



## *Komagata Maru: An exploitative voyage*

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### Abstract

This article articulates the narration of the fateful journey of the *Komagata Maru* ship and encounters comprises of racial prejudice and ambiguity. The whole episode of Voyage sparked political awakening among the Indians particularly among the Sikhs which stimulated the Ghadar movement and served stimulus to war of liberation. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section reveals the immigration laws and the regulations associated to cease the passage of the Asians into British colonies. The second section mentions about the brief account of Indian passengers to manage the voyage against all odds imposed by the Canadian authorities and the harsh treatment meted to the passengers have been mentioned. The third section describes the role of press especially Indian press played an important role in painted the grievances of the passengers and fosters positive note about their journey. A general framework of the whole voyage had been depicted with exploitation, racial discrimination and the consequences gave impetus to anti-British struggle outside India a large expansion.

**Keywords:** associations, immigrants, press, passengers, government, laws and ship

### Introduction

The Indian immigrants were attracted on the pacific coast of North America as being encouraged by the Hong Kong agents of the Canadian-pacific railway because of good remuneration to improve their economic situation and then return to India to support their families. By 1906, there were more than 1500 Punjabi labourers working in and around Vancouver. By 1910, there were more than 10,000 Indian immigrants working in Lumber mills, factories and agricultural farms spread over an area of over 1200 miles from Vancouver to Calexico in South California in the U.S.A. By 1912, the number went doubled and reached 20,000 on the pacific coast. These Indian immigrants articulate their voices through Punjabi newspapers commonly among them were 'Swadesh Sewak' (1909-1911), edited by Babu Harnam Singh, Kahri Sahri and Pandit Ram Chandra Bhardwaj. Another papers was 'Sansar' (1912-1914) edited by Kartar Singh Hundal was also popular among Indians in Canada. These papers focused on immediate problems of the immigrants with patriotic zeal and become popular among Sikhs serving in the army and ex-serviceman.

### Immigration Laws

The Pacific coast settlers on both sides of the U.S- Canada border share a long history of anti-Asian racism. The main centers of the anti-Asian agitation were British Columbia and California that would have both national and transnational effects. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in the U.S and the 1885 Head tax in Canada reflected how white supremacy had become integral to the fabric of politics in both countries. Even Gandhi was too advocating for Colony's Indian population racism. A substantial Indian migration to Canada and the U.S began in the early 1990s. But with the Russo-Japanese war of 1905, an anti-Asian movement accelerated and was followed by anti-Asian riots in 1907. These riots targeted the Japanese and Chinese communities in Vancouver and in Bellingham, but angry mob drove Indian Saw mill workers out of the town. In response, the Canadian govt. moved quickly to limit immigration from Japan and from

India in response to public anti-Asian sentiment. The natives become nervous that immigrants from India and other Asian countries would not acclimatize to their way of life, would take their jobs and might be successful at business that they would control the economy. This reinforced the partiality of many British Columbians who stressed the local government to stop the "brown invasion" in what they claimed were a "white" province and the popular song calling for a "White Canada Forever" was the local slogan at that time. They raised the slogan, "Preserve Canada as a Whiteman's Land" and pressured their government to ban Indian Immigration. In 1907, a Bill was passed prohibiting the Asians the right to vote, running for public office, serving on juries or becoming accountants, lawyers and limiting their basic rights. Restrictive laws and regulation were passed to deny entry into Canada especially with the intention of discouraging immigration. The Canadian legislation against Indian immigrants, introduced in 1908, came in the form of a "Continuous Journey Regulation" requiring all new comers to travel on a direct sailing from their country of origin. Trade unionists took the lead in forming the Asiatic Exclusion League which mustered support across the Pacific North-West on both sides of the border. The Federal govt. in Ottawa in 1907 passed a bill denying running public office or serve on juries. The Canadian govt. of Prime Minister Laurier, framed its order that all Asian immigrants entering Canada are required to possess at least \$200 to pay as tax when an average Indian earned about 10cent a day. In addition they had to follow a continuous and direct route from their homeland, when the steamship companies were tactfully withheld from providing Canada-India direct passenger service. Both were designed only against Indians. This order was heralded with the purpose to exclude Indian immigrants from landing in Canada. The Canadian government was also compelling steamship enterprises to stop selling tickets to Indians. With the immigration Act of 1910, Canadian Citizenship was originally created to designate those British subjects who were domiciled in Canada. All other British subjects required permission to land. It is noteworthy to

mention that the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* were in violation of the “Continuous Regulation Act”. As a result the ship was prevented from docking by the port authorities. Racism, Labour competition and moral standards of Euro-American society became excuses to restrict their entry.

### The historic voyage

The *Komagata Maru* was a Japanese tramp-steamer operated vessel for coal transportation renamed as Guru Nanak Jahaz, launched by Gurdit Singh from Hong-Kong to Canada. Hong Kong became the point of departure but before that Gurdit Singh was arrested for selling tickets for an illegal voyage. After a lot of negotiations with authorities, he was released on bail and given permission for departure. The ship left the shores after getting approval from the Governor of Hongkong. The ship sailed from Hong Kong on April 4, 1914 and picked up more passengers at Shanghai, Moji and Yokohama. It remained anchored at Shanghai for six days. After that ship arrived at Yokohama on April 14. The passengers consisted of 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims, and 12 Hindus, with its complement of 376 passengers, all British subjects. The ship left to Canada on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1914. One aspect of the Gurdit Singh business ambition was to establish a passenger line between Calcutta to Vancouver as a commercial venture and he initiated by this move. The *Komagata Maru* ship reached Vancouver on 22<sup>nd</sup> May but it was not allowed to dock and was stranded about a kilometer away from shore. Only 22 men could prove their Canadian domiciles later, were allowed to land after completing the concerned regulations as the ship violated the immigration laws. No one was allowed to disembark and the stalemate continued. The ship faced shortage of ration and also the scarcity of water. However the Sikhs in Canada appealed to the natives and the concerned government for justice, sent telegrams to the king, the Duke of Connaught, the Viceroy and the eminent Indian leaders in India and England. The plight of the passengers was soon addressed in the Punjab by the famous associations like, Singh Sabhas, the Khalsa Diwans and the Punjab Hindu Sabha. These organisations arranged public meetings and passed resolutions and send copies of the telegram to the government of India and to the Secretary of State for India.

The Indian community in BC, sent messages of protest to the government against the treatment of their countrymen, describing it as “a lot to which even cattle would not be subjected”, and urging the government to save the immigrants from the highhandedness of the immigration department. However, the whole enterprise was linked with the Ghadar party and the Ghadar paper and the passengers were virtually kept as prisoners. The whole mess was widely publicized and soon a Shore Committee was formed with Hussain Rahim, Bhag Singh, Sohan Lal Pathak, Balwant Singh and others to address their dilemma. The immigration control chief, Mr. Malcolm R. Reid denied even to acknowledge passengers request for food and water as there was scarcity of both. The Vancouver Punjabi communities rallied around to collect funds and an appeal went out to send at least ten dollars. Although the collection was around 20,000 dollars for the welfare and defending of the passengers. In the meanwhile the Shore Committee filed a writ petition on June 25 and contacted lawyer Mr. J.E. Bird to fight the case in the court of Appeal at the BC Supreme Court. But to the utter surprise, the appeal was dismissed by the five judge committee. With the legal remedies over, the

time for negotiations with authorities again proved a failure. When the passengers refused to leave the shore, authorities along with immigration officials tried to seize the ship by force. But the angry passengers mounted an attack with coals, bricks and woods. The government decided to revenge and brought a naval vessel Rainbow with troops requisitioned with naval force, and anchored it face to face to the *Komagata Maru*. In this gloomy atmosphere, the passengers were afraid and realized the government of Canada would not support them as authorities and immigration chief was all against the passengers. After a lot of hard bargaining, a compromise was arrived at for their safe return India. The provisions required for the return journey would be supplied by the Canadian officials and the ship shall leave the harbour, the *Komagata Maru* left Vancouver on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1914. The government also mobilized HMCS Rainbow – a naval Royal vessel with troops to accomplish it for a short distance. The ship stranded on the seashore for two months in confinement, confrontation and confusion.

### Return to India

The disappointed passengers left her anchorage and sailed for Asia but again trouble was waiting for them. The ship was still at sea when Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August, 1914 which led to the First World War. On 20<sup>th</sup> of August, 1914, Ordinance No. III of 1914 was notified for the exercise of more effective control of over foreigner’s entry in British India. On reaching Yokohama, Gurdit Singh received a letter from the Government of Hong Kong notifying him that it was considered inadvisable that any of the passengers should be landed there and threatening to enforce a local vagrancy ordinance against any who might attempt to do so. The ship moved to Kobe and disembarked some fifteen passengers there and picked up a few and then proceeded to India. However things was different in India as the Government of Bengal in consultation with Government of India and also with the active support of Government of Punjab made well planned arrangements to receive the passengers of the *Komagata Maru*. The ship entered Bay of Bengal and stopped at Kalpi in Calcutta on Sept. 27, 1914. Then the passengers were taken to a place called Budge Budge, a Calcutta suburb some 17 miles away from Calcutta. The police searched the Ship for objectionable material and the suspected connections with the Ghadarties as the excuse of the Begal authorities. The passengers were ordered to board a train which was to take them to the Punjab. The passengers refused to obey authorities. Only 59 passengers agreed to board the train, while the rest joined the procession following Gurdit Singh who came down with the Guru Granth Sahib and walked towards Calcutta. They were forced to retreat back to Budge Budge. A force of 27 constables attempted to induce the Sikhs to enter the train. A hand to hand fight took place and later it took ugly violent. As a result, on the Government side, four were killed and 19 on the side of the passengers, 11 injured on the government side and 21 on the other side. About 168 were sent to jail in Calcutta and 24 in Jail outside Calcutta while 59 left for the Punjab. Gurdit Singh was escaped by the passengers and nearly twenty eight of them remained underground. The Government of India appointed a committee to enquire into the Budge Budge incident through a circular issued on 15 October, 1914. The report was formally released on 16<sup>th</sup> January, 1915. The committee declared the police not guilty and put the whole blame on the passengers of *Komagata*

*Maru*. The report tries to emphasize the politically motivated nature of the voyage. Viceroy of India regretted the incident but blamed the organizers of Voyage. As the arrival of the *Komagata Maru* in Vancouver coincided with the Ghadar movement this must have prompted the authorities to examine links between the passengers of the ship and the Ghadarities. However the British Government curbed all the voices under newly promulgated anti-sedition laws.

### Role of press

The plight of the *Komagata Maru* passengers at Calcutta was widely discussed topic in the Indian press as well as in Canada also. There was wide variance of opinion in press concerning the voyage. *The Tribune*, Lahore claimed that the voyage was not well organised. Gurdit Singh could not get assistance from the mother country and suffered lack of funds. *The Indian Planter's Gazette* and *The Rangoon Times* criticized the Bengal and the Punjab government in regard to the *Komagata Maru* passengers. These papers reported the orderly mass meeting at Amritsar and Calcutta and testify unswerving loyalty of the Sikh nation to the King Emperor. *The Gadar* weekly tapped its potential in several Ways, a poem invited readers to imagine troubled passengers as. "A Plea of Helpless Indians on the *Komagata Maru* ship". The Punjabi press condemned the inactivity of the Punjab government. However the Anglo- Indian press had divergent opinion regarding the voyage and took the Canadian side. They beckoned the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* ship as "a set of anarchists". The newspapers picked up the story, reported by *The Province*, headlined as, "Boat loads of Hindus on way to Vancouver". *The British Columbia press* captioned the titled as "*Hindus Invasion of Canada*". Another paper, *The Morning Citizen*, an Ottawa newspaper addressed the whole episode was "*the limit of comic-opera government*". *The Times of London* and other contemporary British paper's asserted that there was no discrimination in Canadian law against British Indians only betrayed their ignorance and also commented that "*Asia is knocking and knocking persistently at the doors of western America*". *The Vancouver Sun*, also reported the bad image of the Indians. The Press depicted them not as poor immigrants, which they were, but as forerunners of '*hordes of Asiatics*' who would ultimately overrun the country if they were allowed to enter. The Pro-Punjabi Press like the *Khalsa Samachar*, *Khalsa Sewak* and *Khalsa Advocate* put on the defensive note of the *Komagata Maru* ship. The findings of the *Komagata Maru* report divided public reaction, the English language newspapers in India sided with the government, while the Punjabi press in Punjab blamed the authorities for violent showdown.

### Aftermath/consequences

Various chroniclers of the Ghadar movement denote to the *Komagata Maru* as an instrumental factor to rebel's cause. First, the treatment meted out to passengers while the ship was anchored at Vancouver Bay set the tone of emotions at a considerable high pitch and confirmed in many overseas Punjabi minds the virtual impossibility of gaining justice through negotiation and appeals.

Second, the publicity associated with the return passage of the *Komagata Maru* ensured that Far eastern Punjabis were also ready to join the Ghadar movement and thus contributed to the Singapore mutiny. The plight of the *Komagata Maru* passengers at Calcutta was widely discussed topic for Punjabi

press such as '*Khalsa Samachar*' and '*Khalsa advocate*' were put on defensive. The older associations lost their grounds with in the Sikh community like "*The Chief Khalsa Diwan*" and new associations sprang up and sought allies among the India's emerging nationalist leadership of the Congress party. Also the voyage and tragedy attracted attention of the writers, scholars, and historians who attempted to narrate its details, dimensions and perspectives. For this intention the Ghadar poetry have been analyzed in this exercise. It has been noted that the compiled Ghadar poetry contains 15 poems on the affair of the *Komagata Maru* including *Baints*, *Chhands* and *Bentis*. The span of this literature form begins from 1914-1946. The Sikh populace in Canada was so upset by the attitude of the Government that they went back to India to help overthrow the British rule. They realized that there situation in Canada would not improve until they had their independence in India. There was complete migration to United States in search of better social and economic conditions. By 1918, the Sikh population in British Columbia had dropped to a low the critics describe of about 700 people. A memorial was erected in Budge Budge in 1951 to commemorate the names of the massacred in the shooting and depiction of the incidents related to the *Komagata Maru* history. This memorial is locally known as the Punjabi Monument and was inaugurated by Pandit Nehru. Several plays and stories were depicted and the saga of *Komagata Maru* incident was first produced at the Vancouver playhouse in Jan. 1976, reconstructing a historical event to examine the politics behind the event. The Critics describe the play as Quasi-documentary that dissects the politics of racism. The incident has been discussed and revived from time to time by the Sikh community at large. The diaspora community of Sikhs in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and several cities across Canada held seminars and conferences in 1989 to commemorate the *Komagata Maru* episode with research and pinion the truthfulness of this affair.

On 3 August, 2008 Prime Minister Stephen Harper appeared at the 13<sup>th</sup> annual "*Ghadri Babeyan Da Mela*" in Surrey, B.C., to issue an apology for *Komagata Maru* incident. In 2012, the Simon Fraser university Library in Canada launched a website "*Komagata Maru: Continuing the Journey*" funded by the department of Citizenship and immigration of Canada. The Government of India formed a panel to observe the *Komagata Maru*'s centenary. In India, the ministry of culture started yearlong centenary commemoration of *Komagata Maru* by honouring granddaughters of Baba Gurdit Singh, the hero of the *Komagata Maru*. A set of commemorative coin of denominations of Rs. 100 and Rs. 5 was released to mark occasion on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2014.

### Conclusion

To sum up, the whole affair of the *Komagata Maru* challenged not only the nature of Canada's exclusionary immigration laws contesting this policy from the start in the courts, through delegations in Ottawa, London, and Delhi and by seeking publicity in Canada and abroad, but also the politics of their treatment in Canada. Not allowed to dock, the ship remained anchored in the harbour for two months, a floating prison without adequate water, food, or medical services. Despite legal appeals in court, Canadian federal laws designed to prevent South Asian immigrants from entering Canada despite the fact they, like Canadians, were British subjects were enforced. The whole *Komagata Maru*

affair traced the causes of the exploitation of the passenger's and exposed the deep-rooted anti-Asian/Indian feelings in Canada. The humiliation inflicted upon the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* in Canada and later in India, became a footnote to the larger story of anti-colonial confrontation in direct rule in India that eventually climaxed in India's own foundational narrative of sovereign independence.

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