INTRODUCTION

"When Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, a Sardarji (i.e., a Sikh male) was already there to tap him on the shoulder and ask, "Taxi, sir?" This popular joke captures the significance of migration in the life of Punjabis. Since the late nineteenth century Punjabis have been known for their ‘tradition’ of migration abroad. In many villages today in Central Punjab, a third or more of the local population may be living abroad. Migration abroad has been for people living in Punjab a familiar way of improving their financial condition. How have those Punjabis managed to establish the ‘tradition’ or ‘habit’ of migration abroad?

Although migration was only one aspect of Punjab life, and only a section of the Punjabis practised migration as a survival strategy, it did reflect changes caused by colonial power in Punjab. Migration abroad from colonial Punjab was a by-product of the British rule. An attempt to understand the process through which this ‘tradition’ of migration was established in Central Punjab will help us better understand changes in rural life in British Punjab.

While Punjabi diaspora in the present world has a root in the colonial connection, there are few studies on Punjabi migration abroad under the British rule. There are only two important works: one by Tom Kessinger and the other by W.H. Mcleod.  

2 ibid., pp.1-2.
Kessinger's effort was to understand which section of the landowners fed the migration streams. He discovered that both middle-sized landholders and small-sized landholders were part of migration flows from Jullundur District. To study the origin of migrants abroad, it seems important to know how relatively small-sized landholders were able to send migrants abroad. Since smaller landholders could be more financially vulnerable to increase in their family size, their ability to move was important in establishing the 'tradition' of migration abroad in certain areas. Kessinger's study points to the need to explore how small-sized land holders managed to send migrants abroad.

McLeod asks the question: why were Doabis so predominant in the migration streams from Punjab? Having asked the question, McLeod also points out that all parts of the Doaba did not participate uniformly in this history of migration. These are questions that still require historical enquiry. Studying the push factors and the social contexts within the regions that sent migrants abroad might provide us with a key to answer the question posed by McLeod.

My attempt in this thesis is to study how the tradition of migration abroad developed in the Doaba under colonial rule. I will choose two sets of duration of time: the period of the 1890s during which migration to Australia from Punjab was significant; and the subsequent period, particularly the first decade of the twentieth century when the rush to North America took place. I wish to understand the factors that enabled small-sized land holders to travel abroad in the first phase and explore what happened after migration to North America became first important and then difficult. The documents that I will consult for the purpose mainly belong to the time span between 1872 and 1947. The year is significant for my purpose. This was the year when landed property was brought under the legal rule of custom in rural Punjab.

Chapter 1 will outline a history of Punjabi migration under British rule. It will map the growth of Punjabi diaspora under the British rule and seek to explore how Doabis emerged as typical migrants. Through a close study of the Census figures, migration statistics, and local records, I will analyze the trends and fluctuation in migration, and chart the patterns of shifts within them. What was the colonial power’s role in encouraging migration abroad? What enabled Punjabi migrants to move within the British Empire? What were the important sources of information about migration abroad? What were the so-called pull factors other than those directly created by the colonial power? The chapter also focuses on the nature of work in the host society. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss the typical image of a Punjabi migrant abroad; and I will try to see who the typical migrants were and who the atypical migrants.

Chapters 2 will review various kinds of pressures on land resources as push factors of Punjabi migration. It will assess how a small holder could migrate abroad, and how important was landholding in determining the possibilities of migration. What was the nature of pressure on land resources in Doaba? What were the factors behind the high land value there? How a combination of these factors enabled a migrant to travel abroad?

Chapter 3 will look at another push factor: the pressure on water resources, which was especially important in the later stages of migration from colonial Punjab. How was a peasant landholder trapped into a vicious circle as a result of losing water resources? How did the effort of agriculturists to expand well-irrigated land affect the vicious circle? How did this pressure operate in the regions from which migrants went abroad?

Chapter 4 examines the link between migration and the operation of the marriage network. It examines how marriage expenses could create a pressure for migration. It looks at the peculiar problems faced by the Big Durbari villages of Doaba,
the implications of hypergamy within such villages, and the meaning of the shift from bride wealth to dowry. It then connects the social changes taking place with the evidence of migration. The chapter attempts to argue that migration abroad was a part of the picture of shift from the custom of bride wealth to the custom of dowry. And the history of this shift was closely connected to the history of migration from Punjab.

Chapter 5 will describe how agriculturists experienced a sort of pressure as a result of the way of landed property right was defined under the Punjab Customary Law. 'Custom' or the principle of village exogamy along male lines, which was stressed by the British administration expanded the right of reversions. In such a situation, what was the meaning of land ownership under the regulation of 'custom'?

Chapter 6 will discuss whether land acquisition resulted in a 'liberation from custom' or not. It will also look at the different strategies - including migration abroad - that were deployed to acquire land. Despite the fact that even self-acquired property was under the influence of 'custom', did land acquisition still mean 'liberation' from 'custom'? What was the meaning of the 1920 Punjab Custom Act? How were the changes in custom linked to the working of the migration flows.

The study will be based on official unpublished records of the Indian Government and of the Punjab Government, various official published reports, especially settlement literature, reports from the Board of Economic Inquiry, Punjab, law reports, and digests.

Through all the chapters, my focus will be on Punjab in general and the Doaba in particular. I suggest that the history of migration in all places are not shaped by the same kinds of factors. So it is necessary to understand the peculiar history of the Doaba, in order to understand the logic of the Punjabi migration that occurred from this region.