

Understanding the Social Aspects of Punjabis in Malaysia

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Article History

Received: 22.03.2018

Accepted: 10.04.2018

Published: 15.04.2018



Abstract: The present study deals with the social aspects of Punjabis in Malaysia. Survey was conducted among the Punjabis residing in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) in order to understand their social life in the country of their adoption. It has been found that there are one lakh Punjabis residing in Malaysia mostly from Ludhiana, Amritsar, Ferozepur and Moga districts. Upon field survey, it has been found that fifty- two per cent Punjabis send money back to their family in Punjab. They made number of frequent visitation to their familial roots back in Punjab. On the basis of their responses, it has been found that, eighty two per cent Punjabis made regular visits to Punjab. Further analysis indicates that thirty- six per cent prefers to settle in Malaysia while forty six per cent wish to be back to their families in Punjab.

Keywords: Remittances, Marriage, Visits, Malaysia, Homeland, Migration, Biradari.

INTRODUCTION

The Punjab had undergone economic and social transformation under the British rule. Punjabis were exposed to new opportunities of employment in India and abroad. Many Punjabis sought their fortune in Indian national army and later on police services of British colonies i.e. Shanghai, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore.

The Punjabis particularly the Jats were regarded as Martial races and gained importance in these new colonies (Malaya and Singapore) and they ultimately decided to settle there after the retirement. Those who were not seen qualified enough to be in the forces were absorbed in other sectors of these colonies. They became security guards, watchmen, hawkers, milk deliverers and bullock cart drivers. With time, Punjabi commercial migrants also arrived and became peddlers and cloth sellers or engaged in sundries shops in the early 1920's. In order to increase their income, many indulged in money lending business and lend money at high rate of interest without the interference of government agencies. These commercial migrants gather enough wealth to start their own business like textile trading, manufacturing and many more. In addition to this, professional and skilled workers were also in demand to work in railways, factories and in clerical and education department of the Government sectors of these colonies. Emigration report of the commerce and industry of 1917 indicates that more than seven thousand skilled artisans migrated to Malay Peninsula in 1911 from Central Punjab [1]. This continuous flow of migrants started the establishment of Punjabi community in Malaysia. At present, there are nearly one lakh Punjabis residing in Malaysia, mostly from Malwa followed by Majha and Doaba districts of the Punjab.

Rationale of the study

Awareness towards the study of Punjabi community in South East Asian countries is a recent phenomenon. They became visible in almost every field of the Malaysian economy. This prompted the scholars to focus on Punjabi migration and their contribution in their respective surroundings. Their interactions with the host culture impacted their personal experiences. Further, their bonding with their biradari (closed group of one's own caste) was influenced due to these interactions. Majority of the work focuses on the historical journey made by the migrant in these countries in general and Malaysia in particular. However only a handful studies have devoted their attention towards the social aspects of the lives of the Punjabi migrants [2]. It is imperative to study the social aspects of Punjabi migration to Malaysia. The present study focus on the level of remittances, their frequency of visitation back to Punjab, their matrimonial choices and their future in Malaysia. In specific terms the study is designed to analyse.....

- Level of the remittances made back to Punjab.
- Frequency of visitation made by them to Punjab.
- Reasons of their visitation back to Punjab.
- Their choice regarding the selection (ethnicity) of spouse.
- Their level of absorption on the Malaysian economy.
- Their future and preference to settle in the country of their adoption or in Punjab.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Every respondent gave different story about their experiences in Malaysia. On the basis of their responses, we came to conclude some key points discuss below.

Remittances Back to Punjab

Frequency and variability of remittances back home is one way to determine the nature of bonding with the biradari. The difference between number of those who remit their money and those who do not remit back to Punjab is quiet less. Survey indicated that fifty two per cent send money back to Punjab. Majority of the short term migrants remit money back to their families. While forty eight per cent Punjabis did not remit any money. They are mostly those migrants who have been there for many decades and are permanent citizens. The reasons they gave was that they don't have any relatives or family there. Many times due to their bad experiences from their relatives also prompted them not to send money anymore.

Frequency of number of visits to Punjab

Frequent number of visits means good connections with homeland and vice versa. They visit to attend marriages, meet relatives and family to perform ancestral rites, to invest and for other personal reasons. Upon survey, it has been found that eighty two per cent revisit Punjab but the frequency seems irregular, some visited every year, every five years, while some revisited after every ten years. Meanwhile six per cent visited Delhi or Bombay for business and investment purposes but they never visited Punjab. It seems that they don't feel the reason to visit Punjab as there are no ancestral roots left for them there. Majority of these are second or third generation Punjabis who have no connection back in Punjab. In addition to this, twelve per cent are stranded without their passports (seized by agents) so they yet to be back to Punjab.

Desire to settle in Punjab/Malaysia

Better infrastructure, better quality of life and bright future are the three components that determine the desire of the migrants either to settle in their adopted country or back home. Their wish to spend their last days either in Malaysia or in Punjab differs according to their experiences.

The main agenda for the short term migrants is to acquire wealth there and return home. Their ancestral roots are still very deep. They do not wish to settle in any other place than Punjab. Majority of them are those who came for a short period of time for employment purpose. They are uncertain but continue to work till they accumulate enough money. On the basis of survey it has been found that forty six per cent prefer to settle in Punjab. Although they are happily settled in Malaysia but they did not see any future of their kids in Malaysia.

However in case of permanent citizens, the situation is somewhat different. They are already settled in their adopted home. They would like to keep in touch with their biradari by revisiting Punjab from time to time. Survey indicates that thirty six per cent Punjabis see their future in Malaysia. They have been in Malaysia for long time and establish their niche there, trying to assimilate well in the culture of their adopted home. They do visit Punjab from time to time but they don't see any point to be back to Punjab and leave Malaysia. Though six per cent were uncertain about their future but they prefer to be in Malaysia for employment purpose. Many Punjabis are concerned about the failing economy of Malaysia and its currency i.e. which is 1 Ringgit (Malaysian currency) – 16.77 INR. Most of the migrants would ultimately use Malaysia for onward migration to Canada, U.S.A, U.K and Australia.

Matrimonial choices

In addition to all the above mentioned aspects, there are other changing trends among the Punjabis in Malaysia. Choice of the spouse is one such example which determined the absorption into the local culture or the other way around. Although marriage is usually done within Punjabi community, there are some cases of intermarriages between Punjabis and locals. Author was a witness to a marriage ceremony between a Sikh boy and a Malay girl in the Tatt Khalsa Diwan Gurudwara, Selangor (Kuala Lumpur). Marriage was held according to the Sikh rituals and it has been found that permission is only given to marriage if the local Malay girl covert to Sikh religion. It is interesting to note that Gurudwara only allows Malay girl (with condition) to be married to Sikh boy but not the other way around.

Assimilation with the locals and its impact on Punjabi migrants and their culture

It has been found that majority of the permanent residents seems to be satisfied with their life in Malaysia and they want to continue here like this forever along with their children. Stable governance, infrastructure, jobs and peaceful life are what they expect and they claim to get here in Kuala Lumpur. They are free from government interference in religious matters. They organize religious processions, ceremonies, and language lessons. They are trying their best to assimilate with the local culture and norms in addition to maintain their own culture, society and own language. They seem to be satisfied with possible employment opportunities available there. Many Punjabis who had once served the Government departments like in army and in police now get tax-free pensions and live off on it very happily. Majority of these Punjabis are now members in the Gurudwara administration. They have no complaint regarding any type of discriminatory behavior of *Bhumiputras* and Malaysian Government against Punjabis.

In addition to this, Punjabis plays dominant role in politics. Malaysian Punjabi Party is an example of that which was founded by Jeswant Singh in 1986 with the aim of protecting the interests of Punjabi Sikhs in Malaysia. On 28th February 2014, Punjabi Party of Malaysia became a constituent party of national coalition named Barisan Nasional. Gurjeet Singh Rhande is the president of this party since 2013. Recently an Indian-origin Punjabi Sikh Amar Singh became police commissioner of Kuala Lumpur.

However that is not the situation for those who have been here for short period of time on contract basis. Many of the recent Punjabi migrants in Kuala Lumpur are facing lot of problems. They have been allured by the agents for fake jobs. Many of them are stranded while many of them are being taken prisoners for not having passports (as agents confiscated their passports). They have been living in hiding and depend upon Gurudwara for food and jobs as helpers there. They can't even go to the Malaysian police for help because they don't have legal status to live in Malaysia.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- Punjabis residing in Malaysia maintained their connection with their roots as well as with the host culture on different levels.
- They visit according to their comfortability to their homeland. They remain in touch with their families, friends back to Punjab through social media.
- They remit money to their near and dear ones according to their needs as well as their capability. Their experiences with their relatives and with the administration back home determine the level of closeness with their biradari. For instance they revisit Punjab regularly because they have been in good terms with their relatives while many are reluctant to visit or never visited or neither remits any money because they are the third or four generation of earlier Punjabis and lost touch with their distant relatives back home. They don't want to settle in Punjab and therefore prefer to visit only for short periods.
- They are trying hard to adapt in the local Malaysian culture and society on one hand and sustain their connection to their roots back in Punjab.

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