

The "Easy Money" Illusion and Academic Disinterest: Transnational Migration, Local Unemployment, and Educational Apathy among Youth in Poonch District of Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

This study investigates the growing phenomenon of educational disinterest among youth in the Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir. Grounded in the sociologies of education and migration, the paper explores a dual structural crisis: the pervasive reality of local educated unemployment contrasted with the immediate financial rewards of semi-skilled transnational labor in Gulf countries and local daily-wage work. Through the theoretical lenses of Pierre Bourdieu's *Habitus* and Robert K. Merton's *Strain Theory*, this research analyzes how the traditional value ascribed to academic credentials is systematically devalued. Methodologically, this paper utilizes a purposive and snowball sample of fifty (N = 50) youth respondents who have discontinued or dropped out of formal schooling across Mandi, Surankote, and Mendhar blocks, paired with an empirical survey of regional educators and professors (N = 8). The empirical data reveals how the normalization of manual transport and overseas labor creates an "easy money" illusion, leading to a "crisis of ambition" and structural school desertion. The paper concludes with specific policy recommendations to structurally realign education with meaningful local livelihood security and informal sector formalization in the Pir Panjal region.

Keywords: Easy Money, Transnational Migration, Local Unemployment, Educational Apathy

1. Introduction

The Poonch district, situated along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir, occupies a unique geopolitical and socio-economic landscape. Historically characterized by geographical isolation, a large tribal population (primarily Gujjar and Bakerwal communities), and restricted industrial development, the region relies heavily on agrarian subsistence, localized daily-wage labor, and outward transnational migration. Tucked behind the rugged peaks of the Pir Panjal range, the district features small, fragmented landholdings that cannot economically sustain large rural families. Because the private corporate sector is virtually non-existent, the formal domestic labor market is restricted to highly competitive, scarce government jobs.

In recent decades, a profound sociological shift has occurred. While access to schooling has expanded significantly, the local economy has failed to generate formal employment for educated youth. Local youth witness a discouraging cycle where elders who invested years in acquiring undergraduate or post-graduate degrees remain underemployed or completely jobless. Concurrently, the proliferation of well-entrenched migration networks to the Gulf countries (such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar) has created a visible influx of remittance wealth.

This paper addresses a critical paradox: despite the expansion of educational infrastructure, there is an escalating wave of academic apathy, truancy, and early school dropouts among local youth. This study argues that student disinterest is not merely an individual failure but a rational, structurally induced response to a fractured labor market where manual and migratory labor offers immediate survival, while academic degrees offer prolonged precarity. By investigating how global economic flows directly clash with local borderland institutions, this paper charts how youth psychology, ambition, and community habits are rewritten by the allure of immediate cash flows.

2. Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

The structural interplay between transnational labor migration, volatile remittance inflows, and domestic social dynamics creates a profound socio-economic paradox. While foreign remittances provide an immediate economic safety net for underdeveloped borderland regions, they simultaneously generate deep-seated, unintended structural pathologies. This section establishes the theoretical architecture of the study and systematically reviews the existing literature across three thematic axes: the phenomenon of the "easy money" illusion, the resulting academic disinterest among youth, and the expansion of voluntary local unemployment.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

To diagnose the micro-level behavioral choices made by the youth of District Poonch, this study deploys a tri-theoretical matrix bridging cultural sociology, classic economic sociology, and deviant behavioral structures.

2.1.1 Pierre Bourdieu: Habitus, Cultural Capital, and Field

Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts of *habitus* (deeply ingrained dispositions, habits, and tastes), *cultural capital* (institutionalized or embodied knowledge assets), and *field* (the social arenas of power and competition) provide the primary foundation for analyzing how educational value is constructed or dismantled.

In peripheral borderland spaces like the Poonch district, the traditional structural-functionalist promise that "formal schooling guarantees upward social mobility" is fundamentally broken. The home environment of working-class families—such as agrarian laborers, local daily-wage earners, or absent transnational Gulf workers—frequently lacks what Bourdieu terms *academic cultural capital*. Research on migrant families in similar contexts demonstrates that remittances, while providing economic capital, often fail to translate into the cultural capital necessary for academic success.

When a student's immediate social field is saturated with highly educated yet chronically unemployed neighborhood peers, their *habitus* undergoes a critical reproductive transformation. The youth internalize this local reality, viewing formal higher education not as a path to personal liberation, but as a high-risk, low-reward investment. The internal disposition toward academic rigor is replaced by a disposition

toward immediate economic survival, fundamentally altering how youth calculate the value of time spent inside a classroom.

Furthermore, the mechanics of transnational migration introduce a disruptive domestic dynamic. When fathers migrate to the Gulf countries, they send back financial remittances (economic capital), but their prolonged physical absence strips the household of crucial social and cultural capital. The lack of a present parental authority figure frequently disrupts the domestic transmission of academic discipline. Without structured mentorship to convert remittance money into academic cultural capital, the student struggles to find the way an educational system that demands continuous home supervision.

2.1.2 Robert K. Merton: Strain Theory and Structural Adaptation

While Bourdieu explains the internal conditioning of student apathy, Robert K. Merton's *Strain Theory* clarifies the external behavioral responses to a broken system. Merton posits that social structures place definite pressure on certain individuals to engage in non-conforming rather than conforming conduct. Every society prescribes a culturally approved goal (material success and financial security) and institutionalized means to achieve it (formal education and professional domestic careers).

In the landlocked, geopolitically vulnerable space of Poonch, the institutionalized means are blocked due to a stagnant public sector and a non-existent private corporate environment. Faced with intense structural strain, local youth adapt through modes that Merton classified as:

1. **Innovation:** Youth accept the cultural goal of material wealth but reject the institutionalized means (schooling). They bypass formal education to pursue immediate, liquid cash flows through semi-skilled daily labor, local informal transit, or overseas migration channels.
2. **Retreatism:** When youth realize they lack both the structural means to secure local formal jobs and the genuine skills required to advance academically, they completely abandon their ambitions. This generates profound alienation, deep apathy, and vulnerability to localized social deviations.

2.1.3 Materialist Determinism and Precarity

To prevent the analytical mistake of viewing all student dropouts as a voluntary cultural choice, this framework integrates Karl Marx's classic premise that "material conditions determine consciousness". Under conditions of severe economic precarity, the immediate, raw demands of household physical survival completely overrule long-term considerations of human capital accumulation.

When a family lacks a basic state-sponsored social safety net, an acute household crisis—such as a parent's illness or sudden debt—instantly transforms education from a perceived path toward advancement into an unaffordable luxury. In these scenarios, youth do not drop out due to an alluring illusion of wealth; rather, they enter the labor force under absolute structural duress.

2.2 Literature Review

2.2.1 The Geopolitical and Socio-Economic Realities of District Poonch

The unique geographic position of District Poonch along the Line of Control (LoC) deeply shapes its local economy. Historically isolated by the rugged topography of the Pir Panjal range, the district features a large tribal population and suffers from an absolute lack of industrial development. According to data from the Official Portal of District Poonch, the regional economy relies heavily on subsistence agriculture, which is severely limited by small, fragmented landholdings.

Scholarship focusing on the border districts of Jammu and Kashmir highlights that because the private corporate sector is virtually non-existent, the formal domestic labor market is restricted to highly competitive, scarce government jobs. This deep deficit in local formal employment options functions as

a powerful push factor, forcing a substantial portion of the male workforce to join transnational migration pipelines toward the GCC states and parts of Western Europe. Research from Pakistan-administered Kashmir similarly documents how merit violations and unemployment are driving youth migration from the region.

2.2.2 The "Easy Money" Illusion and Conspicuous Consumption

The concept of the "easy money" illusion describes the sociological transformation of communities that receive high volumes of international remittances. In their foundational research on migration corridors, scholars like Durand et al. (1996) and Cohen (2004) observed that remittances are rarely funneled into productive, long-term domestic investments, such as local manufacturing or agricultural technology. Instead, receiving households heavily direct these capital inflows toward highly visible, conspicuous consumption.

In South Asian migration pockets, research indicates that remittance income is overwhelmingly spent on constructing multi-story concrete homes, buying private vehicles, hosting lavish social ceremonies, and acquiring luxury consumer goods. Empirical findings show that this localized display of wealth distorts the economic perceptions of the younger generation left behind. Local youth witness the immense consumption power of migrant families but remain completely insulated from the harsh realities of the production side. They do not see the severe labor exploitation, poor living conditions, and legal vulnerabilities that low-skilled South Asian laborers face daily in the Gulf.

This mismatch creates the "easy money" illusion: the false narrative that international migration or manual labor is an effortless, rapid shortcut to affluence that completely bypasses the need for formal education or hard-earned domestic professional careers.

2.2.3 Transnational Migration and Academic Disinterest

The relationship between high migration rates and local educational investment is heavily discussed within human capital theory. While classic economic models assume that higher household income via remittances should naturally increase investment in children's higher education, empirical field studies across developing regions show a different trend.

In their seminal work, Kandel and Massey (2002) established that an entrenched "culture of migration" causes international movement to become a normative rite of passage for young men. Studies by de Haas (2007) and Bredtmann et al. (2019) reveal that in high-migration areas, the perceived return on domestic education drops significantly. Because transnational labor networks for blue-collar or service-sector jobs in the Gulf rely on social contacts rather than academic credentials, youth begin to view formal schooling as irrelevant to their future economic survival. This dynamic is highly visible in the border regions of Jammu and Kashmir.

When local youth observe educated university graduates remaining unemployed for years due to a stagnant domestic economy, they develop a profound academic disinterest. Secondary and higher-secondary education is often viewed merely as a time-killing phase while waiting to reach the legal age for passport acquisition and migration. Consequently, students show low academic engagement, high absenteeism, and elevated dropout rates, choosing immediate migration over domestic academic advancement.

2.2.4 Remittances, The Reservation Wage, and Local Voluntary Unemployment

The final component of this structural loop is the emergence of voluntary or "waiting-list" unemployment among non-migrant youth in remittance-dependent communities. Economists like Chami et al. (2005) and Azam and Gubert (2006) argue that steady remittance inflows create a distinct moral

hazard by artificially raising the "reservation wage"—the minimum salary an individual expects to accept a local job.

As a consequence, youth from remittance-receiving households often reject available local opportunities in manual labor, agriculture, or small-scale retail. These domestic jobs are stigmatized as low-status and financially unrewarding when compared to the inflated lifestyle funded by foreign currency.

This dynamic creates a distinct economic paradox in District Poonch. While the region suffers from high overall youth unemployment, local businesses and landowners simultaneously complain of severe labor shortages in essential sectors like agriculture and construction. Youth choose to remain voluntarily unemployed—spending their time in local market hubs or social spaces—while actively waiting for their turn to migrate abroad. This structural paralysis stalls local entrepreneurship, leaves agricultural fields underutilized, and hooks the entire community's financial future entirely to foreign labor markets.

3. Research Methodology & Field Framework

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method qualitative and empirical survey research design to explore the lived experiences of youth, parents, and educators in Poonch. This approach prioritizes understanding how participants make sense of their socio-economic constraints and why educational apathy manifests within their specific habits.

3.2 Sampling and Target Population

- **Primary Student: (N = 50):** The primary empirical core of this study consists of fifty (N = 50) youth respondents across the Mandi, Surankote, and Mendhar blocks who have actively discontinued or permanently dropped out of formal secondary or higher secondary schooling.
- **Qualitative Triangulation:** This sample is supplemented by qualitative narratives from local parents (n = 15) and school administrators/educators (n = 12) to triangulate structural trends.
- **Institutional Professor Survey (N = 8):** To capture institutional evaluations of classroom engagement and regional constraints, a structural survey questionnaire was administered to college professors and senior educational administrators across the district.

4. Empirical Survey Findings and Quantitative Distribution

Before analyzing specific biographical trajectories, a thematic frequency analysis of the responses from the (N = 50) surveyed dropout students reveals a stark structural pattern. Because the structural pressures of the Poonch borderland economy intersect, respondents frequently cited multiple, overlapping drivers for their academic disinterest.

- **Economic Necessity & Government Job Deficit:** Direct financial strain coupled with total disillusionment over scarce public sector avenues.
- **Structural Devaluation of Degrees:** Close visual proximity to unemployed or underemployed neighborhood college graduates.
- **Transnational Pull Factor & Remittance Allure:** Social prestige and immediate wealth associated with Gulf migration.
- **Domestic Labor and Care Substitution:** The requirement to substitute household manual labor or care duties due to parental absence or physical exhaustion.

The qualitative empirical data derived directly from the cohort explicitly unpacks these categories:

1. **Underemployment and Financial Distress:** Respondents consistently highlighted that higher education in the locality does not guarantee economic security. Educated youth frequently settle for low-paying, entry-level positions like Multi-Tasking Staff (MTS) or underpaid private academic roles, with at least 10 specific respondents pointing to identical local salary stagnation. This reflects broader patterns across Jammu and Kashmir, where educated youth unemployment is estimated at nearly 46 percent.
2. **Perceived Superiority of Overseas Migration:** A stark economic contrast exists between local graduates and transnational migrant workers. Due to a severe lack of regional private-sector options, graduates face what respondents described as a "miserable" and unsatisfactory quality of life, whereas those who migrate to the Gulf earn significantly more, directly elevating their living standards.
3. **Occupational Fatalism:** Widespread job uncertainty has induced a sense of career fatalism among students. Unable to envision a viable future through schooling, a near-unanimous consensus emerged among respondents that long-term professional goal planning was futile. Instead, they choose to pivot early toward immediate, low-skill informal work, such as rickshaw driving and construction labor.
4. **The Peer Echo-Chamber:** Discussions regarding dropping out early are highly frequent and normalized among peers. This trend is driven by severe familial financial strain, an absence of public sector opportunities, and deep disillusionment with formal education. Crucially, the local community has shifted its social validation away from academic achievement, heavily respecting active earners over unemployed, educated individuals.
5. **The "Gulf Dream" and Social Capital:** Parental engagement in daily manual labor or overseas migration heavily shapes student aspirations from a young age. When fathers return from Saudi Arabia with substantial earnings and material goods, it significantly elevates the family's socio-economic status and prestige within the village landscape. This tangible upward social mobility creates strong community reinforcement, leading relatives to actively encourage youth to abandon formal schooling in pursuit of Gulf migration.

5. Case Studies and Qualitative Evidence

To bridge abstract theory with localized realities, this section presents three qualitative case profiles compiled during field investigations in District Poonch. These narratives bridge the macro-level systemic issues detailed in the literature review with the micro-level mentalities of the regional youth habitus. Participant identities have been anonymized through the use of alphabetical pseudonyms.

Case Study 1: Participant "A" – The Alternative Role Model and Economic Autonomy

Participant Profile

- **Pseudonym:** Participant "A"
- **Age:** 20 years
- **Location:** Mandi-Poonch Route
- **Educational Attainment:** Dropped out during Higher Secondary School (Grade 11)
- **Occupation:** Owner-Operator of a local Auto-Rickshaw

Narrative and Field Observations

Participant "A" operates a high-volume commercial auto-rickshaw along a busy transit corridor in Poonch. Dropping out of school at age 17 due to a complete lack of academic interest and immediate

household economic pressures, Participant "A" secured an informal local loan to purchase his vehicle. On peak transit days, through continuous short-distance shuttling of passengers, commuters, and market goods, Participant "A" boasts a remarkable daily revenue reaching up to ₹1,500.

For a youth living in a peripheral borderland economy, this immediate liquid cash flow grants him absolute financial autonomy. He covers his personal upkeep, fuels his vehicle, and contributes substantially to his household's daily kitchen expenses without relying on parental assistance or institutional credit. Participant "A" reports that he "enjoys life completely," unburdened by the anxiety of exams, student debt, or the long periods of waiting that define the lives of his educated peers.

The critical sociological transformation occurs in the evening, during what local youth call *Adda* sessions—informal social gatherings at village squares or market tea stalls. The moment Participant "A" sits down with his peer group, his daily success becomes public performance. He openly counts his cash, shares stories of his daily earnings, and displays his material comfort. Through this evening ritual, the realities of hard physical labor are completely glorified and transformed into a narrative of easy, self-made success.

During an interview at one of these evening gatherings, Participant "A" explicitly articulated the counter-school philosophy that shapes the local youth habitus:

"Look at the guys who spent all their parents' money on college degrees here. They are wandering around the market begging contractors for work, or sitting idle at home feeling depressed. My books never gave me a single rupee. Today, I earn more in a few days than a private school teacher makes in a month. I enjoy my life, I have cash in my pocket every evening, and I answer to no boss. Why should anyone study in Poonch? There is absolutely no output to it. No jobs, no future in books. Having your own wheels is the only real degree."

Sociological Interpretation

Participant "A's" case study perfectly illustrates Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital devaluation and Robert K. Merton's mechanism of Innovation. Participant "A" has rejected the institutionalized means (schooling) because he correctly observes that the local structural "field" offers no formal jobs for graduates. By entering the informal transport sector, he has innovated a shortcut to the cultural goal of financial success.

When Participant "A" glorifies his daily earnings to his friends, he creates a powerful alternative role model. For the school-going youth sitting in that evening circle, Participant "A's" immediate liquid wealth shatters the legitimacy of academic authority. The classroom is collectively re-imagined as a waste of time, while the auto-rickshaw is elevated as the ultimate symbol of youth freedom, masculinity, and economic survival.

Case Study 2: Participant "B" – Forced Conformance and Economic Precarity

Participant Profile

- **Pseudonym:** Participant "B"
- **Age:** 19 years
- **Location:** Ari Village, Mendhar Block, Poonch District
- **Educational Attainment:** Dropped out during Secondary School (Grade 10)
- **Occupation:** Auto-Rickshaw Driver

Narrative and Field Observations

Participant "B" operates his auto-rickshaw out of Ari, a rural locality in the Mendhar block. Unlike peers who view the transport sector as a path to lifestyle choices or luxury items, Participant "B's" entry into

manual labor was an abrupt response to acute household distress. Belonging to an impoverished family where multiple members—including aging parents and younger siblings—are entirely dependent on his daily labor, Participant "B" had to abandon his schooling right after his matriculation exams.

Through a high-interest informal loan from local acquaintances, he purchased a second-hand auto-rickshaw. His daily earnings are immediately absorbed by the family's basic survival needs: buying wheat flour, paying for medical prescriptions, and funding his siblings' basic primary schooling. While he works long hours on the road, Participant "B" experiences no illusion of wealth. Instead, he faces profound emotional distress because his deep internal desire to study further is completely blocked by his family's material reality.

During an interview near the Mendhar transport stand, Participant "B" shared his story, presenting a stark contrast to the narrative of voluntary dropout culture:

"I never wanted to leave my books. I was a decent student in school and dreamed of going to college in Poonch town or Jammu to get a proper job. But look at my home in Ari—my father can no longer do heavy daily labor, my siblings are small, and everyone looks to me for food. If I sit in a classroom, the kitchen fire at home goes cold that very evening. I had to buy this auto-rickshaw out of absolute helplessness, just to keep my family alive. I still want to study further, but my economic condition keeps me chained to this steering wheel. For me, this rickshaw is not a choice; it is a life sentence to save my family."

Sociological Interpretation

Participant "B's" narrative shifts the paper's focus from cultural choice to structural determinism, reflecting Karl Marx's classic premise that "material conditions determine consciousness". Using the lens of economic precarity, Participant "B's" situation shows how the structural lack of state-sponsored social security, educational stipends, or adult employment in Mendhar forces vulnerable youth into early labor.

While the first case study (Participant "A") represents what Robert K. Merton calls Innovation (willingly bypassing rules for cash), Participant "B" represents *Forced Conformance to Poverty*. He values the cultural capital of education but is denied access to it by the demands of immediate survival.

When school-going children in Ari look at Participant "B," they do not see a glamorous alternative lifestyle; instead, they witness a sobering reality check. They learn that in a borderland economy without structural safety nets, a family crisis can instantly transform a promising student into a daily-wage laborer, reproducing the cycle of regional poverty across generations.

Case Study 3: Participant "C" – Systemic Cheating and Educational Retreatism

Participant Profile

- **Pseudonym:** Participant "C"
- **Age:** 21 years
- **Location of Origin:** Poonch District, Jammu and Kashmir
- **Current Location:** Mumbai, Maharashtra
- **Educational Attainment:** Completed Higher Secondary School (Grade 12 via mass copying)
- **Occupation:** Unskilled Factory Laborer

Narrative and Field Observations

Participant "C" is a 21-year-old youth from Poonch who currently lives and works in the industrial suburbs of Mumbai. He represents a significant demographic of outward migrants who leave the region not because of immediate family crises, but because they feel academically inadequate. Participant "C"

attended a rural government high school in Poonch where structural negligence and mass cheating during board examinations were quietly tolerated. He passed his Grade 12 exams with minimal effort, obtaining a formal certificate without acquiring foundational literacy or analytical skills.

The turning point occurred during the transition to higher education. Upon reviewing college admission requirements and observing the strict, invigilated exam environments of higher education institutions, Participant "C" experienced a profound fear of failure. Realizing that his unearned high school credentials would not survive genuine academic scrutiny, he chose to withdraw entirely from education.

To escape the social embarrassment of failing college locally, he joined an outward migration network to Mumbai. Today, he cycles through various unskilled factory jobs, trading his potential for upward mobility for low-wage manual survival in a distant metropolis.

During a telephonic interview, Participant "C" explained how institutional cheating ultimately ruined his academic prospects:

"To be honest, I passed my 12th standard exams completely through cheating. In our school center, everyone did it, and the supervisors looked the other way. I got my certificate, but deep down, I knew I didn't learn anything. When the time came to enroll in college, I panicked. In college, you cannot copy answers; the professors are strict, and there are external examiners. I knew I would fail completely and humiliate my family. Instead of entering a college where I couldn't survive, I took a train to Mumbai. Now I work long hours in different factories, making plastic parts and packing boxes. My school certificate is just a piece of paper sitting in a trunk back home. Cheating made passing easy, but it ultimately closed the door to my future. It left me fit only for factory labor."

Sociological Interpretation

Participant "C's" case study provides a powerful critique of institutional reproduction through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's Institutional Devaluation and Impostor Syndrome. By allowing systemic cheating, the local school system gave Participant "C" fake institutionalized cultural capital (a diploma) without giving him the actual embodied cultural capital (knowledge and skills) needed to succeed. When a school system substitutes mass copying for real learning, it commits a form of institutional negligence against marginalized youth.

This case can also be analyzed using Robert K. Merton's concept of Retreatism. Participant "C" values the status of being a college graduate, but because his foundation was built on fraud, he realizes he lacks the legitimate means to achieve it. The resulting anxiety causes him to completely retreat from the region's educational field. His story shows that the breakdown of academic integrity in peripheral regions like Poonch does more than just lower education standards—it actively generates a sense of academic invalidity, pushing underprepared youth out of classrooms and into distant, unskilled labor pools.

6. Quantitative & Institutional Survey Analysis (Cohort C)

To supplement and validate the descriptive ethnographies of Participant "A," Participant "B," and Participant "C," this section incorporates empirical feedback collected from regional professors and school administrators in District Poonch via a standardized structural field survey questionnaire. This institutional dataset maps structural trends across the entire district over the past decade.

6.1 Decadal Decline in Classroom Performance and Attendance

Educators heavily confirm a severe pattern of decadal "decline and continuous degradation" regarding daily classroom attendance, engagement, and cognitive focus among rural students. The data illustrates

an environment where student focus is split by outside factors:

- **The Rational Choice of Truancy:** Respondents stress that irregular classroom attendance is driven directly by a "lack of job and career opportunities in Jammu and Kashmir". Students evaluate college degrees as financially non-viable pathways and adapt by shifting toward immediate labor loops.
- **The Digital Shift:** Key technological transitions were uncovered. While traditional settings experience sharp declines in standard attendance, the adoption of Interactive Flat Panel Displays (IFPD), smartphone learning tools, and AI applications has shifted youth patterns away from theory-based reading and toward immediate, skill-focused digital media consumption.

6.2 The Struggling Graduate Paradox and Classroom Skepticism

When educators try to motivate students by discussing the long-term returns on higher education, the responses are defined by deep skepticism and operational indifference.

- **Empirical Disbelief:** Professors report that students look at the immediate reality of highly educated elder brothers, cousins, and neighbors who remain structurally unemployed or underpaid within the Union Territory.
- **The Structural Gridlock:** Anomalies such as continuous delays in state exams, institutional faculty shortages, and low entry-level academic wages have caused students to reject standard academic advice as completely out of touch with reality.

6.3 Domestic Disruption: The Cost of Transnational Separations

The survey data highlights a clear breakdown in parental monitoring structures, which aligns perfectly with our theoretical framework on social capital deficits:

- **The Remittance Hazard:** While international remittance flows alleviate structural household poverty, the prolonged physical absence of fathers working in the GCC states removes necessary home supervision. Overstretched mothers or extended relatives take over administrative contact with schools, but they struggle with major time constraints, leaving young males vulnerable to localized social deviations and drug exposure.
- **The Daily-Wage Constraint:** For local daily-wage families, financial precarity makes continuous schooling a secondary priority. Parents are trapped in exhausting labor routines and simply do not have the time or resources to participate in school functions, often expecting children to work and support the home income.

7. Discussion: The Deepening Structural Paradox

The empirical evidence from Mandi-Poonch, Mendhar, and Mumbai shows that the rejection of formal education is a structured response to regional limitations. By examining these three cases alongside our theoretical frameworks, we can observe the direct social mechanisms driving the devaluation of schooling in borderland communities.

7.1 The "Adda" Economy: Conspicuous Consumption and the Performance of "Easy Money"

A major finding of this study is the role of informal spatial networks—locally known as *Adda* sessions—in rewriting youth ambitions. In the villages of Poonch, the *Adda* functions as an alternative social field where traditional academic authority is publicly questioned and dismissed. In these evening gatherings, returned Gulf migrants or youth working in the informal transport sector perform their economic success.

The empirical data from the (N = 50) cohort shows that the "easy money" illusion is explicitly sustained by this cyclical sociological performance during community interactions. Multiple respondents noted

that when a father or relative returns from Saudi Arabia, they bring high volumes of liquid cash and visible material markers of wealth, such as high-quality blankets and usable consumer electronics. Within the village landscape of Poonch, these objects function as forms of objectified economic capital that instantly elevate the family's local social standing. The neighborhood grants intense cultural respect to the returning Haji Sahib, while simultaneously devaluing the status of the unemployed educated person. As a result, the extended kinship network internalizes a modified *habitus*, actively encouraging youth to abandon formal schooling early to chase transnational remittances.

As observed in Participant "A's" evening ritual, this visual counting of cash in front of school-going peers creates a localized spectacle of immediate wealth. This performance alters how young students evaluate their time. The hard realities of manual labor—such as physical exhaustion, lack of job security, and systemic vulnerability—are hidden behind a narrative of easy, self-made success. Consequently, the classroom is collectively re-imagined as a space of financial delay and dependence, while the steering wheel or the overseas passport is elevated as the ultimate symbol of youth freedom and masculinity.

7.2 The Educational Vacuum: Institutional Cheating and the Crisis of Ambition

The emergence of academic disinterest among Poonch youth cannot be blamed solely on the allure of external wages; it is heavily accelerated by an internal collapse of academic integrity within rural schools. The narrative of Participant "C" exposes a critical structural failure: the normalization of mass cheating during state board examinations in remote schools.

When local educational institutions allow systemic copying to maintain superficial passing rates, they devalue the actual utility of education. This dynamic can be analyzed through Bourdieu's concept of Institutional Devaluation

This academic apathy is explicitly verified by the survey data: 76% of the discontinued students ($n = 38$) rationalized their school departure by pointing to older, well-educated neighborhood peers who are stuck in low-paying Multi-Tasking Staff (MTS) jobs or undercompensated private academic roles. In their view, the local social hierarchy has completely uncoupled societal respect from academic credentials, linking it solely to immediate cash generation. When the youth observe that extensive investments in formal education yield prolonged economic precarity, their decision to drop out becomes a functional adaptation to structural exclusion.

When youth pass Grade 12 through mass copying, they hold a formal certificate but lack foundational literacy and analytical skills. The crisis occurs during the transition to higher education. When faced with strict, invigilated college environments, underprepared students experience intense anxiety and a fear of failure. Rather than entering a system where their lack of skills will be exposed, youth choose what Merton terms Retreatism. They withdraw entirely from the region's educational system and join unskilled outward migration networks to cities like Mumbai. Institutional negligence in peripheral schools does not just lower standards; it actively generates a sense of academic invalidity, pushing underprepared youth out of classrooms and into distant, unskilled labor pools.

7.3 Divided Realities of Manual Labor: Choice vs. Forced Conformance

The final theme highlights that the rejection of schooling is not a uniform choice across the district; it is deeply divided by social class. The study reveals a stark contrast between youth who drop out to pursue consumer lifestyles (Innovation) and those forced into early labor due to extreme household poverty (Forced Conformance).

A critical finding from the 50 surveys is the presence of an extreme future goal deficit induced by structural economic anxiety. When asked about long-term professional aspirations, the majority of the

students revealed a total collapse of career imagination. Rather than navigating an uncertain formal job market with zero private corporate avenues, the cohort defaults to a survivalist mindset. They view low-skill informal tasks—such as immediate commercial rickshaw driving or local construction daily labor—as their only reliable economic destinations.

The experience of Participant "B" from Ari Village shows that for the poorest households, dropping out is an act of absolute survival. When a family faces a crisis without a state-sponsored social safety net, the immediate need for food and medicine overrules long-term human capital development. Participant "B's" statement—"If I sit in a classroom, the kitchen fire at home goes cold that very evening"—illustrates how material conditions dictate consciousness. Unlike Participant "A," Participant "B" values education but is denied access to it by the demands of immediate survival. When school-going children in rural blocks look at Participant "B," they do not see a glamorous lifestyle; they receive a sobering reality check on how regional poverty reproduces itself across generations in a borderland economy.

8. Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

The educational apathy observed among the youth of Poonch is a rational reaction to an irrational economic structure. The "easy money" illusion thrives because the formal educational apparatus fails to offer a viable, localized path out of economic precarity. When the immediate social field offers clear material rewards for manual or overseas labor while punishing academic achievement with long-term unemployment, the traditional value assigned to educational degrees collapses. This study demonstrates that breaking this reproductive cycle requires moving beyond simple infrastructural adjustments like building classrooms or distributing textbooks. Instead, systemic reforms must target the root structural mismatches that detach formal schooling from the actual economic opportunities available in peripheral borderlands.

Based on the specific realities cited by the (N = 50) discontinued students and field professors, the following policy interventions are recommended:

1. **Formalization and Financial De-risking of the Local Transport Sector:** Since commercial auto-rickshaw operation represents the primary pathway to immediate economic autonomy for dropouts, the state must formalize this trade. Local administrations should introduce cooperative transit models paired with mandatory continuing education modules. Financial institutions should provide regulated, low-interest vehicle loans linked to the completion of secondary schooling or vocational certifications, directly undercutting the predatory, high-interest informal loans that trap youth in life-long debt.
2. **Vocational Integration and Up-skilling as Alternates to Low-Wage Gulf Migration:** School curricula must pivot away from purely rote academic tracks to modern, market-driven technical training. In alignment with Jammu & Kashmir's emerging skill policies, rural schools should partner with localized institutional frameworks to offer professional certifications in automotive engineering, renewable energy management, and smart-agriculture. This transforms the youth's mindset from entering the workforce as unskilled, legally vulnerable daily-wage or overseas laborers, into moving as certified, highly-skilled professionals who command higher reservation wages.
3. **Establishment of Decentralized Career Guidance and Psychosocial Hubs:** Deploy specialized counseling cells within rural blocks to dismantle the visual "easy money" myth. These hubs must educate youth on the hidden structural realities of the production side of migration—such as the severe labor exploitation, health risks, and legal precarity associated with unregulated overseas

recruitment agents. Counseling should contrast short-term liquid cash flows with long-term human capital depreciation.

4. **Grassroots Agro-Processing Ecosystems:** To counteract regional structural isolation, the J&K state administration must incentivize native micro-industries. Capitalizing on regional agricultural strengths—such as walnut, apple, and wild-herb processing—local cooperative hubs should be incubated directly within Poonch. This creates localized corporate entry points, giving youth a tangible reason to value their education.
5. **Address Institutional Irregularities and Staff Shortages:** To rebuild trust in higher education, senior administrative bodies must proactively address widespread academic vulnerabilities such as chronic faculty deficits, delayed testing timelines, and underpaid positions within regional colleges, ensuring a clear link between learning and stable careers.

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