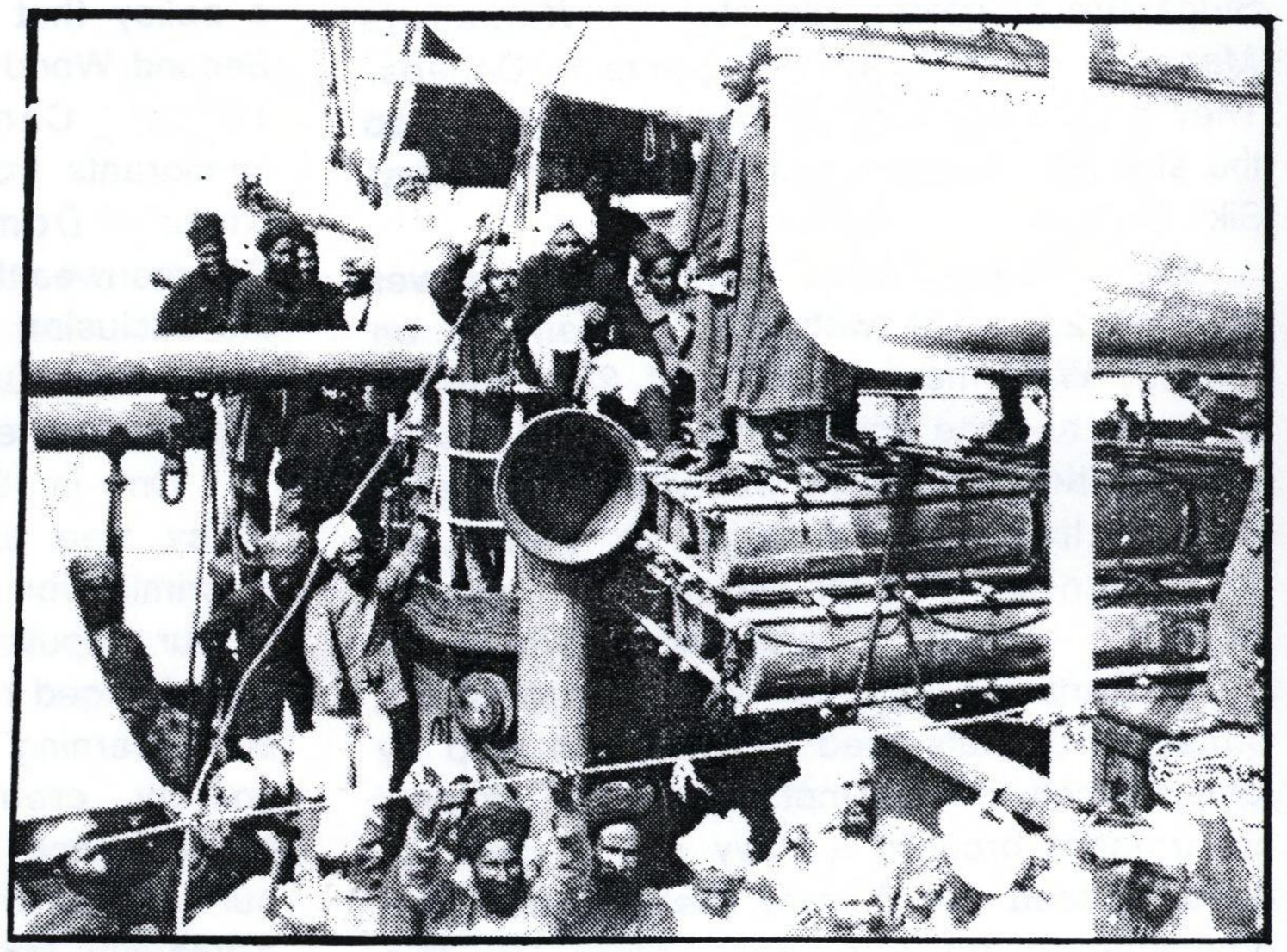
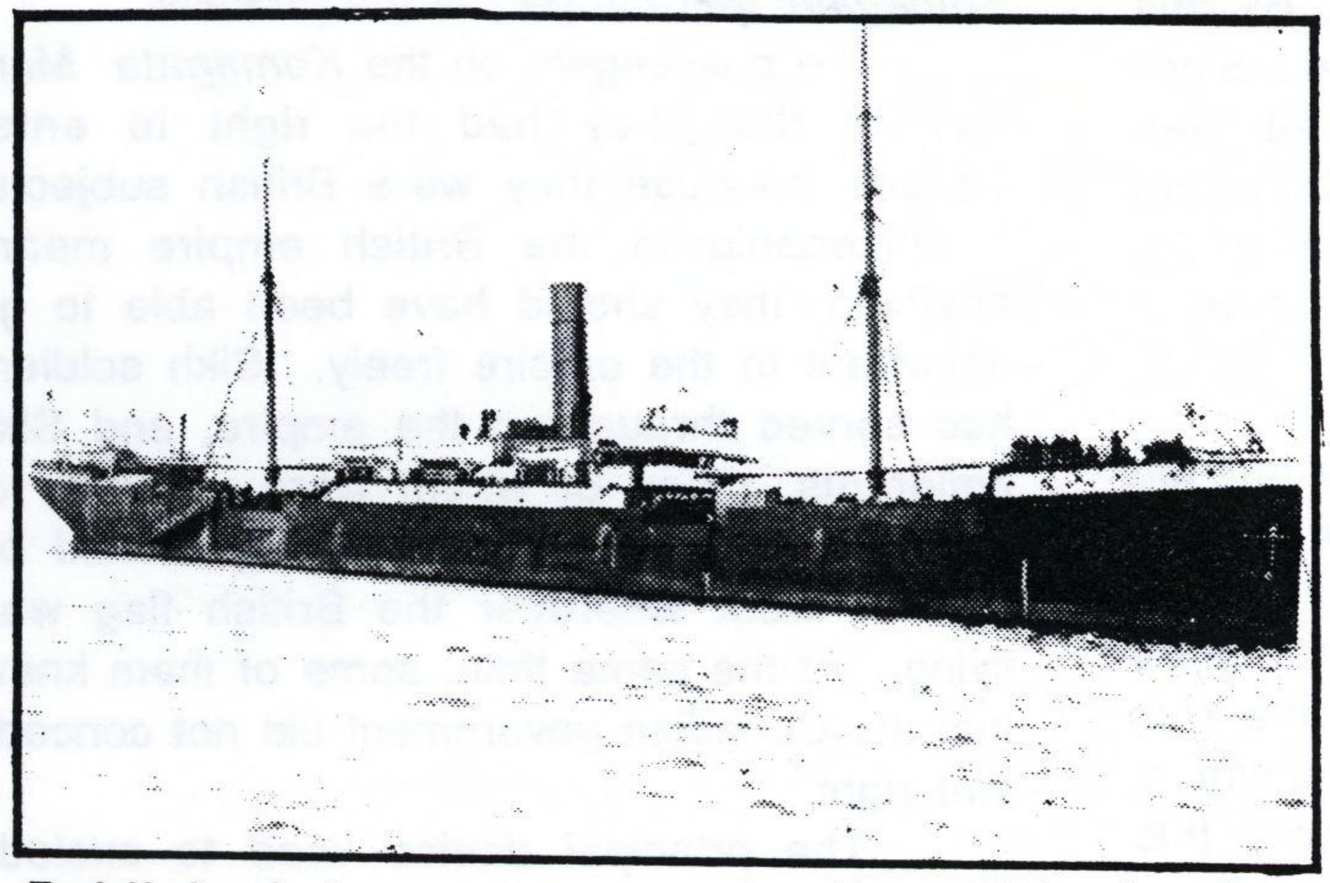
THE KOMAGATA MARU INCIDENT



Baba Gurdit Singh with binoculars, the leader of the 376 passengers on the *Komagata Maru* (also named *Guru Nanak Jahaz*).



Full view of the 2,900 ton steamer *Komagata Maru* at anchor in the Burrard Inlet near Pier A (west of Canada Place) Vancouver, from 23 May-23 July 1914.

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The *Komagata Maru* Incident of 1914 belongs to a racist and narrow minded past that Canadians have not left far behind. In the spring of 1914, a committee of Sikhs, led by Baba Gurdit Singh, a wealthy Sikh from Singapore chartered the steamer *Komagata Maru* to carry Indian immigrants to Canada. They had a sense of mission, and they called the steamer *Guru Nanak Jahaz* after the first Sikh Guru.

The *Komagata Maru* arrived in Vancouver on May 23, 1914 with 376 passengers on board. With the exception of 20 returning residents and the ships doctor and his family, none of the passengers was allowed to land. Instead, they were detained in Vancouver harbour on the ship for two months until July 23, 1914. When the passengers would not leave Canadian waters without provisions, Canadian officials tried to seize the ship by force. When that attempt failed, the Canadian government brought a navy cruiser with its guns exposed into Burrard Inlet and parked it broadside to the *Komagata Maru*.. By this atmosphere, unintimidated Baba Gurdit Singh and his fellow passengers negotiated their departure. Only when the Canadian government agreed to provision their return voyage did they consent to leave without ever putting a foot ashore in Canada.

Vancouver's newspapers carried the story of this ship and its passengers on their front pages throughout the summer. Crowds lined the waterfront when the *Komagata Maru* arrived and they returned to gaze at the ship and its passengers whenever the promise of drama or action mounted. However, this curiousity and sense of excitement, did not awaken much sympathy among Vancouverites for the ordeal of the passengers or their desire to come to Canada.

For most of this century, Canada has possessed an exclusionist immigration policy based on race and nationality. The policy had its origins in the 1880s when the Canadian government first imposed a head tax on Chinese immigrants. Over the next forty years, the government erected a variety of barriers to keep Canada a white man's country, and by the 1920s it had articulated a policy that remained intact until after the Second World War. From the 1920's until the 1950s, Canada gave preference to immigrants from Britain, France, Ireland, the white Dominions of the British Commonwealth, and the United States and to the exclusion of all others except those from Continental Europe (or the wives and children of Canadian residents).

Only in 1962 did Canada announce a new policy free of racial, religious or national discrimination. Since then, the composition of our population, especially in major cities, has changed remarkably, and Canadians have been learning to appreciate the very different society created as a result. As a consequence, we are beginning to reassess our past; giving attention to the story of the *Komagata Maru* is part of the process.

The passengers on the *Komagata Maru* thought that they had the right to enter Canada because they were British subjects. If citizenship in the British empire meant anything, they should have been able to go anywhere in the empire freely. Sikh soldiers had served throughout the empire, and Sikh emigrants, many of whom were veterans of the Indian army, thought that they should be able to work wherever the British flag was flying. At the same time, some of them knew that the Canadian government did not concede that right.

The principal device used to exclude immigrants from India was the Continuous Journey Provision of the immigration acts of 1908 and 1910. Immigration officers had the authority to refuse entry to anyone who did not come by continuous journey from his or her country of origin. Under pressure from the Canadian government, shipping companies would not sell through tickets from India to

Canada, so it was impossible for anyone to come from India and meet the requirements of the Canadian law.

Ninety percent of the passengers on *the Komagata Maru* were Sîkhs. The rest were Hindus and Muslims, but they all came from Punjab, the homeland of the Sikhs. Except for two women and four children, the passengers were men mostly between the ages of eighteen and thirty. The main attraction for them to leave their homeland was to find work in Canada at wages that were ten or fifteen time as high as anything that they could earn at home .

Some of the passengers came from Hong ng, Singapore, Shanghai or Manila, ports in which they had been waiting for many months for an opportunity to reach North America. Others came directly from their villages in Punjab. As soon as they heard that Baba Gurdit Singh was organizing a voyage to Canada, these villagers travelled by rail to Calcutta and took regularly scheduled passages to catch the *Komagata Maru* at Hong Kong, Shanghai, Moji, or Yokohama, ports where the *Komagata Maru* stopped before crossing the Pacific.

None of the passengers met the continuous passage requirement because the voyage of the *Komagata Maru* began in Hong Kong. Baba Gurdit Singh had tried to get a ship out of Calcutta, but agents of the Indian government had prevented it. Baba Gurdit Singh and the organizing committee understood the legal situation, but they believed that they had a strong case and were confident they could succeed if they challenged the Canadian law in court. Most of the other passengers simply believed that they had a right to land in Canada.

The ship left Hong Kong on April 4, and, er stopping at Shanghai, Moji, and Yokohama, reached Willams Head, near Victoria on May 22. The next morning, when the *Komagata Maru* dropped anchor in Burrard Inlet, the passengers were dressed and prepared to go ashore, but that was not their fate. The immigration officials learned that the voyage was underfunded, and immediately began to delay proceedings in the expectation that the ship could be forced to leave before anyone made a decision about the passengers right to land. An installment of $15,000 was due on the charter and the passengers did not have enough food or money on board to sustain a long waiting game.

While the officials played out this strategy, the passengers went without food and water on several occassions for more than twenty-four hours. At the same time, the immigration officals held the passengers incommunicato, refusing to allow anyone to come on board to talk to them, not even the lawyer hired on their behalf. Still, the ship remained in the harbour, because the Punjabi residents of Vancouver raised money to pay for the charter and to send food out to the ship.

Between five and six thousand Punjabis had entered Canada before 1908. Many had crossed the border to find work in Washington, Oregon and California, and others had returned to India after working for several years in Canada. But in 1914, more than two thousand remained in British Columbia. At least half of them were living in Vancouver where they had built a Sikh gurdwara under the management of the Khalsa Diwan Society. The executive of the Khalsa Diwan Society took the lead in organizing a Shore Committee to raise money on behalf of the passengers. Within days of the arrival of the *Komagata Maru*, the Shore Committee raised $5,000 in cash among the Sikhs of Vancouver. Subsequently, they raised another $10,000 or $20,000 to pay the Japanese ship owners and keep the ship in the harbour. Finally, after the passengers had been confined on board for a month, the Shore Committee and the immigration department agreed to terms that allowed a test case to go before the courts.

Five judges of the British Columbia Court of Appeal heard the arguements at the end of June and, in the first week of July, the Court rendered its verdict against the passengers. At this point, the men on the ship said they were willing to give up the battle and go. However, another three weeks elapsed before they actually departed. The government insisted that the charterers of the ship were responsible for provisions; but the passengers would not leave without supplies for the return trip. Officials interpreted this refusal as a delaying tactic and attempted to gain control of the ship with a police boarding party on the *Sea Lion*, but the passengers drove them off with a barrage of coal and fire bricks. The government then brought in the cruiser *HMCS Rainbow* and aimed its guns at the *Komagata Maru*, but it was only when officials promised to put provisions on board that the passengers agreed to weigh anchor.

In the early morning of July 23, the *Komagata Maru* sailed out of Vancouver harbour with 352 passengers still on board. A large number of spectators stood along the shore above the C.P.R. tracks looking down over Coal Harbour to see the *Komagata Maru* begin to lift her anchor at 5:10 a.m. - a few minutes before sunrise. There was a cold nip in the air as they watched the *Komagata Maru* slide away, with the *HMCS Rainbow* as her shadow, until the two vessels disappeared around Brockton Point. For the passengers and for their friends on shore it was a bitter and deeply disappointing moment.

A voyage that began on April 4, did not end until September 29 when the *Komagata Maru* docked at Budge Budge, twenty miles downstream from Calcutta. The pasengers had been refused permission to land by the governments of Hong Kong and Singapore and were forced to go all the way back to India, although many might have chosen to look for work elsewhere. By this time the passengers were fully aware of the political implications of their voyage and they expected to stir up the feelings of their countrymen with their demonstration of the injustice and inequality that existed in the empire. Unfortunately, the British govenment of India saw the men on the *Komagata Maru* as dangerous political agitators. When the ship docked at Budge Budge, the police tried to arrest Baba Gurdit Singh and the twenty or so other men that they saw as leaders. In the process, shots were fired and nineteen of the passengers were killed. Some escaped, but the remainder were arrested and imprisoned or sent to their villages and kept under village arrest for the duration of the First World War. Six months of confinement on board the *Komagatra Maru* ended for most of these passengers in another form of confinement.

In India, the *Komagata Maru* represents the Indian people's struggle for independence from the British Empire. In Canada, it is a reminder of a policy of exclusion that, for Sikhs and other immigrants from India, lasted more than half a century. The Sikh community has survived and achieved in Canada despite the prejudice and hostility that the *Komagata Maru* story typifies and the community has emerged in the 1980s with a positive and confident outlook. In a more tolerant Canada, the *Komagata Maru* remains a powerful symbol for Sikhs and one that other Canadians should understand, because it is a part of our history.

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