CONCLUSION

Migration abroad became a tradition in British Punjab, particularly in the Doaba. Punjabi migration was inspired initially by the demand for soldier/policemen to protect the Empire and sustained by the principle of free mobility of a citizen within the Empire. But the mobility of the Punjabis was not restricted by the boundaries of the Empire nor to any one form of employment. Punjabis migrated in the first phase to become soldiers or policemen, but subsequently they were seen employed in a variety of forms of labour, especially to the White Dominion countries. Then having moved to Canada many explored possibilities of jobs in neighbouring USA. These movements were not directly encouraged by the state. As we have seen steamer companies and migration agents were also responsible for encouraging Punjabi migration. The data showing the volume of migration to every destination is not available, but it is clear that the level of migration was critically determined by immigration policies of each host country: the extent to which they encouraged or restricted migration.

A typical Punjabi migrant was a Jat Sikh male from Doaba. Sikhs were the most visible of the migrants; they were the dominant group within the migration streams to the White Dominion countries and the USA where wages were higher than in other destinations. The image of a successful migrant, stories of their foreign travel, and the money they brought back home, all contributed to the attraction for migration.

While Doabis were not the only group that participated in migration streams, it was certainly true that they dominated migration streams to the White Dominions and their adjacent countries. The major factor that created a push for migration was the pressure on land resources. Scarcity of land, small size of holdings created a surplus of
hands at the farm, and migration was one of the ways in which these hands could find employment. But once migration started, it created a condition that in turn sustained the flow of migration. In the areas from which migration occurred, land values increased rapidly, with colonists and foreign migrants buying land in their original home villages. As long as migrants did not lose their links with their original village, their fellow villagers’ ability to borrow money increased and in theory the more the land value increased, the smaller was the area of land a peasant needed to mortgage in order to travel abroad. Both colonists and migrants were thus indirectly responsible for creating conditions in which rural Punjabis could finance their travels abroad in search of employment.

The demand for land increased for a variety of other factors. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Doaba was considered to have rich water resources and the Government did not think that investment in canal construction was necessary. However, by the first decade of the twentieth century, it was clear that the water resources were shrinking due to universal scramble for well-irrigated lands. Agriculturists in such areas were trapped in a vicious circle: they needed well-irrigated lands to survive, especially when holdings were small; but this demand led to a pressure on water resources, impoverishing the land and creating problems for the peasant households.

The reason for migration abroad was not only purely economic. In some Jat villages, which were major migrant senders, the British suspected that the Jats were quickly adopting the custom of dowry to acquire status. The economic pressure to pay dowry, in turn, led to infanticide, an acute ‘shortage’ of girls, an adverse female/male ratio. I have suggested in my thesis that these conditions also sustained migration.
flows. In these villages, families with unmarried men as well as those with girls sought to improve their economic condition through migration. Families seeking upward mobility had to pay dowry, if they had to marry their daughter to men of higher social status as was usual within the system of hypergamy. On the other hand, men who wanted social status, had to shift from paying bride-price to demanding dowry; but they could not do this if their holdings were small. Men of small means could not expect brides with dowry even outside the endogamous village network. They had only three options: first, to stay single; second, to exchange female family members with another family; third, to take a bride outside the endogamous village network paying bride-wealth. The problem was not resolved even when they decided to pay bride-wealth, for bride-wealth was increasing due to ‘shortage’ of women. Migration abroad could solve their problem by improving their socio-economic status. Through migration, as we have seen, households could increase their bargaining power in the marriage market. In a sense, migration abroad was part of the process of shifting from bride-wealth to dowry.

Despite active attempts at land acquisition by migrants and their families, it was possible for them to face problems caused by the way the immovable property was being defined by the British. A proprietor who inherited land from his father or his agnates did not have a full power of disposition of his land. Under the British rule, his power of disposition was constrained because of the operation of customary law. A father did not have power to make unequal distribution in the central districts. Because the British adhered to the agnatic theory, they were responsible for expanding the rights of reversioners rights. No.50 PR 1893 (FB) was symbolically against the custom of appointing the daughter’s son as a sonless proprietor’s heir. Although
agriculturists were against the idea of including remote agnates as their reversioners without limitation by the Second Revised Settlement, Jats in Jullundur District accepted the ‘custom’; Jats in Hoshiarpur District had a wider power of disposition in the sense that they succeeded in establishing the custom of appointment of daughter’s son as a sonless proprietor’s heir. In a situation where the demand for land was increasing, accepting ‘custom’ meant increased interference from agnates as reversioners.

Self-acquired property was supposed to be free from interference from agnates in theory. However, there seemed to be a demand for controlling self-acquired land under the influence of ‘customary’ restrictive power. The level of such influence was not uniform all over Punjab. Even within Doaba, the demand for ‘custom’ over self-acquired property was strong in Nawanshahr, but agriculturists in Phillour Tahsil had a wider power of disposition of their self-acquired property. However, as a district, there was a demand for controlling self-acquired property under ‘custom’. This was obvious from the fact that daughters had a right to succeed to the father’s self-acquired property only in the absence of near agnates, even though self-acquired property was supposed to be unrelated with the agnatic theory. Whether or not land acquisition was a means of ‘liberation’ from ‘custom’ probably depended on the influence of ‘custom’ in each area and in each group before 1920. While land acquisition could have meant expansion of ancestral land for Jats in Nawanshahr, Jats in Phillour Tahsil had a power to gift the whole or part of their self-acquired land. For the latter, land acquisition meant ‘liberation’ from ‘custom’.

Then was it possible that a migrant abroad gained nothing due to this strong ‘customary’ control? The answer is no. In the Doaba landowners did acquire the
right to keep the land that he purchased as his separate property even after his father’s
death, in addition to his share of his father’s ancestral land. There was also a custom in
which a person who rendered services to a proprietor could be rewarded with a share
of landed property even when this was ancestral land. Naturally a person who
contributed to land acquisition could be rewarded with the land he acquired. However, when he ended up as a sonless proprietor after migration, the land could not
be always free from the influence of ‘custom.’

When a peasant emigrated, his family usually mortgaged part of the family land.
Migrants were expected to redeem the land at a later date and if possible add more
land to the family’s ancestral possession. Once the land was redeemed, the land was
probably also redefined as self-acquired property. The process of redemption and
land acquisition in a sense was a kind of risk management. In areas where
agriculturists saw the distinction between self-acquired and ancestral land, such a
process of redemption and land acquisition minimized the number of reversioners. I
would argue that the steady decrease in the number of reversioners over the years was
a by-product of the process of migration abroad.

For the establishment of the tradition of migration, however, the critical moment
was 1920 when the Punjab Customs Act was introduced. This Act guaranteed to the
proprietors a full power of disposition of self-acquired property by reducing the power
of reversioners. After this year migrants’ family could safely invest on land. With
this Act, land acquisition could become ‘liberation’ from ‘custom’ even in the areas
and amongst groups in which demand for ‘customary’ control was strong.

In the Doaba migration thus emerged as a survival strategy that operated in a
peculiar way. Economic pressure may act as a push factor for migration in many
regions. Discovering this pressure does not tell us much about the specific history of migration from any place. It is necessary to explore how these pressures work within historically determined contexts. What I have tried to show is that migration was linked in a specific way to the pressures and changes within the marriage market, as well as to the way customary law defined the relationship between peasant households and landed property. Pressures of the marriage market may not have created the critical push for migration, but migration did define the status a migrant’s family commanded within the marriage market, and it also shaped the nature of shift from bride-wealth to dowry. Similarly migration in the long run was sustained by changes within the customary law - especially regarding the rules relating to ancestral and self-acquired property and the power of the reversioners – and migration led to pressures for change within customary law.