronto Area, has become a lightning rod for criticism, not only because of its ecological footprint but also over suspicions that land developers with close political ties stand to profit disproportionately. The proposed three-level tunnel under Highway 401, a project of unprecedented scale, is still in feasibility studies but already sparks questions about cost, timeline, and who ultimately benefits.

At the same time, Ontario is expanding transit through the Ontario Line, the Hurontario LRT, and GO Transit's ten-year plan, projects that are widely seen as necessary but chronically delayed and over budget. The Eglinton Crosstown LRT - plagued by contractor disputes and inefficiencies, has become a cautionary tale, symbolizing how poor oversight and weak accountability turn vital projects into endless sagas. Public skepticism is further inflamed by cases like the Ontario Place redevelopment and the Greenbelt controversy, which suggest that infrastructure planning is less about public need and more about political favoritism. Even seemingly routine services such as towing and snow removal have been corrupted by opaque bidding practices: exclusive towing contracts reduced turf-war violence but sent costs soaring for ordinary drivers, while snow removal subcontracting has fueled inefficiencies and perceptions of cronyism. For Ontario, the challenge is not ambition but legitimacy, citizens do not object to highways or transit themselves, but to the belief that contracts are awarded unfairly, money wasted, and accountability absent. Without restoring transparency in how projects are tendered and managed, even the best-designed infrastructure risks being seen as tainted.

Canada's national connectivity is defined less by its vast geography than by its startling fragility. The single bridge at Nipigon in northwestern Ontario represents the only physical road link connecting eastern and western Canada, a structural vulnerability so severe that a failure at this one point would fracture the country's economic lifeline. Beyond this, the two critical highways of northern Ontario, Highway 11 and Highway 17, remain undivided two-lane roads, where traffic congestion and fatal accidents are constant reminders of an unfinished system. In a nation that prides itself on being among the world's most advanced economies, such dependence on outdated infrastructure is not simply inefficient but dangerous. The floods in British Columbia, which effectively cut the province off from the rest of Canada, highlighted the fragility of national supply chains and the absence of redundancy in Canada's infrastructure. High-speed rail has long been proposed as a remedy, particularly along the Quebec City-Windsor corridor, where it could connect Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, and Windsor into a single high productivity zone. The potential impact is transformative: dispersing population pressure away from the Greater Toronto Area, lowering real estate costs, and allowing professionals to live and work in smaller cities while commuting efficiently to major hubs. Yet Canada continues to hesitate, even as Europe, China, and Japan have demonstrated how high-speed rail not only accelerates movement but

stimulates regional economies, redistributes opportunity, and strengthens national unity. For the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the Washington DC metro rail system in the neighbouring USA could be worth emulating. The Conclave made clear that without redundancy in its highways and bold investment in high-speed rail, Canada risks remaining a nation held together by one bridge, a few narrow roads, and an air travel system that too often fails its citizens.

In fact, the concept of infrastructural redundancy is central to critical infrastructure theory, which holds that redundancy is not inefficiency but a precondition for resilience in modern states (Graham and Marvin 2001). As transportation geographers have long argued, the capacity of a nation to maintain internal connectivity - particularly across vast, sparsely populated territories like Canada — relies on layered and multimodal systems that offer both everyday utility and strategic redundancy in times of disruption (Rodrigue 2020).

If Canada's highways and railways expose its physical vulnerabilities, its air travel system highlights the economic and social costs of neglect. Air connectivity in Canada is among the weakest and most expensive in the developed world. Fares between major cities such as Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, and Calgary are often higher than transatlantic flights to Europe, a disparity that reflects not geography but market failure. Competition is stifled by strict ownership rules and the dominance of a handful of carriers, with low-cost entrants repeatedly undermined or forced out, as seen in the case of Flair Airlines. When Flair suspended routes out of Ottawa, ticket prices spiked almost overnight, revealing how fragile consumer choice really is. Service standards are equally troubling: delays are frequent, accountability minimal, and even full-service carriers have stripped away basics, such as Air Canada's controversial move to charge for carry-on luggage. The consequences extend beyond inconvenience. High fares and poor reliability discourage interprovincial movement, isolating regions from one another and reducing the flow of talent, commerce, and opportunity across the country. In a vast nation where weather can routinely disrupt rail and road systems, air travel should be the backbone of resilience. Instead, it has become a bottleneck, one that weakens Canada's economic competitiveness, undermines social cohesion, and leaves citizens questioning why a country of its wealth and scale cannot provide affordable, reliable air links across its own territory.

Analysis of Findings - Healthcare

Healthcare emerged in the Conclave's prologue as one of Punjab's most neglected yet defining challenges. Under United Nations SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, while Punjab has made notable progress in reducing maternal mortality, which has steadily declined to 111 per 100,000 live births in the recent year, improvements are largely due to increased institutional deliveries and better monitoring of maternal health services. Moreover, the state still lags behind the national

SDG target, and significant disparities remain across districts. A major challenge to Punjab's health outcomes is the widespread issue of substance abuse, with high rates of drug dependency placing a heavy burden on public health infrastructure. According to a study: "The state's public health system is constrained by limited financial resources, uneven distribution of health facilities, and infrastructural deficits, which contribute to persistent health disparities, particularly in less developed districts" (Singh; Kaur and Sharma 2018). The state of affairs has not improved much.

The state's system, structured in a four-tier model, from sub-centers at the village level, to primary and community health centers, and finally to district hospitals, exists more on paper than in practice. The reality is stark: Punjab has only one government doctor for every 9,000 people, nine times worse than the World Health Organization's recommended standard of 1:1,000. The crisis in dentistry is even more acute, with just 300 government dentists serving the whole state, creating a ratio of one dentist per 97,000 people. Our speaker at the Conclave, Dr. Harinder Sandhu, who was among the first twelve dentists recruited in Punjab in 1974, recalled that even then there was little equipment to carry out basic services, and decades later, little has changed. While private practitioners fill some of the gap, their services remain prohibitively expensive, putting essential care beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. This is not a failure of resources alone but of governance: successive governments have launched new schemes, renamed programs, and made rhetorical promises, yet the state of healthcare delivery remains unchanged. Hospitals are under-equipped, staff are overburdened, and citizens are left without reliable access to even the most basic services. Dr. Sandhu argued that commercialization of healthcare has also deepened ethical lapses. He called for an "ethical timeout" in the medical fraternity, where professionals pause to ask whether their decisions truly serve the patient. Punjab's rehabilitation centers, he warned, often prescribe addictive drugs rather than substitutes, trapping patients in cycles of dependency and ensuring that recovery remains elusive.

The contrast with Canada, while less extreme, is equally telling. Canada has made good progress toward United Nations SDG 3 on health through strong monitoring and promotion of healthy lifestyles, but challenges still remain. Long wait times for specialist care and elective surgeries, along with cost barriers for low-income Canadians, continue to limit equitable access to healthcare.

In 2022, Canada had approximately 96,000 physicians, equating to just under three per 1,000 people, insufficient for a country with high expectations of universal healthcare. Canada is short by an estimated 30,000 family physicians, leaving millions without consistent primary care. Dentistry, though better staffed with around 26,000 practitioners nationwide (10,000 in Ontario alone), is increasingly out of reach due to cost barriers. About 6,000 internationally trained dentists remain in regulatory limbo, waiting for examinations or licensing decisions. Alberta and British Columbia have begun piloting supervised practice pathways that allow such dentists to work

under oversight, but Ontario has yet to follow with similar reforms. Meanwhile, the shortage of dental hygienists has been worsened by lobbying that restricts supply and keeps wages high, creating bottlenecks in access to routine preventive care.

Both Punjab and Canada reveal the same paradox in different forms: healthcare systems under strain not just from resource limitations but from structural neglect. In Punjab, the neglect stems from chronic underinvestment, credit wars between political parties, poor wages, and weak medical practice ethics, in Canada, from bottlenecks in training, licensing, and distribution. Canada's strong triage and emergency care systems, capable of stabilizing patients quickly and allocating resources efficiently, contrast sharply with Punjab's near-total absence of trauma care and emergency protocols. The result in both cases is growing public frustration, declining confidence in government institutions, and health outcomes that fall short of what citizens are promised and deserve.

Policy Recommendations - Crime & Public Safety

Punjab must confront gangsterism with a legal and institutional framework that is both decisive and restrained. The stalled Punjab Control of Organized Crime Act should be enacted, but only with robust safeguards: judicial oversight of detention, protections during interrogation, and limits that prevent its misuse against political opponents or innocent citizens. A special independent policing division, dedicated solely to organized crime and insulated from partisan interference, should be empowered to enforce this law. The police enforcement wing must be separated from the investigation unit. At the same time, enforcement or investigation cannot be Punjab's only line of defense. Rising unemployment among youth is a cause of concern. The state must address the drug epidemic that feeds gang recruitment by investing in prevention programs, community education, and rehabilitation centers capable of delivering meaningful recovery rather than token treatment. The creation of safer recreational alternatives, such as regulated cannabis, could mirror Canada's experience in displacing hard drug use while generating tax revenue for public health initiatives. Without such a dual strategy, strong laws paired with strong recovery, Punjab risks fueling the very cycles of crime it seeks to suppress.

For Canada, the challenge is to reinforce enforcement capacity without eroding civil liberties. The proposed reverse onus for bail should be applied selectively to violent and high-risk crimes, ensuring dangerous offenders remain in custody while avoiding the pitfall of mass pre-trial detention. Expanded surveillance powers for the CBSA and RCMP should proceed only with clear lines of accountability, oversight mechanisms, and narrowly defined mandates, so that targeted enforcement does not become blanket monitoring. Most critically, enforcement must be balanced by credible rehabilitation pathways. Canada should expand post-sentencing reintegration

programs, education, skills training, and community support, to prevent repeat offending, breaking the cycle of crime rather than deepening it. To complement these reforms, immigration and enforcement policy must be aligned with the realities of transnational crime. Stronger background checks for new immigrants from high-risk regions should be introduced to prevent the spillover of criminal elements from Punjab into Canada. At the same time, a real-time intelligence-sharing platform between Canadian and Indian enforcement agencies - in addition to the Five Eyes (FVEY) alliance - should be created, enabling authorities to disrupt extortion and gang financing networks across borders rather than allowing them to exploit jurisdictional gaps. Finally, Canadian citizens require clarity and confidence in defending themselves. The principle of "reasonable force" in self-defence law must be explicitly defined and communicated, empowering individuals to protect themselves proportionately without fear of reprisal.

At the community level, anti-stereotyping campaigns and diaspora leadership initiatives are essential to prevent criminal incidents in Peel or Surrey from defining the image of South Asians as a whole. Finally, law enforcement cooperation between India and Canada - through extradition agreements, intelligence-sharing on extortion networks, and standardized charging procedures across provinces, is vital to address crime that now spans borders. The overarching principle must be clear: enforcement and rights are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent pillars of a system that protects citizens while upholding democratic legitimacy.

Policy Recommendations - Mobility & Infrastructure

Punjab's infrastructure development requires a shift from ad hoc fixes to systemic reform. Land acquisition, the central obstacle to highway and industrial projects, must be rebuilt on foundations of fairness and transparency. Reform here is not only an economic necessity but a political one: without farmer confidence, every project risks delay and resistance. Financial compensation alone will not suffice; support for livelihood transition and alternative income options must accompany land acquisition packages to address the deeper anxieties of farmers, particularly smallholders who fear permanent dispossession and the end of their way of life. Alongside highways, Punjab must urgently invest in urban rapid transit for its largest cities - Ludhiana, Chandigarh, Amritsar, Jalandhar, and Patiala. Traffic bottlenecks in these hubs already sap productivity and stifle growth, and without metro systems they will worsen as populations expand. Complementing this, Punjab must break free from political bus syndicates, overhaul its bus and road transport systems by introducing a unified booking platform, clearly designated stops, and stronger enforcement of traffic laws. Public education campaigns on road discipline, particularly lane usage, are essential to ensure that the benefits of modern highways are not squandered by chaos on the roads. Only by combining physical infrastructure with systemic reforms can Punjab transform its transport network from a patchwork into an engine of development.

Ontario's priority is not whether to build highways or transit, the province rightly pursues both; but how to restore legitimacy in the processes that deliver them. Contracting and tendering must be made transparent, public, and accountable, with open publication of bidding criteria, winning bids, and progress reports. Without such measures, projects like Highway 413 or the 401 tunnels will remain mired in suspicion, and transit expansions like the Ontario Line or Hurontario LRT risk being overshadowed by the failures of the Eglinton Crosstown. Routine services such as towing and snow removal must also be restructured to avoid exclusivity that inflates costs. Instead of high-priced contracts awarded to a few firms, the province should adopt performance-based contracting that encourages competition, reduces consumer costs, and breaks the nexus of favoritism. The Greenbelt reversal demonstrated that public trust can be regained when government admits error and corrects course; Ontario should apply that lesson proactively, embedding transparency and accountability into every major project from the outset. Beyond efficiency, greater emphasis must be placed on transparency and public legitimacy in contracting, ensuring that infrastructure is not only delivered on time and on budget but also trusted as fair, province impartial, and accountable. Citizens do not oppose infrastructure itself; they oppose the perception that it is delivered unfairly, at their expense, and to the benefit of insiders.

At the national level, Canada must treat connectivity as a matter of resilience and nation-building, not convenience. The country cannot remain dependent on a single bridge at Nipigon, Ontario or two undivided highways in northern Ontario to hold its geography together. Even today, logistics movement and general road travel across Canada, especially along sections of the Trans-Canada Highway in Ontario, are so hindered that, for stretches of hundreds of kilometres, drivers lack even a single safe and reliable access to washrooms, fuel, and basic facilities. To address this, Canada must invest in dividing Highways 11 and 17 into safer, modern routes that can support reliable east–west connectivity. Western provinces, especially British Columbia, must be better connected to the rest of Canada through infrastructure that can withstand severe weather and natural calamities, ensuring that communities and supply chains are not left isolated. At the same time, Canada must finally move from rhetoric to action on high-speed rail, particularly along the Quebec City-Windsor corridor. A dedicated line linking Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, and Windsor would not only reduce reliance on the Greater Toronto Area but redistribute opportunity across smaller cities, ease housing pressure, and enhance productivity. GTA must collectively invest much more in metro rail/ subway/ public transit. Air travel, meanwhile, requires structural reform: open the market to new and foreign entrants, encourage low-cost carriers, reduce taxes and fees, and enforce service standards so Canadians are no longer charged more to fly within their own country than to cross the Atlantic. Air travel is not a luxury in Canada; it is a backbone of resilience in a nation where winter storms routinely paralyze other modes of transport. Strengthening air connectivity while expanding rail and road redundancy is essential if Canada is to move from a fragile system to one worthy of its geography and global standing.

Policy Recommendations - Healthcare

Punjab's healthcare crisis demands not cosmetic schemes but structural overhaul. The state cannotcontinue to rely on renaming programs while hospitals remain understaffed, under-equipped, and unable to meet even the most basic international standards. The immediate priority must be to expand the medical workforce by addressing the crippling doctor-to-patient ratio of 1:9,000 - with annual targets. This requires both increasing the intake of medical colleges and incentivizing doctors with better pay and also benefits to serve in rural areas through competitive pay, housing support, and career advancement opportunities. Dentistry, where one government dentist currently serves 97,000 people, requires urgent intervention through public-private partnerships that expand affordable access without pushing patients into debt. Beyond staffing, Punjab must focus on rebuilding primary care infrastructure. Sub-centers, primary health centers, and community health centers should be upgraded with diagnostic facilities, essential medicines, and digital record systems so that citizens can access treatment without traveling to district hospitals already overwhelmed by patient loads.

Credit games by each party in power must be replaced with continuity of projects by successive governments. Preventive care - nutrition, vaccination, sanitation; must be prioritized alongside treatment, ensuring that the state is not only curing disease but reducing its prevalence. Equally urgent is the need to establish trauma and triage pilot projects in major cities, gradually expanding them to smaller towns and rural districts, so that preventable deaths from emergencies and accidents are not normalized. To address the ethical crisis of commercialization, ethics review boards should be established in hospitals to guide practitioners when private practice creates a dilemma between making decisions that are profitable versus ones that are truly right for the patient. Without such systemic reforms, Punjab risks leaving healthcare as a symbolic promise rather than a lived reality for its people.

For Canada, the challenge is not the absence of resources but the misalignment of systems. Withnearly 100,000 physicians nationwide, Canada still faces a shortfall of 30,000 family doctors, leaving millions without consistent access to primary care. Bridging this gap requires urgent investment in training and retaining physicians, particularly in family medicine, which has been undervalued compared to specialized practice. Incentives must be created for medical graduates to enter family practice, with loan forgiveness, residency slots, and competitive compensation packages tailored to regional shortages. Equally, distribution must be addressed: rural and northern communities remain underserved while urban centers often absorb the majority of practitioners. Canada's dental system also needs reform. With 26,000 dentists, concentrated disproportionately in Ontario, the challenge is affordability rather than supply. Policies that expand dental coverage through public programs, particularly for children, seniors, and low-

income families, are essential to prevent oral health from becoming a class divide. At the same time, systemic bottlenecks must be dismantled: lobbying by dental hygienist associations that artificially constraints supply should be countered with regulatory reforms, and practice-ready assessment programs, already piloted in Alberta and British Columbia should be scaled nationally to accelerate the deployment of internationally trained medical and dental professionals. Ultimately, both Punjab and Canada face the same truth in different forms: healthcare systems cannot rest on reputation or rhetoric. They must deliver reliable, accessible care on the ground, or risk eroding public trust in government itself.

Implementation and Next Steps

For Punjab, the path forward begins with institutional reform. The state should immediately enact the Punjab Control of Organized Crime Act, but under a framework of judicial oversight, independent review boards, and a dedicated anti-crime division insulated from political interference. Alongside this, Punjab must overhaul its land acquisition framework by ensuring that compensation is both transparent and accompanied by livelihood-transition options for small and marginal farmers. Public-facing land and infrastructure portals, updated quarterly, should be launched to provide visibility into compensation terms, project progress, and expenditure, reducing suspicion and building legitimacy. Pilot projects in Ludhiana and Chandigarh should initiate metro systems, supported by feasibility studies and phased construction to demonstrate viability. In healthcare, Punjab must rapidly scale medical education by expanding seats in government colleges and forging partnerships with private institutions, while also offering service-linked incentives, including pay hike to ensure doctors and dentists are deployed in underserved areas. Hospitals, particularly private institutions should be mandated to establish ethics committees to review clinical practices and challenge decisions where profitability risks overriding patient welfare. These steps require not only legislation but also sustained public communication campaigns to rebuild trust: farmers must see land acquisition as fair, patients must see healthcare as accessible, and citizens must believe that law enforcement serves them rather than intimidates them.

Ontario's implementation priority is transparency. The province should establish a digital contracting portal where all major infrastructure tenders, including highways, transit lines, and redevelopment projects are published with full visibility into bids, criteria, and progress reports. Such transparency would not only rebuild public trust but also discourage favoritism and inefficiency. The towing and snow removal sectors must be restructured under performance-based, multi-vendor contracts that prioritize consumer affordability and safety. For ongoing projects such as the Ontario Line and Highway 413, the government should publish quarterly progress audits, conducted by independent reviewers, to ensure timelines and budgets are

adhered to. Finally, Ontario should adopt proactive stakeholder engagement, consulting citizens, municipalities, and advocacy groups before contracts are awarded, so that legitimacy is secured at the front end rather than repaired through backlash. Implementation here is as much about governance as construction: without public trust in process, no amount of physical infrastructure will feel legitimate.

At the national level, Canada must prioritize resilience and integration. A national contracting transparency portal should be established to ensure all federally supported infrastructure projects are subject to public scrutiny. East–west connectivity must be strengthened by fast-tracking the upgrading of Trans-Canada Highway corridors to divided, four-lane standards, especially through northern Ontario and vulnerable choke points like the Nipigon River Bridge. Resilient connectivity options for Western provinces, particularly British Columbia, must also be developed to ensure communities and supply chains are not left isolated during weather disruptions or natural calamities. The federal and provincial governments must jointly establish a dedicated high-speed rail authority for the Quebec City–Windsor corridor, with clear mandates, financing mechanisms, and timelines to prevent the project from stalling in feasibility studies. Air travel reform should begin with revising ownership restrictions to allow greater competition, particularly from low-cost carriers, while simultaneously reducing airport fees and enforcing service-level guarantees. Consumer protection boards should be empowered to fine airlines for unreasonable delays, ensuring accountability across the sector. In healthcare, the federal government should incentivize provinces to expand family medicine residencies and redistribute practitioners to underserved regions through funding tied to equitable deployment. Practice-ready assessment programs, already piloted in Alberta and British Columbia, should be expanded nationwide to absorb internationally trained doctors and dentists more quickly. Implementation at this scale requires coordination across multiple jurisdictions, but the principle is simple: Canada cannot remain a country where one bridge, one airline, or one bottleneck defines the fate of millions. Building fairness, accountability, and resilience into its systems is the only way forward.

Conclusion

The Punjab Conclave 2025 underscored a sobering reality: Punjab and its diaspora stand at a crossroads where inaction is no longer an option. Gangsterism and narcotics threaten to hollow out yet another generation; diaspora-linked crime risks stigmatizing entire communities abroad; infrastructure failures, whether in Punjab's land acquisition or Ontario's contracting practices, erode trust in government; and healthcare systems, both in Punjab and Canada, falter under the weight of neglect and misalignment. These are not isolated policy failures; they are interconnected fractures that, left unaddressed, will deepen into crises of identity, governance, and legitimacy.

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