

DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF PUNJABI MIGRATION TO MALAYSIA*

SUNAINA PATHANIA

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN HISTORY,
GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY, AMRITSAR, INDIA

ABSTRACT

The present study focus on the Punjabis residing in Malaysia. The study deals with the historical process and pattern of their migration. Survey was conducted among the Punjabis residing in Malaysia in order to get first-hand knowledge about their reasons of migration, occupational profile, their current status in the country of their adoption. It has been found that Punjabis formed 4.7 per cent in Malaysia out of the total population of Indians. Majority of Punjabis in Malaysia are from Malwa region followed by Majha and least from Doaba region of Punjab. Although almost every Punjabi migrate to these countries due to economic reasons, however some of them decided to permanently settle there. It has been found that 44 per cent in Malaysia are permanent residents while fifty six per cent are on work permit. Further, twenty six per cent Punjabis are skilled workers, twenty four per cent are professional workers, twenty eight per cent are businessmen and ten per cent are unskilled workers. Most of the first and second generation migrants are indulged in traditional business such as textiles manufacturing while third and fourth generation are indulging themselves in other professions.

Keywords: Demography, Occupations, Punjabi, Migration, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The movement of Punjabi migration to Malaysia started with the expansion of British colonialism during late nineteenth century which reflects the recruitment of Jat Sikhs and Pathans in colonial police and military services in newly acquired British colonies like Shanghai, Hong Kong, Malaya, Burma and Singapore. They were attracted to these colonies for better jobs and stability. British rule was established in Punjab in 1849 after second Anglo-Sikh war (1848–1849). New

* This research paper is based on my PhD thesis for which I conducted survey in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2015). For more information see “Indians in South East Asia with special reference to Punjabis in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand”

administration and changes in the economic structure played significant role in the migration process of Punjabis to South East Asia.

New irrigation projects bring waste lands under cultivation, introduction of commercial crops and expansion of transport, communications connected the Punjab province to world economy. This resulted the export-import of the commercial crops easier on one hand and the continuous interaction led to the easy availability of factory made goods and agricultural implements into villages which affected the assured income of village artisans on the other. Village artisans were now called only upon either for the installing or repairing of the tools. Inelastic land revenue settlements further aggravated the situation. Cultivators had to depend upon *sahukars* (moneylenders) for the payment of land revenue in lieu of their land as collateral. This led to the dominance of *sahukars* in the agrarian affairs. All these events led to more serious problem of rural indebtedness and thus the transfer of land rights to village *sahukars* gradually.

These factors forced artisans and cultivations to search for their livelihood elsewhere. Joining the army was one such opportunity. Newly acquired province was in great need of able locals to protect its vast border from outside forces. British generals had already seen the bravery of Punjabis in Anglo-Sikh wars. Soon, they were recruited in newly formed Punjab Frontier force. Punjabis further managed to get recruited in Bengal Indian Army stationed in Punjab. Having service in army proved beneficial for them due to the regular pays, vacations and many other *bhattas* (allowances). At the same time, they were also called upon to join the police services in other British colonies like Hong Kong and Shanghai. News of availability of jobs in these colonies soon reached every part of Punjab province. Due to their strong physique, Punjabis were encouraged to get recruited by their fellow villagers who were already in these services and were sent by their employers to recruit more of their kind. By last decades of nineteenth century, there was a fair number of Punjabis in Federated and Un-federated Malay police forces. There is sufficient evidence of their recruitment in Malay States Guides (formed in 1896). There were 584 Punjabi Sikhs, 102 Punjabi Muhammadans, 200 Pathans, and 3 Hindus in Malay States Guides before First World War (Report of the Malay States Guides, 1914). They were able to maintain their existence in this force till the disbandment of Malay States Guides in 1919. After the disbandment, they were absorbed in other occupations. Only a few of them came back to Punjab. In order to supplement their income, Punjabis also engaged themselves in money lending business. Their number was ten thousand in the early 1930's.

There was continuous flow of migrants to this region till the mid twentieth century after which various immigration laws were passed to restrict the entry of Indians by autonomous governments of almost every South East Asian country after their independence from British Imperial rule. Only limited entries to Indians were granted. At present, majority of Punjabis residing in Malaysia are the third or fourth generations of earlier migrants who settled there

during the colonial rule. With time, their occupational profile changed and widened according to the circumstances and opportunities available. Most Punjabis played the dominant role in the economy of these countries. They earned their status and position in almost every field.

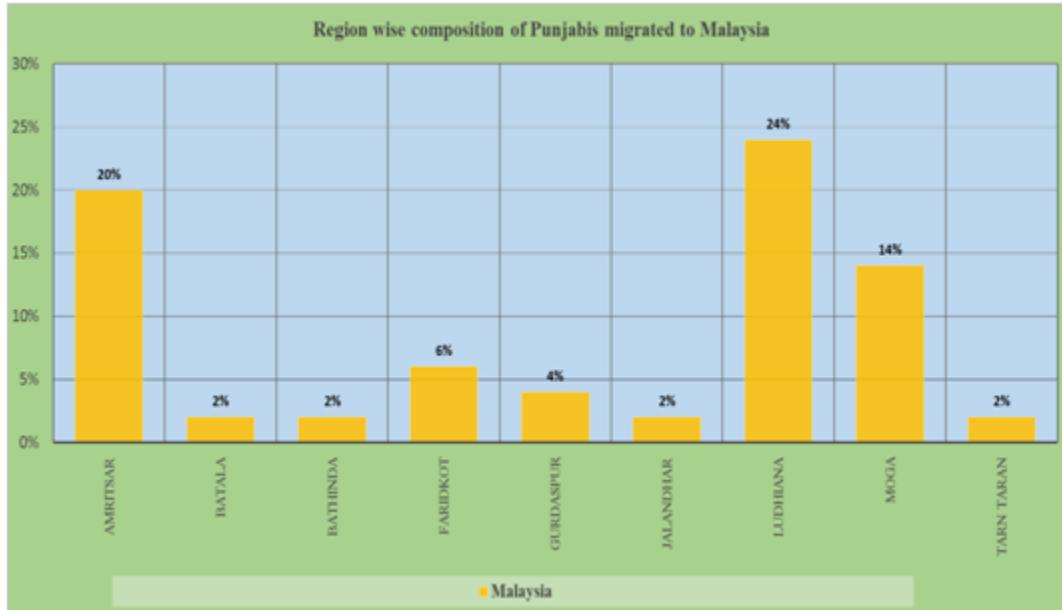
Punjabi community spread around the globe with the estimated number of more than 2.5 million out of which 2 lakh five thousand resides in South East Asia. They are embedded with large scale network. Their individual experiences and actions originating and impacting the host culture as well as bonding with their *biradari* (closed group of one's own caste and kin group) back in Punjab, henceforth my empirical research. Punjabi community in this region has not been studied with reference to the demographic and economic norms in the countries of their adoption. The present study therefore, focuses on their reasons of migration, their occupational profile, residential status, problems faced by them. This study is based on the field survey conducted in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia). A survey based on a structured questionnaire was conducted to analyse their reasons of migration, their occupation profile, their current status in the country of adoption as well as their homeland, and the future prospects. In specific terms, the study is designed to analyse...

- The process and reasons of migration and what are their attractions;
- How they came to know about the opportunities available in Malaysia;
- The regional composition of these migrants back in Punjab;
- Residential status of Punjabi migrants in Malaysia;
- How much and how have they been able to project themselves in economic terms?

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

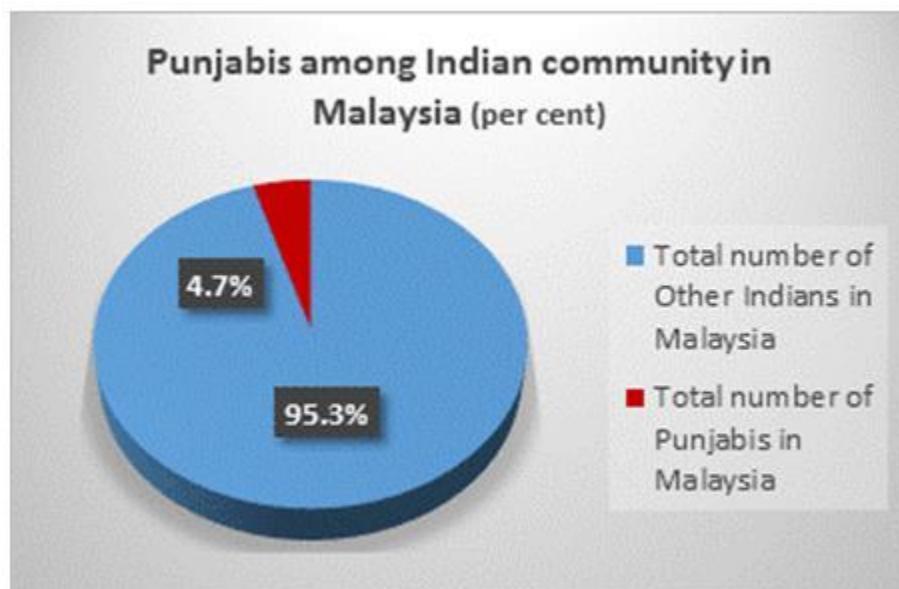
1. TOTAL NUMBER OF PUNJABIS: It is estimated that number of Punjabis is nearly one lakh out of the twenty one lakh thirty one Indians in Malaysia which is 4.7 per cent of the total. According to the survey, majority of them are born and brought up in Malaysia and are permanent residents. They are local born Punjabi Sikhs and Hindus. Punjabi Hindu Community is not more than one or two thousand. Their parents came here in search of employment and recruitment in Malay States Guides and other police services of Malay states. Those who could not find government services engaged themselves into any other jobs available. However after the independence of Malaysia, majority of them decided to settle down here rather than to return home. Today Punjabis who came from Punjab mostly for short term employment, engaged in skilled and semiskilled occupations like electrician, cooks, construction workers and waiters.

FIGURE 1(A): represents per cent of Punjabis in Malaysia



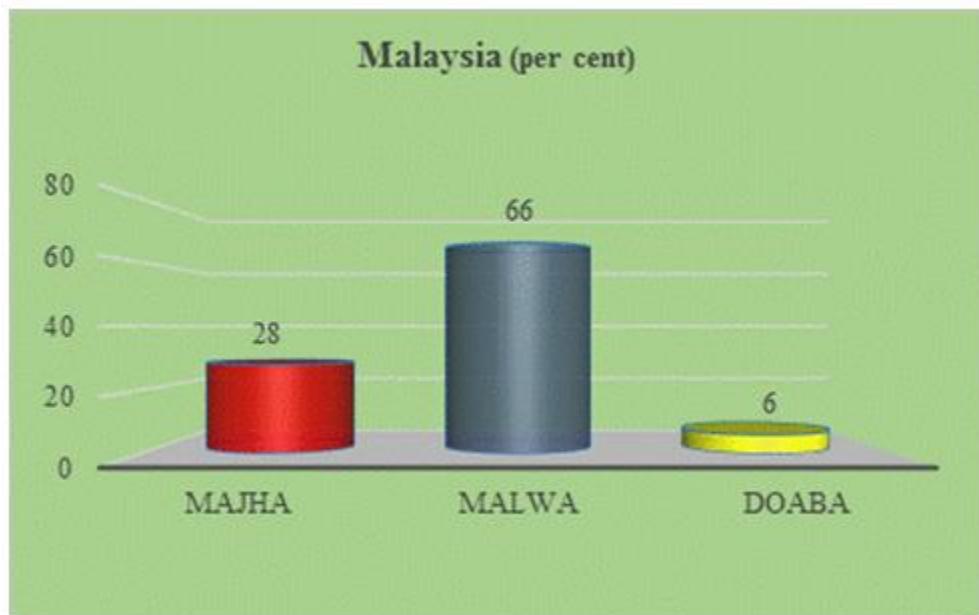
2. REGION WISE COMPOSITION OF PUNJABIS MIGRATED TO MALAYSIA

FIGURE 2(A): represents the geographical affiliation of Punjabis back in Punjab



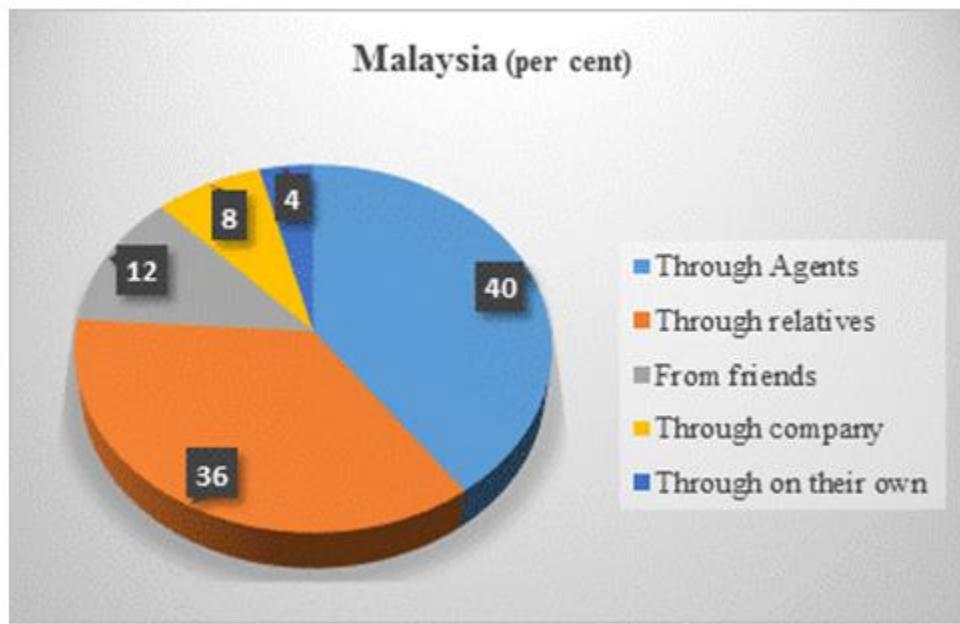
From the above figure it is evidenced that the overwhelming majority of the migrants hail from the districts of Malwa and Majha and out of these two, the migrants of Malwa comprise of 2/3rd of the total and Majha comprise of more than 1/4th of the total migrants. Further analysis show that out of Majha area, majority of them are from Amritsar and Gurdaspur while from Malwa region, majority are from Ludhiana and Moga. The remaining 6 per cent belong to the districts of Doaba.

FIGURE 2(B): shows the per cent of Punjabis in Malaysia coming from Majha, Malwa and Doaba region of Punjab



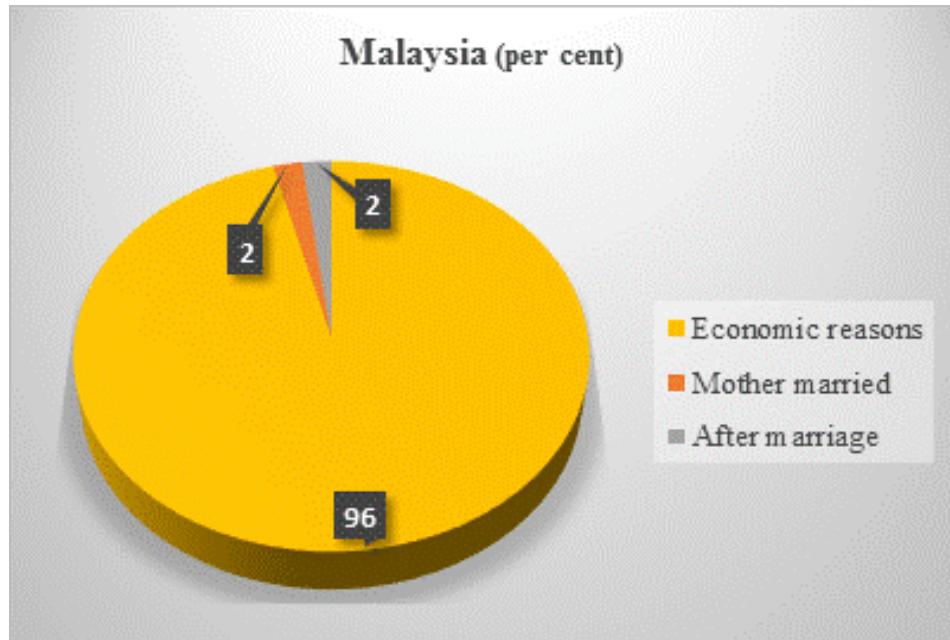
3. SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE TO MIGRATION: Profile of Punjabis in Malaysia represents two categories of migrants: those who came two or three generation ago. They had learnt about the availability of opportunities by word of mouth from their fellow villagers or relatives. They are now well settled and the citizens of Malaysia; the second categories of Punjabis are the ones who have arrived with the help of agents or on their own in search of worthwhile opportunities. At present majority of Punjabis are coming through agents. Problem arises when agents attract innocent Punjabis into the web of fake job prospects and black mail them once they arrive in Malaysia and seize their passports.

FIGURE 3(A): shows represents the per cent wise details of sources of knowledge to migrate to Malaysia



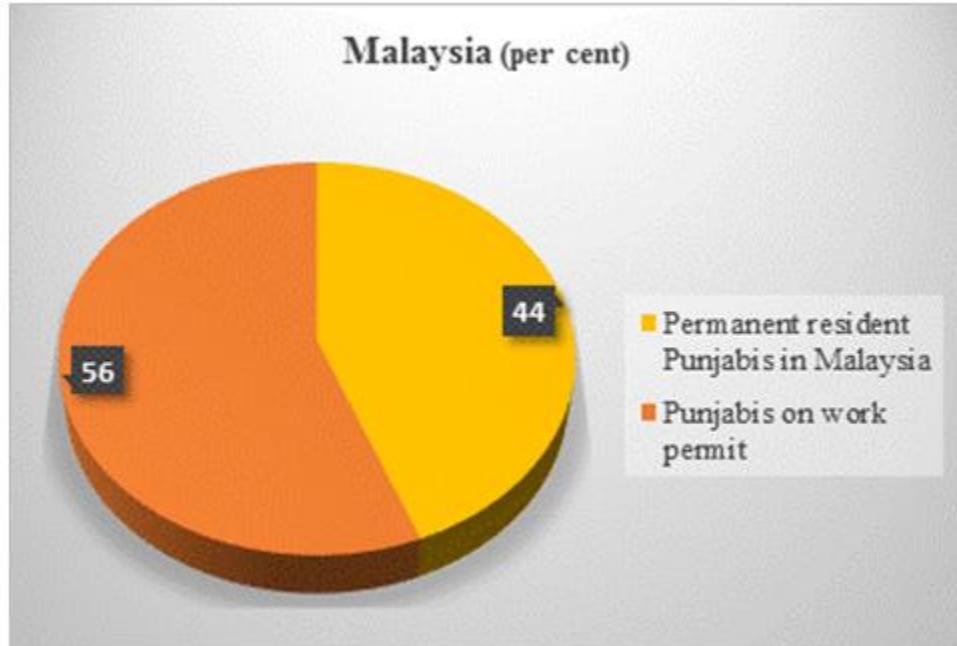
4. REASONS OF MIGRATION: Every one tends to migrate out of their habitat for certain number of reasons. They do not have adequate means of income so they migrate outside their society, in this case Malaysia. In addition to this, there are also other reasons like many migrate during 1947 to avoid partition riots; while some came as little boy or girl with their parents. Majority of Punjabis gave economic reasons to migrate while others came here after marriage.

FIGURE 4(A): shows the per cent of different reasons of migration



5. RESIDENTIAL STATUS: It is evidenced from the survey that forty four per cent are permanent residents. Most of them are local born or great grandchildren of earliest Punjabis. There are those who have come here recently to work on contract basis for two or three years and they keep on renewing their work visa repeatedly. Ishar Singh Koshar, President of Tatt Khalsa Gurudwara, Selangor mention that population of Punjabis are not increasing as most of them are migrating to other countries like Australia, New Zealand and United Kingdom for better fortunes.

FIGURE 5(A): shows the residential status of Punjabis residing in Malaysia



6. Occupational Profile of Punjabis in Malaysia: Punjabis who are currently residing in Malaysia are engaged in a variety of occupations. Earlier generations also came here to work as security guards, watchmen, police constables. Their children are now well off and work as clerks, lawyers, nurse, in banking sector and even became doctors. Most of the respondents who are here for many generations mentioned about how their grandparents came here to work as regulars in government services during British rule.

Malaysia also attracted number of Punjabis to work as cooks, waiters, construction workers, tailors, cloth sellers, in IT-sector. They are coming on work permit and stayed till their contact period. Number of Punjabis working as helpers, cooks and tailors in Brickfields (little India) area of Kuala Lumpur.

However major problem regarding the employment among Punjabis is that they are being lured by false promise of the agents who forced them to hand over their passport and work as laborers in rubber plantation estates. There are estimated of two thousand Punjabis stranded in Kuala Lumpur without any money, job and even proper food. A respondent from Jalandhar mentioned his story about how his father gave 3 lakh rupees to agent in lieu of promise of assured job to him in Malaysia but on reaching Malaysia, agent took his passport and forced him to write a

letter regarding the own will to work in plantation estate as laborer. He is living off on the mercy of a Pakistani national in Malaysia while waiting for his passport.

7. INCOME GROUPS

FIGURE 7(A): shows the classification of income groups of Punjabis in Malaysia

1 RM= 16INR (Now 16.65 INR) Malaysia in ringgit per month (Basic Salary-1000 RM Per month)
Doctor-5,000-10,000(gov. service) Private may be more
Lawyers- 10,000 (increases as most local born practices in private firms)
Teacher - 2000-3000
Nurse - 2000-3000
Construction Workers- 1300
Textile business- 10-20,000
IT workers- 3,000-4,000
Tailor- 1500
Cook-1200-1500
Waiter/helper- 1200-1300
Cloth seller- 1300-1500
Electrician- 3000
Technicians- 1500-1600
Clerk- 1200-1300
Security guard- 3000 (started with1000)

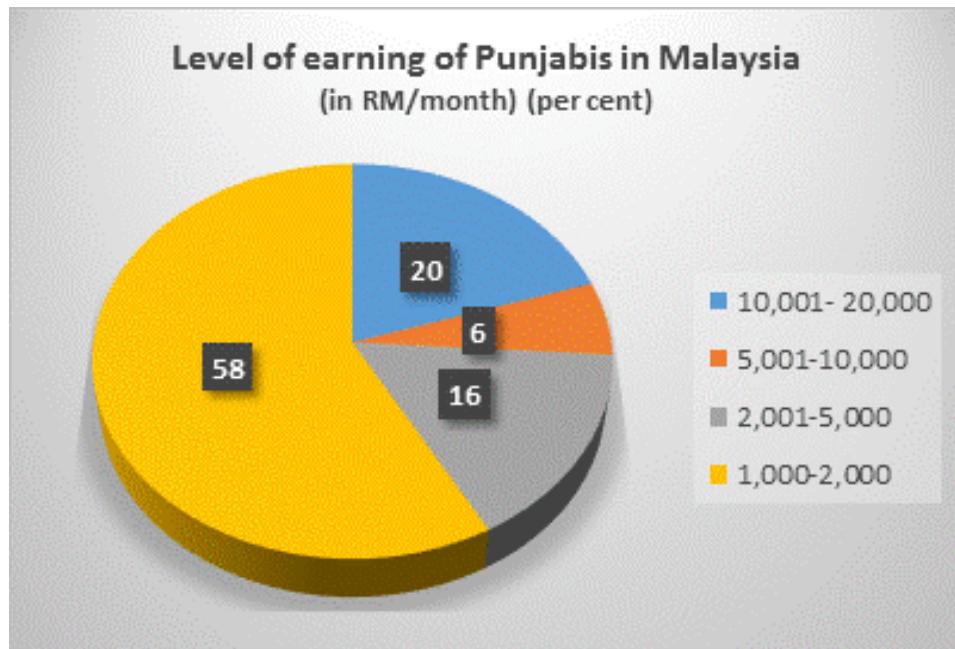
Majority of respondents complained about falling Malaysia economy. They don't see any future there. On the top of that Malaysia Government still favoring *Bhumiputras* (son of soil...Malays) which makes the life and job prospects difficult for other residents including Punjabis. Basic salary in Malaysia is 1000 RM per month which is equivalent to 16,000 rupees per month. We found Punjabis engaged in number of occupations having pay scale as low as 1200 ringgit to as high as 20,000 ringgit per month. Punjabis engaged in cooking services (cook in restaurants), tailors in shops, waiters in restaurants and construction workers earn nearly 1800-2300 RM per month. Electricians and other technicians also earn within this range. However Punjabis coming here for short period of time get housing lounge and food coupon from their employers. So they have enough money to save and send as remittances to Punjab.

Punjabis in government services like teacher get 3,000 RM per month; lawyer gets nearly 10,000 RM per month. Today, majority of lawyers are local born and engaged in private firms. They

usually are third generation of early migrants. One respondent mentioned about how their elders (grandfathers) came to Malaya during British rule and became constable in police service. At present he is a lawyer in the private firm and gave income of 10,000 RM per month. On the basis of survey, we found that 26 per cent Punjabis are skilled workers, 24 per cent are professional workers, 28 per cent are businessmen and 10 per cent are unskilled workers.

We also found Punjabis working as doctors earning nearly 10,000 RM to 20,000 RM per month. IT workers hired by Malaysian companies get 4000-5000 RM per month; however these figure are just estimate because respondents always seem to give the less figures than their actual income. Besides this, security guards earn nearly 2,000 to 3,000 RM per month after years of service staring from 1,000 RM per month. Punjabis who are in their own businesses earns more than 20,000 RM per month.

FIGURE 7(B): shows the distribution of Punjabis in various income groups in Malaysia



From the above pie chart, it is evidenced that highest per cent of Punjabis are in the lowest income group as compare to the other three groups.

CONCLUDING REMARKS....

Some conclusions based on analysis of field work and observations during survey as follows

- Punjabis are the major component of Indian community residing in South East Asian region.

- Majority of Punjabis in Malaysia are from Malwa districts of Punjab followed by Majha and least from Doaba region.
- The main reason of their migration is economic and for that purpose they are depending upon agents and relatives. However many Punjabis are being lured to the promise of fake jobs.
- More than 26 per cent Punjabis are engaged in skilled professions while 10 per cent in unskilled professions.
- It has been found that 44 per cent of Punjabis (who are already residing there) prefer to settle in Malaysia. However the remaining prefers to return after earning enough for their family back in Punjab.
- Punjabis who are permanent residents in Malaysia are much more comfortable in there. They just want to visit Punjab for short period of time. However those who are going under work permit find it hard to absorb in host country. They can be named as ‘bird migrants’.

SUGGESTIONS:

- Punjabis desires to migrate should do the background check on the agents and the job promises they offer instead of getting lure by them in the fake job webs. Government should keep a check on these agents.
- Indian embassy should also help those Punjabis who are being stranded in these countries.

REFERENCES:

- Dhaliwal, Malkiat S Lopo. (1971). Some Historical Notes (Malaysian Sikhs), Sikhs in Malaysia Series. Vol.I. West Malaysia: Lopo Ghar.
- Kaur, Amarjit. (1973). North Indians in Malaya: A Study of their economic, social and political Activities with Special Reference to Selangor, 1870-1940.Master Thesis. University of Malaya: Department of History.
- Kaur, Arunajeet. (2003).Sikhs in the policing of British Malaya and Straits Settlements (1874-1957. Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller.
- Report of the Malay States Guides for the Year 1913. (1914). Supplement to the “FMS Government Gazette” March27:1-4.Retrieved April 10,2015, from http://commonrepo.um.edu.my/29/1/FMS%20GOV%201914_8.pdf

Sandhu, Kernial. (1969). Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement, 1786-1957. London: Cambridge University Press.

Sandhu, Kernial. (1970). Some Preliminary Observations of the Origin and Characteristics of Indian Migration to Malaya (1786-1957). *Intisari*, 3(4):22-40.

Sandhu, Kernial. (1976). Sikh Immigration into Malaya during British Rule. *The Punjab Past and Present*, 10(2)20: 425-443.

Shamsul, A.B., Kaur, Arunajeet. (2011). Sikhs in South East Asia: Negotiating An Identity. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Sidhu, Manjit. (1983). Sikh Migration to Malaya (Peninsular Malaysia). *Journal of Sikh Studies*, 10(1):105-137.

Sidhu, Manjit. (1983). Sikhs in Peninsular Malaysia: Their Distribution and Occupations. *Asian Profile*, 11(3): 293-307.

Singh, Gurukh. (2003). The Global Indian: The Rise of Sikhs Abroad. New Delhi: Rupa and Co.