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978-1-107-11703-7 - Migration, Mobility and Multiple Affiliations: Punjabis in a Transnational World

Edited by S. Irudaya Rajan, V. J. Varghese and Aswini Kumar Nanda

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# Transnational World and Indian Punjab

## Contemporary Issues

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### Introduction

The Punjabi transnational experience injects a distinct flavour to Indian transnationalism. With a history of sustained migration for more than two centuries beginning primarily during colonial rule of India, the entry into transnational life from Punjab has been enormous. Though members of Punjabi diaspora share a common cultural, as well as linguistic, identity yet in terms of religion and socio-economic characteristics, this diaspora is sufficiently diverse. Originating in the Punjab region of undivided India that was bifurcated by the Radcliffe Line in 1947 into eastern and western parts to become the separate provinces in independent India and Pakistan respectively, this diaspora is spread across more than 75 countries of the world with major concentrations in United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA), Canada, Australia, Southeast Asia and Middle East.

The history, growth and size of the Punjabi diaspora are critical to the understanding of its role in the transnational sphere. In spite of an extensive presence across many parts of the world and global vibrancy in various fields such as trade, industry, agriculture, healthcare, politics, arts, culture, music, entertainment, spiritualism, charity, etc., precise information is not yet available on the numerical strengths of the Punjabi diaspora. There is a lack of reliable and comparable data on several aspects regarding the Punjabi communities abroad. This constraint, coupled with definitional limitations

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in national surveys and census, both at the destination as well as origin countries, have resulted in a lack of proper understanding of transnational activities and their implications. Inadequate recognition of the contributions by the immigrants in host society and the rising trend of moving away from ethnic statistics often contribute to lack of diaspora statistics in many societies. Notwithstanding the data deficiencies, it is believed that Punjabis are one of the largest ethnic groups in the 2.5 million strong Indian diaspora – with their size touching nearly eight million (Saroya, 2008, 43).

One major cause of rising interest in Punjabi transnationalization is the consistent increase in the number of Punjabi immigrants abroad – particularly in the third quarter of the twentieth century – despite the ‘rising walls’ in favourite destination countries. Successful negotiation with changing immigration regimes using both formal and informal rules abroad is living testimony to the perseverance of migrants from Punjab in securing entry, residence and livelihood abroad. Unfortunately, no empirical evidence is available to examine the patterns of changes in emigration from the state that would lead to understanding of the implications for the state and society in wider terms. The phenomenon of international outmigration from Punjab is captured only to a limited extent in three separate surveys since 1981. Besides, the official statistics of the Government of Punjab on the subject are woefully inadequate in spite of international migration being a major phenomenon in the state of Punjab. Attempts by the state government to collect international outmigration statistics at the block level have not proved useful due to conceptual and methodological inadequacies. In spite all these limitations, data suggests that labour emigration from Punjab is substantial, reaching around 31 thousand in 2009 (MOIA, 2010).

Punjabi transnationalism has been studied selectively by focussing on the diaspora in the United Kingdom, North America, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, etc. The areas that have been examined in great detail are historical origin, types and phases of emigration (Fox, 1990), ways of penetration into various countries and spread (Tatla, 2004), role of the British empire in recruitment, caste consciousness and identity abroad (Kalsi, 2001), remittances (Thandi, 2004), Sikh religious identity, traditions and practices (Singh, 1996), politics of ‘Sikh separatism’ (Singh, 1996), and the identity development of Sikh youths in relation to their educational and labour market experiences in Britain (Thandi, 2001).

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Some areas where little research has been done include transnational connections, crimes and violence, music, politics, religious transnationalism and social remittances.

### Development-induced migration

Punjab is a developed state in the Indian Union. It has the lowest incidence of poverty and hunger, high per capita income, elevated urbanization, surplus production of foodgrains, high levels of household asset ownership, spread of physical infrastructure, high level of human development, etc. These indicators of the considerable economic progress made by the state are largely credited to the success of agriculture powered by the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, development, as the trigger of high and sustained emigration, is not well documented in contemporary Punjab, though Nanda and Veron (2011) have highlighted international outmigration in relation to overall of development. Given that migration is largely an economic issue in Punjab, the pertinent questions from the perspective of development could be regarding the role that overall prosperity played in determining emigration from the state, and how the slowdown in economic development in the rural areas due to the agricultural deceleration in the 1990s impacted migration trends. In Punjab, one of the richest states in 1990–91, the growth rate of per capita Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) was not only lower in the 1990s than in the 1980s, but also fell below the national average. During this period, in terms of economic growth, most states (except for Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa) narrowed the respective gap with Punjab. Such deceleration in the economic growth of Punjab – a good performer in the 1980s according to Ahluwalia (2000) – needs to be examined for its overarching implications for outmigration from the state.

The slowdown in the economic growth of Punjab, among other things, can be traced to agricultural stagnation. The state's economic stagnation in the 1990s, termed as the 'decade of slumber', is marked by a lower growth rate in agricultural net domestic product (2.3 per cent) than the corresponding growth rate of 3.3 per cent for the rest of India (Gulati, 2002). Agriculture has been central to Punjab's development (nearly about 40 per cent of the state income came from agriculture in 1998–99 according to Gulati, 2002). Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that the downslide in agriculture might have had an adverse impact on the quality of life in the state where around

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60 per cent of total population depend on this sector for its livelihood. Since the propensity to out-migrate internationally is higher among the rural households than among the urban households (IIPS, 1995), it is pertinent to examine the impact of a sluggish agriculture on the rural economy in particular to understand the linkages between decline in the standards of living and outward mobility. The benefits from the 'Green Revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s that improved agriculture in Punjab substantially during 1962–65 to 1980–83 by recording high growth rates of agricultural output (Bhalla and Singh, 2009) seem to have been reversed due to the absence of newer and regular agrarian transformations. The rural economy generated employment and raised living standards in the state with the gains peaking in 1980–83 to 1990–93. However, the first Green Revolution was not able to sustain the demands of better living without a second Green Revolution. Bhalla and Singh (2009) found that in the post-liberalization period (1990–93 to 2003–06), agricultural growth decelerated sharply in Punjab. According to their study, the growth rate of agricultural output in the state of Punjab is recorded to have declined from 1.64 per cent per annum during 1990–93 to 2003–06 compared with a growth rate of 4.22 per cent per annum during 1980–83 to 1990–93. This downslide in agriculture in mid-1990s was main reason for the stagnation of the rural economy of Punjab and has been attributed mainly to the overemphasis on wheat and rice, rising capital costs, and increased productivity in the other regions of India (Gulati, 2002). Additionally, the slowdown of industry in Punjab that began in the 1990s due to dampening effect of a sluggish agriculture, militancy, and inability of the industrial sector to benefit from the initiation of national liberalization furthered the financial woes of the state, as documented by Ahluwalia *et al.* (2008), thereby impacting the life of the people in Punjab.

Other than the agricultural and industrial slowdown, development in Punjab has also been affected by the unhealthy experiences of a border state. Its long international boundary in the west, being a witness to a history of sustained hostility of India and Pakistan, has noteworthy ramifications for the socio-economic progress of the state. Four border districts, accounting for about 29 per cent of the total population of the state in 2011, continue to remain relatively backward, as planning and programmes have been affected by considerations of armed conflict and inadequate infrastructure expansion. Additionally, the separatist movement of the 1980s and 1990s

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adversely affected development initiatives in the state by denting the growth of agriculture as well as the industry. All these are reflected in the value of Human Development Index, which did not improve substantially between 1999–2000 and 2002–07 in Punjab.

At one level, it may be interesting to examine if the decrease in economic growth played a role in international outmigration in Punjab. If the decline in the overall economic environment sustained or promoted migration – as conventionally expected – then the fundamental questions would involve the pathways of linkages and nature of the contexts in which migration-enhancing forces operate in Punjabi society. On the other end of the spectrum, Punjab offers a unique setting to test the fact that higher development does not necessarily lead to higher international outmigration in the first place. With immigration becoming increasingly difficult and border control rising, there has been an undocumented shift in favour of student migration.

### Overseas remittances

One of the major benefits of international outmigration from Punjab has been receipt of remittances. Though India's total private transfer receipts for the period 2010–11 increased to US\$ 55.9 billion from US\$ 53.9 billion during 2009–10, according to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), it is still difficult to relate these figures to Punjab in terms of share and trend. Despite data limitations, some broad understanding of the dynamics of household remittances to Punjab is available in a recent RBI study (2010) that examines the remittances to Punjab and adjoining region routed through the banks in the union territory of Chandigarh. It is seen from this study that the remittances to the region are mainly sent through Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) or electronic transfers (63 per cent), drafts or cheques (26 per cent), direct transfer to bank account (97 per cent), money orders (1 per cent) and other modes (3 per cent). This suggests increasing popularity of electronic transfers/SWIFT as these instruments take lesser time to reach the destination in comparison to other means. Low-sized remittances (below ₹ 100,000) dominated the overseas transfers (59 per cent) with only 41 per cent of the remittances being above ₹ 100,000. Interestingly, around 15 per cent of the remittances to the region were also in extremely small quantities (below ₹ 5,000), perhaps indicating presence of an economically-challenged lower income segment of population

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in the streams of international outmigration. Frequency of the remittances to the region reveals that only one-fourth of the total remittance inflows were received once in every month while another 50 per cent were received once in every 2–6 months. Up to 33 per cent and 30 per cent of the total remittances to Punjab come from North America and Europe respectively, while the Gulf countries account for another 15 per cent. Interestingly, countries in South America, Africa and East Asia – accounting for only 13 per cent of the total – are not prominent sources for Punjab and the adjoining region. Data on the end use of funds sent by the overseas Indians to their families indicate that 56 per cent of the remittances is used for family maintenance in the areas of health, education and so on, while 25 per cent is deposited in banks, 3 per cent is invested in land/property and a negligible share (1 per cent) goes into the equity market. Did the inward remittances to Punjab shrink during the recent global economic crisis? Though one does not have a clear answer to this question in the absence of long-term data on household remittances, according to the national sample survey of some authorized dealers of foreign exchange in November 2009 by RBI, the dealers in Chandigarh, Delhi and Kochi did report a slowdown in receipt of remittances unlike their counterparts elsewhere in the country. However, nationally, Mumbai documented a significant impact of recession on remittances in the country (RBI, 2010).

In the context of transnationalism, a wider appreciation of fund flows across international border would require an understanding of not only inward remittances but also outward remittances by the Indians. Fund flows out of India seem to be rising for the country as a whole according to recent RBI statistics. Indians are allowed to send money abroad under the RBI's Liberalized Remittance Scheme (LRS) for specific purposes including gifts, maintenance of relatives, investment, education and medical treatment, etc. Therefore, an assessment of such outward remittances from Punjab is crucial in the light of reports of reverse remittances from the state. Moreover, it will also be prudent to examine the implications for 'Dutch Disease' – the impact of remittances on the competitiveness of economy and incentives for the government to provide a sustainable institutional framework in Punjab.

### **Social remittances**

The increase in the number of immigrants abroad coupled with economic globalization has promoted social remittances to Punjab with the linking of

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markets and technology facilitation, at times with support from the state. The individual and collective social remittance impact of international migration covers norms, practices, identities, and social capital that circulate between home and host society, leaving behind both positive and negative trails in social spheres (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011). Social remittances – involving religious and cultural interventions, consolidation of ethnic and caste consciousness, social ceremonies, literacy, health, sports and recreation – have been assessed in the contexts of diaspora philanthropy in Punjab (Dusenbury and Tatla, 2009). Strands of such remittances have also been recognized in aspects of Sikh collective identity and nationalism (Dusenbury, 2008), political conflicts and quest for Khalistan in the 1980s (Dhillon, 2007), art, communication, and advocacy (Thandi, 2006), gender relations and cross-border matrimony (Walton-Roberts, 2004; Nanda and Veron, 2011) that need to be further scaled up in other areas.

The social development effects of migration cannot be appreciated in Punjab without reference to the diaspora philanthropy or the spirit of *sewa* (selfless service) strongly ingrained in the religious groups. Punjab has a rich tradition of diaspora philanthropy. Of all the types of remittances, the Government of Punjab is aware of the immense contribution of non-resident Punjabis to the socio-economic development of Punjab, and also of the various problems faced by them back home, and has set up a separate Department for NRI Affairs.

As indicated by the Government of Punjab, the Department of NRI Affairs in the state is mandated to channelize foreign as well as local NGOs that are willing to enter into mutual charters to fund the development of municipal and rural areas in Punjab, and to correspond with the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of External Affairs in the Government of India for the benefit of the NRIs.

The Department of NRI Affairs is also responsible for formulation and implementation of schemes related to NRIs with regard to: (a) Plan Scheme- C.D. 2.35 providing matching grants in NRI-shared projects for creating infrastructure like schools, buildings, community services, hospitals, libraries, drinking water schemes, sewerage disposal facilities, public latrines, streetlights and sports stadium and other projects; (b) following an integrated policy for using funds provided by Punjab Government in NRI-shared

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projects like construction of bridges etc., from rural development fund (RDF) to which NRIs can contribute meaningfully for creation of such infrastructure; (c) attracting foreign capital and assistance for the twinning of the city of Kapurthala with Derby (UK) and Jalandhar with Borough of Hounslow (UK); (d) coordinating with the Department of Technical Education and Medical Education for reservation of seats in technical colleges/institutions and medical colleges and charging of fees etc., from NRIs; (e) consideration of schemes to start a bacculaureate system of education in some of the existing schools in Punjab and setting up of some system abroad with a view to help NRI youth get acquainted with their heritage, develop a certain amount of attachment to their motherland, and also get a much better understanding of India; (f) coordination with the projects encouraging mutual understanding and friendship between Derby (UK) and Kapurthala through school linking, which will envisage an exchange programme where a representative of the Education Department of the UK will visit the schools in Punjab and suggest measures to upgrade the educational system; (g) formulating organized schemes of tourism and cultural affairs to invite NRIs, especially the younger generation with a view to maintain their ethnic bonds with their motherland; (h) coordination to make optimum use of NRI contributions in the field of sports; (i) creation of a data bank of NRIs and to provide online services to NRIs; (j) wide publicity in the foreign media for government efforts/policies in favour of NRIs in Punjab; (k) matters related to grant of honours by any Department, conferring Honours, PhD etc., related to NRI affairs will seek clearance from the NRI Affairs Department, which will get clearance from the Government of India, as may be required; and (l) all matters related to the authentication of documents submitted by the non-resident Indians after getting them countersigned from deputy commissioners (Government of Punjab, 2015, <http://punjab.gov.in/nri-s-affairs>).

## Media and migration

International outmigration from Punjab, as experienced today, would not have been the same without the current channels of communication and media exposure. Access to regular flow of information from diverse media sources both within the country and from outside have been instrumental

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in shaping individual migration decisions. Regular advertisements in the print and electronic media by profit-making immigration consultants and corporate houses have served to enhance and cultivate interest in emigration. By providing the necessary guidance and services on how to benefit from changing immigration policies of the selected countries, such agencies arm a pool of desperate individuals who otherwise would not have met the rising stringent conditions for immigration.

A number of local television channels in Punjab devote primetime slots to long and interactive discussions with prospective migrants on emerging and favourable destinations, availability of various academic courses, employment after education, occupations, language proficiency, sponsorship, costs, family and dependent union, permanent residency, procedures, quality of living, etc. Taking advantage of the increasing dominance of students in international outmigration, the immigration consultants systematically woo those who seek education abroad and sponsor such programmes on television. Interestingly, while immigration consultants aim to promote emigration from Punjab through vernacular channels by highlighting the advantages of settling abroad, the central as well as the state government attempt to use the vernacular media to spread awareness to restrain migration abroad by focussing on the need for safe migration, particularly for cross-border marriage and employment. Vernacular television channels in the state play a proactive role in promoting emigration through selective proliferation of information, while the national television media is sporadic in its coverage of migration related issues in terms of news and documentaries.

The print media in Punjab is fairly consistent in reporting issues related to international migration from Punjab. Illegal migration, forged travel documents including passport and visa, exploitation by travel agents and immigration consultants, participation of youth, marriages abroad and deserted women, vulnerability of dependents, poverty and unemployment, sufferings of migrants at origin, en route and destination, philanthropic activities, role of the state involvement in policy, etc., are regular news in Punjab if one considers the mainstream print media. Print media, which was the chief source of advertisement and information on the availability of commercialized services for emigration, have suddenly lost ground and surrendered their turf to a host of television channels. Internet has opened up a host of opportunities for the youth in the state to enhance

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their migration potential. Yet, not much effort has gone into assessing the impact of the media and communication networks on migratory decisions in Punjab.

### Migration management

Over the years, awareness on the importance of international migration and its consequences has been rising steadily in Punjab. The state administration has responded, albeit slowly, to various migration issues through the framework of administrative measures, organizational restructuring, policy prescriptions, legal support, etc. In some programmes, the state government has partnered with the central government and also with civil society agencies. There have been discussions with the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) on subjects such as illegal migration, return migration, administrative, organizational and legal support

NRI *Sabha Punjab* embodies the first major attempt by the state government to provide a permanent service focussed platform to the NRIs in Punjab for promoting their welfare and expectations in the state. Founded as an NGO in 1996 by the Government of Punjab to promote the interests of the NRIs by protecting their property rights, providing facilities during their visits to Punjab, pursuing the interests of NRIs with the central and the state governments, streamlining the investments from abroad, strengthening cultural and ethnic bonds with newer generations and recognizing the achievements and contributions in different spheres to motherland, the NRI *Sabha* claims to be apolitical in character and enjoys, in theory, the support of the state government at the highest level. With grievances removal wing, youth wing and women wing in position, this *Sabha* has units in districts that have higher presence of NRIs. In spite of its growing membership, the *Sabha* has not succeeded significantly in becoming a pivot for marshalling issues of interest to the NRIs. However, it claims to have been instrumental in bringing about the desired amendments in *The Punjab Security of Land Tenure Act 1953* and *East Punjab Rent Regulation Act 1949* to restore agricultural lands to the NRIs from the tenants and give NRIs the right to recover immediate possession of a building (residential or non-residential) from the tenant respectively, and also in setting up fast-track revenue courts to save NRIs from protracted litigation ([www.nrisabhapunjab.in](http://www.nrisabhapunjab.in)).

One major worry of the NRIs from Punjab is related to encroachment