
International Migration from Punjab: Trends and Challenges

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Abstract

In this paper World today is experiencing increased migration of people for various reasons. Migration across borders is a historical process, its magnitude and direction has changed from time to time. India has been an important player in the process as a supplier of migrant workers since colonial time, though all regions within India did not participate equally. The present paper tracks international migration from one province in India. International migration from Punjab though started during colonial time, it was not in the nature of indentured labour. The trends in migration are located within the global trends in migration. The challenges to the process as well as way out are also discussed in the paper.

Keywords: International Migration, Emigration, Illegal Migration

Introduction

International migration is a historical process with people migrating across countries and regions in different time periods that took different forms. Migrations to the New World up to the eighteenth century included convicts from Great Britain, slaves from Africa, servants indentured workers from Europe. Slavery was later replaced by indentured migration from new regions, mainly from India and China, to work on plantations and in mines in different parts of the world. Early nineteenth century also witnessed increase in migration of free or passage migrants to the New World, but it was only in the later half of the nineteenth century up to the First World War that migrations from Europe to the New World took a mass magnitude. Post world War-II international migration has picked up again after inter-war period witnessed decline in migration. The trends and nature of international migration has undergone change in each phase and globalisation of the late twentieth century has further brought change in the trends. Recent data shows that the number of international migrants reached 232 million in 2013, increasing from 154 million in 1990. Between

1990 and 2013, the number of migrants in the developed countries has increased more than twice as fast (by 53 million) as in the developing and under-developed countries (by 24 million). Similarly, more and more countries have emerged as counties of origin in the past two decades (UN, 2013).

International migration from India can be traced back to the colonial practice of indentured migration. India's indentured labour was recruited as a substitute for slaves, employed on various plantation colonies of the colonial powers. These workers belonged to different provinces and regions in India. Since then different provinces have participated in different phases of migration. We find a few regions participating overwhelmingly in indentured migration phase and other regions participating in free migration phase. The former were drawn largely from the provinces of central, eastern and southern India. By contrast Punjab has been one of the leading states of free emigration from India (Kapur, 2005). Migration from Punjab has mostly been towards the developed countries of the West. Similarly, Kerala has been a significant supplier of labour to the Middle East. Other similar significant states of origin of migrants are Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

The present paper examines the trends in international migration from Punjab in light of the global trends. It is based on secondary sources of information mostly case studies involving international migration from Punjab to different countries of destination. The paper situates Punjabi migrants in the overall global migration and examines changes in its nature. The paper further presents some estimates of remittance inflow into the state of Punjab, since remittances are one of the most tangible benefits of migration for the country of origin. Given the trends the paper then discusses challenges of the process of migration for Punjab and way ahead.

Sources of Data on International Migration and their Limitations

Data on international migration is not available through any single source. There are different ways in which data is captured on inward migration in different countries. These are: a) administrative registers, including population registers and registers of foreigners; b) other administrative sources, like visas issued, residence permits or work permits issued and exits clearances; c) border statistics, derived from the collection of information at ports of entry into and departure from a country; and d) population censuses and household surveys (UN, 1998, 2002). Each source captures different types of migration statistics, with its own strengths and limitations.

Source of data on stocks of international migrants are the population censuses of the countries. Some countries also use population registers to

record stocks. Again, the problem with comparability is that a few countries use place of birth criteria while others use citizenship to identify migrants. Different data sources with different definitions leads to lack of comparability and makes it difficult to arrive at the exact numbers and trends in international migration. Under-reporting of the extent of international migration is a serious problem in India as well. There is no single comprehensive official source of data on international migration. Data on emigration is limited. Estimates on population migrating from India are not recorded completely. The only source of official data on emigrants is the office of the Protector General of Emigrants (PGE), Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA), Government of India and the Protectors of Emigrants in each state. Under the Emigration Act, 1983 no citizen of India can emigrate for work (as defined in Section 2(1)(o)) unless he/she obtains emigration clearance from Protector of Emigrants (PoE). However, thirteen categories of persons have been exempted from this requirement.

Those having educational qualification below matriculation are granted Emigration Check Required (ECR) passport, while those with education level of matriculation or above are entitled to Emigration Check Not Required (ECNR) passport. Similarly, certain countries (currently 17) have been identified that do not have strict laws regulating the entry and employment of foreign nationals and do not provide avenues for grievance redressal to these migrant workers. These countries have been categorized as Emigration Check Required (ECR) countries.

Those with ECR passport, emigrating for work to any of the ECR countries have to obtain emigration clearance from any of the PoE offices. However, those holding ECR passports, migrating to any other country, other than ECR countries, are exempt from emigration check formalities. An ECNR passport holder does not need any emigration clearance for migrating to any country. Hence, it is only those with ECR passport and migrating for work to 17 ECR countries that require emigration clearance and get registered officially as emigrants. All migrants to Europe and North America and countries other than these 17 countries left out of official counts on emigrants.

Another source of underreporting in the numbers of international migrants arises from irregular migrants, for example, a person may leave on a visitor visa and succeed in staying on and working in the destination country. The migrant is thus not included among the migrants. The system of data collection in India, therefore, misses a substantial proportion of international migrants from the country, and figures on emigration clearance granted only give a small proportion of the actual extent of emigration.

Magnitude of International Migration from Punjab

In light of the data limitations on international migration from India, the table below only provides a partial view of total emigration from India and different states. Accordingly, Punjab appears to be contributing only a small amount to the total pool of emigrants each year, ranging between 5 to 6 percent. However, this is a severe under-enumeration of flow of migrants from the state, since secondary literature informs us that Punjab has had history of migration to various countries of the world which continues till date and that migration from India to the Gulf countries gained prominence only since the 1970s.

Based on the data on emigration clearance granted Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (now Ministry of External Affairs), calculates the total number of emigrants from India. According to this source 804878 emigration clearances were granted in 2014 which had increased from 641356 clearances granted in 2010. Since the data is available state-wise, the highest number of clearances was granted to UP followed by Kerala in 2010. The trend has changed slightly in 2014 with UP maintaining its position but Bihar and Tamil Nadu taking second and third positions respectively. Since emigration clearances are granted for migration to the Gulf countries and that too for limited categories, this data only provides a partial view of the magnitude of international migration from the country.

Punjab does not appear to be a significant contributor to the pool of migrants according to this source, but its share has increased over the years from about 4.8 percent to 6 percent in 2010 and 2014 respectively. There are some other sources through which an estimate of the number of emigrants from India and Punjab can be gauged. One estimate on emigration places India among top 10 countries of emigration with 13.9 million emigrants in 2013 (World Bank, 2016). According to statistics from Canada census 2011, 460 thousand Canadians reported that their mother tongue is Punjabi (Statistics Canada, 2015). This gives the presence of Punjabi Diaspora in Canada (but not only of emigrants since those reporting Punjabi as their mother tongue could be second or third generation migrants from India, who would not be treated as emigrants under the definition).

Trends in International Migration from Punjab

Reviewing secondary literature on international migration from the state of Punjab, it is possible to discern different phases of migration, with the earliest migration being triggered by recruitment to the colonial army in India and posted in British colonies in Southeast Asia to maintain law and order. This opened the channel for migration to Australia, New Zealand, and further to North America. Punjab also contributed, relatively a small number

as compared to some of the states in India, to the pool of indentured workers in the plantation colonies and to work in the construction of railways in Uganda in the 1890s. There is also evidence of recruitment of seamen from a few districts in Punjab who deserted their ships to work on different ports in UK, Singapore, US and other ports in Europe. Punjabi migrants to North America are believed to have come through Hong Kong which had a large number of Sikh soldiers, watchmen and policemen (Singh, 1994). Shipping companies acting on behalf of the employers also lured Punjabis to work in Canada (Singh, 1994: 30).

The phase of free migration soon came to an end with the introduction of racial policies of immigration introduced in Australia in 1901 followed by Canada (Continuous journey legislation of 1908) and USA, to once again gain in significance with the end of World War II and amendments in the immigration policies.

There are some common characteristics of migrants that emerge from country case studies of migration from Punjab. Those migrating were rural men, of land owning castes, relatively young and single and in some cases where men were married, they travelled without their wives or children. Migration from Punjab has mostly been from Doab region, consisting of districts of Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Hoshiarpur and Nawanshahr (S.B.S Nagar now). Doab region is also the origin of most of the Punjabi migrants to England, Canada, USA, and New Zealand. The migrants were either illiterate or with low educational background and took up unskilled or semi-skilled occupations in the countries of destination. For example, they were initially employed in the railroad construction and in lumber mills in North America often as a source of cheap labour, cheaper than the existing 'white' labour force. By the first decade of the twentieth century they were increasingly being employed in agricultural farms, again as a cheap replacement for existing Japanese and Chinese farm workers (Singh, 1994: 35-36).

Post Second World War reconstruction boom created demand for migrant workers in the developed countries and led to relaxation of immigration laws. Britain recruited workers from its former colonies to meet industrial demand for workers. Migrants from Punjab joined the already existing Punjabi migrant community in Britain to work as industrial workforce (Tatla, 1999; Helweg, 1979). USA and Canada relaxed their immigration policies to allow entry of Indians at par with other citizens of other countries and finally introduced amendments to attract skilled and professionally qualified migrants. Those migrating from India increasingly comprised of scientists, physicians, engineers, teachers and other qualified workers. Due to data limitations it is not possible to indicate the extent of migration of professionals from Punjab. However, migration of the unskilled and semi-skilled with low educational background continued from rural Punjab as

part of family reunification. In the face of selective immigration policies of the developed countries migrants from rural Punjab have taken illegal channels of migration (Singh and Tatla, 2008: 35; UNODC,2009).

Another phase in international migration from Punjab began with migration of unskilled and semi-skilled workers on a temporary basis to the countries of the Middle East. Oil price rise of the mid-1970s and the resulting infrastructure development projects in the oil-exporting countries of the Middle East created demand for cheap labour that was supplied by various developing countries including India. Punjab along with other states continues to participate in the supply of migrants to the Gulf countries, with dalit households participating more than the land-owning dominant castes of rural Punjab.

The contemporary trend of migration from Punjab is that of continued migration to the Gulf countries and the traditional countries of USA, UK, Canada and Australia along with migration to a large number of countries in Southern and East Europe, especially southern European countries that were net emigration countries till the 1970s but became net immigration countries since the 1980s. However, there has been very little change in the characteristics of migrants in terms of educational qualifications and in terms of occupation in the destination countries (Jacobsen, & Myrvold (ed.), 2011). Moreover, majority of those migrating from the state are from rural areas (81 percent according to one estimate). According to the same source, 45 percent of the migrants from the state migrate to the Gulf countries and Canada ranks second important destination.

Industrialisation in certain Southeast Asian countries—the four NICs and other emerging economies in the region, as well as shift in importance of the services sector in the developed countries have created demand not only for highly skilled migrant workers but also for unskilled and semi-skilled workers, to take up employment in the declining manufacturing industries or to provide low-end, low skilled services sector jobs in the global cities (Cohen, 2006). Moreover, the developed countries of the world are facing skill shortages as well as labour shortages in the face of declining birth rates and ageing population. As a result we find demand for migrant workers across spectrum of occupations and especially in occupations that cannot be relocated to places with abundance of cheap labour like caregivers.

Punjab fits into this general trend as a supplier of unskilled- and semi-skilled workers. It is the rural migrants with low skills and educational qualifications that continue to remain in focus, mostly because of their migration through illegal channels.

Remittances to Punjab

The most tangible outcome of international migration is the remittances that households receive from its migrant members. Studies have shown that remittances provide much required income to the households that are resource constrained. It has been shown to have positive impact on the health and nutrition status of the family members, on schooling and education of the children, on investment in family- run small business and on housing.

Remittances have been growing steadily in the past few years and now represent the largest source of foreign exchange for many developing countries. According to the World Bank (2016), remittance inflows to developing countries are more than three times official development aid. Remittance flows are more stable than capital inflow and they also tend to be counter-cyclical—i.e. they tend to increase during economic downturns or after a natural disaster while private capital flows tend to decrease during such times (Rath, 2003).

According to the World Bank estimates, India received \$72.2 billion in remittances in 2014, being the highest remittance receiving country. Of this, maximum remittance flows from the Gulf countries followed by USA (World Bank, 2016). It is estimated that migrants of Punjab origin remit Rs. 800-1000 crore per month back home to their families (The Economic Times, 2013)

Another study estimates that Punjab received Rs. 16505 crores in remittances in 2007-08 with Kerala being the highest remittance receiving state followed by Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. When calculated as a share of the state domestic product, remittance to NDP was 12.9 percent for Punjab, being the second highest, after Kerala at 35.3 percent (Tumbe, 2011).

In the absence of any systematic study on international migration and remittances in Punjab, exact magnitude and uses of remittances cannot be stated clearly. However, existing case studies have shown that remittances have been used to build palatial houses, purchase agricultural land and purchase of goods of conspicuous consumption. Village development projects, construction of village Gurdwara, schools or dispensaries, and investment in agriculture and small businesses have equally been highlighted by these studies.

International Migration and Challenges

Punjab faces a huge challenge in terms of controlling illegal migration from the state. As UNODC report shows a large number of Punjabi youth under the impression of finding greener pastures in foreign lands, is trapped into

the agent-smuggler nexus. Illegal status in destination countries only makes them vulnerable to exploitation in the countries of destination. The government also needs to act strictly, through legislation and implementation, to break the agent-smuggler nexus.

It is also evident that Punjabis have migrated to various countries of the world to meet the demand for less skilled workers. With increasing restrictions on immigration in the developed countries, youth in Punjab takes illegal channels to migrate and risks its life and money. It is therefore important that the problem of illegal migration should be dealt with through two pronged strategy of creating awareness among youth against illegal channels of migration, and to improve education outcomes of the youth to increase their employability in the country as well as in other countries.

Policy making on migration requires reliable data on the numbers and socio-economic profile of the migrants which again is missing in India that further complicates the scenario. Thus, what is required with utmost urgency is reliable data on international migration from the country, which is available on regular basis. A specialised agency may be identified for this purpose. Trends in migration also highlight that a large number of migrants from rural areas are unskilled or semi-skilled workers and with their poor skills and education background, these workers end up performing low-end jobs often 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) in the countries of destination. These 3 D jobs are at the bottom of the hierarchy with little or no job security, are dangerous and de-humanising. At the same time most of the developed countries of the west are facing demographic challenges with low birth rates and ageing population. Thus these countries are in expected to face severe labour shortages, especially of care-givers and in sectors where jobs cannot be shifted to other countries with abundant labour supply, especially in services sector. Therefore, what is required is to identify the skills that are in demand in the developed countries and to train and educated youth to fill these labour shortages in a legal manner.

Migrants to the Gulf countries face a different set of problems due to poor legislations protecting rights of the migrant workers. These Gulf countries are heavily dependent on migrant workers to drive economic growth and this dependency is expected to continue. With increase in the local youth population and their aspirations for local jobs, these countries have introduced localisation policies like Nitaqat in Saudi Arabia. Thus, localisation policy along with exploitative working conditions of the migrant workers poses a big challenge that needs to be overcome at the policy level to protect migrant workers and ensure their safety.

Similarly, remittance inflow from migrants to the state is underreported in the absence of a mechanism to track this inflow. A large part still flows

through informal channels. The state has also been unable to make a major headway in attracting its migrant population to invest in the state. Punjabi migrants have shied away from investing in the state partly due to absence of business-friendly environment.

Lastly, Punjab has to develop a strategy to utilise remittances inflow in such a manner that it becomes part of the development plan of the state, rather than being used to purchase goods of conspicuous consumption or build huge houses. There has to be a strategy in place to utilise these flows for creating jobs in the local economy, improve agriculture and manufacturing base in the state to ease pressures of migration, often through illegal channel.

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