CHAPTER-VI

CONCLUSION

Indian and Punjabi diaspora in European, American and African countries, in particular have drawn attention of the scholars of history, sociology, demography, economics, and of course, literature. Their attention towards Indians settled in European countries, America and Africa is understandable as they remit a great amount of foreign exchange and wield considerable influence in shaping policies of the governments of the countries of their domicile and India and vice versa. It is only recent that some scholars like A.K.Pasha, P.C.Jain and Abdulla Elmadani have drawn themselves towards the study of social, economic and cultural conditions of Indians in West Asian countries, and particularly of the Gulf region countries like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE and Oman. A.K.Pasha published an anthology entitled, “India, Iran and GCC States: Strategies” in 2000. It consisted of ten articles on different issues related to India’s relations with these countries in the Gulf. Prakash C. Jain’s edited work “Indian Diaspora in West Asia” published in 2007, however, is more focused on the conditions of Indian expatriates in the region. Abdulla Elmadani’s book “Historical Links Between India and The Gulf” published in 1999 focuses on the relationships between India and the Gulf region from ancient times.

Indians are now large in numbers in the Gulf countries and are important because they are remitting good deal of foreign exchange to Indian treasury. Social dimensions of Indian migrations to the countries of the Gulf, particularly regarding to the impact on the families back home has not been studied so far. The present work traces the relationship between India and the countries of the Gulf during the twentieth century in historical perspective. The work covers Indian and Punjabi migrations to the Gulf with focus on Bahrain. Migration to Bahrain has social and economic consequences for the migrants and their families back home. The study is based on several sources such as the Archival records, both in India and Bahrain, field work in Bahrain and among their families in India. Interviews are based on a structured questionnaire. Methods used are historical, as far as the archival material is concerned, sociological and statistical to analyze the collected data.
Relations between India and West Asian countries date back to the period of Indus Valley civilization. Archeological evidences indicate trade relations between these two regions. A number of seals found in the Gulf during excavations have design and characters similar to those of Indus Valley civilization. The period of the seventeenth century, however, is known as the ‘golden period’ of Indian maritime trade when the Indian merchants expanded their trade activities to almost every part of the Gulf. During this period, Indian goods were sent to the Gulf from the ports of Sind and Gujarat. Ivory, agate-carving, muslin, quilts, patola, baftas, cotton stuffs, silk, lacquer ware, calico and chintz were the major items of trade. The chief products brought to India from the Gulf were horses, dried fruits, Persian silk, carpets and pearls. The Arabs and Portuguese documents speak of a specific business community of Bhatias from Thatta who were known as “baniyas”. Thattai or Sindi Bhatias were the first Indians to arrive in Bahrain. The trade between Bahrain and India was conducted by them. Bahrain’s pearl was the finest among other Gulf countries and was in great demand in India and European countries. The Thattai Bhatias were the financiers for the pearl business in Bahrain. They were given the first preference to choose the best pearls to export to India. Still this community is doing well in Bahrain.

We find further references to the presence of Indian merchants in the Gulf region during the mid nineteenth century. The process of movement of people got acceleration during the first half of the twentieth century. For the purpose of the present study, we have, therefore, limited ourselves to the Indian migrants to this region during the 20th century. Indians and Punjabis started moving towards these countries during the 1930s after oil reserves were found, resulting in the growth of industry related to the production of oil by big multi-national companies. These companies offered lucrative employment as clerks, technicians, artisans and as skilled professionals. Several thousand Indians including Punjabis were employed in unskilled and semi-skilled works in construction sites and even households after the oil boom of 1970s. In 1948, the number of Indians in the Gulf was only 14,000. It increased many folds by the beginning of the 1970s with the rising oil prices. The total number of Indians in UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Oman grew to 2,57,000 in 1975 which increased rapidly to more than 33,18,000 in 2001.
Presently around 4.5 million Indians are working in the Gulf countries and they formed the largest expatriate community in the region.

Increasing demand of labour and promise of higher wages attracted the unskilled and semi-skilled labour to rush towards the countries of the Gulf. Not only the above categories but professionals and traders were also migrated, however, their number was small. For the governments of the Gulf countries too Indians were more economical than the Arab workforce. But the movement of the labour could not allowed to be unbridled. The governments of the countries therefore, formulated a policy in 1973 to import foreign labour till their own labour becomes able to handle the projects. Impact of this policy is visible in many countries as they are now putting restrictions on employment of foreign labour. For example, United Arab Emirates introduced a new labour policy in 1980 that at least 30 per cent of the jobs should be reserved for the Arabs. Likewise, The Ministry of Labour and Social affairs of Bahrain launched a project in 2001 which aimed at the training and employment of 4,000 Bahrainis in a year. Such policies have affected the Indian migrations to the Gulf region to some extent.

We have, in our work, focused on the Punjabis who are an important part of Indian community in Bahrain. It may be mentioned that we do not have separate data on the Punjabis from the records available with either the Labour Market Regulatory Authority of Bahrain or the Indian Embassy in Bahrain. We are able to trace the migration of the Punjabis to Bahrain from 1929. Since then the migrations are a continuous process. Until 1932, the police force of Bahrain was dominated by Punjabi soldiers as they were considered loyal and brave.

The Indians were appointed as clerks and technicians in Bahrain Petroleum Company named BAPCO which was incorporated in 1929. In 1945, there were 580 Indian workers including Punjabis in the company. The oil boom of 1970s, however, completely transformed the scenario in the Gulf as well as in Bahrain. By 1975, the number of Indian migrants reached 17,250 which further increased to 1, 30,000 in 2001. According to the Labour Market Regulatory Authority of Bahrain, there were about 3 lakh Indians residing in Bahrain in 2012. On the basis of the information collected from the Punjabis in large construction and trading companies and the Gurudwaras, it is estimated that there are between 25 and 30 thousand Punjabis in
Bahrain. They constitute around 10 per cent of the total Indians on the island. They are concentrated mainly in the cities of Manama, Janabia, Zallaq, Budaiya and Safra.

These Punjabis have left their homes in search for better economic opportunities. They, nevertheless, live a difficult life under uncomfortable weather conditions and unfriendly and indifferent neighbourhood. Even then they preferred to go to Bahrain because it is considered marginally liberal than other Gulf countries. They have to live under various social and cultural restrictions. They celebrate their religious festivals only in the areas demarcated for the purpose. They are not entitled to be the permanent resident or to be the citizens of Bahrain or any other Gulf country. They can live and earn only.

In terms of their original residence, the migrants from Doaba tract of the Punjab constitute the majority with 46.4 per cent followed by those from Malwa with 32.8 per cent. The migrants from Majha constitute a little over 20 per cent of the total. Jalandhar district has maximum share among the migrants followed by Hoshiarpur and Ludhiana districts. Nearly 50 per cent Punjabis have migrated to Bahrain as skilled workers, 15 per cent as unskilled workers, 26 per cent as professionals and only 10 per cent as businessmen. (It is important to mention here that most of the skilled workers also fall in the category of lowly paid workers) 41.6 per cent of Punjabis in Bahrain are engaged in lowly paid jobs earning less than 100 BD per month which is approximately equivalent to 13,000 INR, at current rate of exchange, 32.8 per cent have an average income (BD 101-1000), whereas, the high income group constitutes 25.6 per cent (BD 1001-2000 & above) It has been noticed that around 47.2 per cent of Punjabis save between 4,000 and 10,000 rupees per month, 43.2 per cent between 10,001 and 1,00,000 and only less than 10 per cent are those who save 100,001 & above.

The Punjabi migrants are composed of different caste and religious identities. The Jat, Brahman, Rajput, Khatri, Kamboj, Sunar, Jhiwar/ Lohar/Tarkhan/Saini, Ramgarhia, Parjapat, Ramdasia, Mazhabi Sikh and Muslim are the most visible groups among the Punjabis. It is noticed that Ramgarhia community constituting 34.4 per cent of the total community are the largest. They are followed by Ramdasia/ Mazhabi Sikhs with 19.2 per cent, Jat with 16.8 per cent and Khatri with 12.8 per cent. They belong to the districts of Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Gurdaspur, Jalandhar,
Hoshiarpur, Nawan Shehar, Kapurthala, Ludhiana, Chandigarh/ Mohali, Moga, Sangrur, Ferozepur, Bhathinda, Patiala and Ropar.

The migrations have impacted the Punjabi society in several different ways. In order to assess the impact of migrations, we undertook a survey among the migrants in Bahrain and their families living in Punjab. Our findings are based on the responses to our queries. We visited their houses and interacted with them in informal manner. Our questions, however, were based on a structured questionnaire. In addition to the pre-formulated questions, several points emerged during our conversations with the subjects. The responses, experiences and attitudes of the respondents have been recorded and verified.

Punjabi migrants, predominantly males (62.4 per cent), have left their families in Punjab who are largely dependent on the money sent by them. It, therefore, became important for us to look into migrants’ relations with their families, kinship group and the neighbourhood. There are a number of problems that the families of the migrants face. Our fieldwork revealed that the most affected subjects of the male migrations are the females, either migrants’ wives or mothers. They are dependent upon the money sent to them by the husband, son or father. In this scenario, most of the social and economic responsibilities and the pressures to run household fall on the wife of the migrant worker. She has to carry out all the chores of the household. She is responsible for the education of the children. She is supposed to look after the aged father and mother-in-law and also in many cases the younger brother and sisters of the worker. She fulfils all the social obligations like attending weddings and funerals, pays ‘neonda’ on the weddings of children of relatives and friends. They are required to perform even those tasks which were performed normally by their husbands, like operating bank accounts, securing school admissions for children and attending medical emergencies. She is also held responsible if the children do not do well in studies and in many cases is the object of scorn of the husband and the family of the in-laws. It is even more difficult for a woman living as a nucleus unit with children. She is constantly under watch of every relative and the neighbourhood for all the right and wrong reasons. To sum up, the responsibilities are more than what she can bear upon herself.
It is important to mention that generally, the wives of the migrants, particularly those living in joint families, are not allowed to handle finances. Sometimes there are confrontations between relatives and the migrant’s wives, related to financial matters. There are generally two groups of members in the family. One group thinks that the money sent by the worker should be used in the interest of the whole family, whereas, the other group including wife and children of the worker, thinks that the money should be used mainly in their interests. A majority of respondents (wives and children), complained that the money was largely being misused by migrant’s parents and other family members.

Here I would like to share with you the answer given by one of our respondent from Udesian village in Hoshiarpur. She says, “My husband has been working as a labourer in Bahrain for more than fifteen years, but our life is still miserable. The other brothers of my husband have become lazy and irresponsible because they know that without making any efforts, their families would be surviving on the money sent by him from Bahrain. I cannot raise voice against them as it would affect our relationship so, if I would get a chance, I would prefer to live separate from his family”.

The parents of the migrants when questioned on this issue asserted that the money earned by their son belongs to the entire family, and above all the head of the family has the right to spend it the way he or she likes. Such tensions increased the number of nucleus families. It has been observed that women who are educated or living in cities prefer to live as a nucleus unit. Whereas, a majority of women living in rural areas are largely dependent on other family members and not free in making decisions on their own.

Next to the women, the subjects badly affected by male migration are the children of the migrants. They remain in a state of tension in the absence of their father. They come face to face with many behavioral problems, as they become irritating, short-tempered and ill-mannered. They pay deaf ears to family’s advises and warnings, become argumentative and at times conceal things.

This narrative is incomplete without considering the difficulties of elderly parents of the migrants. They feel isolated and sad. A number of them complain of the mistreatment of other family members. They reported that their health problems
and security issues were neglected. We have found that the situation is really bad, especially, in those cases where migrant is their only son, or his wife decided to live separately due to clashes in the family.

The next important issue to understand was how the money sent from abroad and in our case from Bahrain is used? There are several studies which suggested that foreign remittances are used for various purposes like construction of houses, study of children, establishing a new business or industry or in the real estate. In case of Bahrain too all these elements of expenditure are visible. A major portion of the remittances (31.2 per cent) have been utilized for construction of new houses or renovation of the old ones. Building a large house is a high priority since it is the most visible indicator of the change in the status of the family and will stand as a permanent proof of their success. It has been noticed that some migrants preferred to construct their houses similar to what they had seen in Bahrain. Migrants’ families also display their acquired wealth in expensive tokens of economic status like classy furniture, crockery, electronic gadgets, motor-cycles, cars and synthetic textiles. They send their children to prestigious schools and wear branded and trendy clothes. In some cases it has been observed that homes have been built in response to a jest or a taunt.

Our fieldwork revealed that the raised economic status of the lower castes’ has changed their roles and social relations particularly in the urban areas of Punjab. The regular inflow of money has made the lower castes more confident. Their children are getting better facilities of education and turning towards new occupations.

In rural areas, however, the situation is not the same. A majority of respondents from several villages across the districts reported that in spite of their new economic status in the society, they feel neglected. The upper castes are not appreciative about their rise. They reported that the high castes do not welcome the shift of any lower caste in their neighbourhood and the agriculturist castes are quite unwilling if they see any non-agriculturist caste purchasing land. This argument is reflected in the following comments by one of our respondent from Jandiala Guru, a village around 15 kilometer away from Amritsar.
A respondent belong to Mazhabi Sikh community says, “The lower caste groups are living under pressure of the upper classes like Jats, Brahmans, Rajputs and others even after gaining high status in the society. My son is working in Bahrain for twenty five years. With the money sent by him, we purchased a piece of land in the area where most of Brahmans and Rajputs live. We came to know that some of them objected and argued with the property dealer about it. Finally, we have constructed our home but our relations with them are very restrained”.

Our study would remain incomplete without mentioning the success stories of the families who have elevated the image of Punjabis in Bahrain. For example, the families of Mansa Singh, the first Punjabi in Bahrain, and Paramjeet Singh Walia.

Mansa Singh was born in 1901 at a village Sarangwal, district Hoshiarpur. His father was a carpenter and had four children. After marriage, Mansa Singh went to Bombay in search of job in 1927. Where he got selected in British Cable Company working in Bahrain and therefore he was sent to Bahrain. He worked in the company from 1929 to 1953 and then left the job and started his own electrical shop in Manama in 1953. Soon, with his hard work he established his own company, called “MANSA SINGH & SONS” at Shaikh Isa Road, Manama, Bahrain. The company dealt with electrical, carpentry, air-conditioning and refrigeration works, thus, he became the first multi-service provider in the country. The first big contract he got after opening of the company was the shuttering work of the pacca bridges in the country to replace the earlier wooden fabrications. Since Mansa Singh required workers to handle the project, he called many Punjabis in Bahrain. Most of them were his relatives and friends in Hoshiarpur. The royal family was so impressed by his services and dedication, that he was rewarded with a certificate of appreciation after the completion of the project. He was very religious man. It was on request of Mansa Singh that the management of a Hindu temple in Bahrain provided space for a Sikh temple where Punjabi community could celebrate their social and religious occasions. He worked hard and established himself as a leading businessman in Bahrain. At the age of eighty, he left the responsibility of the business upon his son and came back to India as he wanted to spend rest of his life by recalling his childhood memories in Hoshiarpur. His son Swaran Singh was very ambitious like
his father and soon he proved that he had all the skills to handle the business pressures. Everything was seemed fine but suddenly, the death of Mansa Singh on December 31, 1990 shattered the family.

Similarly, Paramjeet Singh Walia of Jalandhar is one of the richest Punjabis and the biggest service provider of the air-conditioners and automobiles workshops in Bahrain. He also acquired two hotels in Jalandhar city which are being looked after by his sons. Likewise, there are some more interesting success stories of Punjabis in Bahrain which have been given in the appendix in the thesis.

In a retrospect, relations between India and the West Asian countries, particularly the Gulf are traced back to the ancient period. There are evidences of trade links between these two regions which were flourished in the medieval times. For the present study, the focus is on the period from 1930s to 2007. In the Gulf region, Bahrain became the centre of my studies for many reasons. Firstly, being a frequent visitor, I got the opportunity to know about the country. Secondly, Bahrain was famous for its finest pearls in the world and thirdly, it was the first country to discover oil and recruit Indians and Punjabis in the oil industry. It is interesting to mention that the first Punjabi migration to Bahrain started in 1929 that is the beginning of my period of study. By, 1950s almost all Gulf countries explored oil and demand for labour increased in the region. In spite of that, the number of Indians in the Gulf countries was not more than 40,000 by 1970. But the oil boom of the 1970s changed the whole scenario when a large inflow of Indian migration started. For example, the number of Indians grew 6 times by 1975 (2.5 lakh). Bahrain government also needed labour for the development projects and therefore, the number of Indian labour also increased manifolds. By 1970 there were only about 6,000 Indians in the country which increased 3 times by 1975 (17,000). Among Indians our focus was on the Punjabi community who migrated to Bahrain as unskilled, skilled workers and professional and businessmen. Most of them are the Ramgarhias and are from Doaba region followed by Malwa and Majha. These migrants face a number of social, cultural and religious restrictions in Bahrain. Their families in Punjab though, get economic advantage with the money sent by the migrant workers from Bahrain, but also get into several problems. This aspect has been dealt with in detail in our chapter on social dimensions.
Migration has affected the social life of the migrants’ families back home as well as the economic condition of the areas of their origin. Our study reveals that females, either wives or mothers of the migrants are the most affected subjects of the male migration. They face a number of physical and psychological problems in the absence of male members in the family. Not only females but the children of the migrants too live under stress due to distant relationship with their fathers. However, money sent by fathers from abroad helped them in improving their education and health standards. Our study also highlights the security and health issues of migrants’ parents who feel neglected and lonely. We have also tried to understand how remittances received from abroad has helped the lower castes in attaining upward mobility. It has been seen that migration has affected the urban and rural areas of Punjab in different ways. In urban areas, the young elite is however, has become less restricted towards lower classes. Whereas, in rural areas, the relationship between different castes is still traditional. Apart from this, migration has facilitated both the families of the migrants and the people residing in the areas of migration in many ways, for example, development of local bazaars in villages is a big contribution of migration. In urban areas too health, education and infrastructural facilities have improved with the emerging demand. Therefore, migration has affected people directly or indirectly in various ways. It has brought some positive as well as negative changes in the lives of migrants’ families.