

Indians' dream of migration to Canada and the tragic massacre of the "Komagata Maru ship"

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Abstract: *Humanity has been on the move ever since its inception. The desire for a better life has long been the main driving force behind relocation. It has been fascinating to study history of Indian migration to Canada. The primary reason for Indians' migration abroad was their poor economic condition. The desire for a better life has long been the main driving force behind relocation. The journey to unknown, faraway lands has abounded with uncertainties, fear, and dilemma. In the context of the history of Indian migration to Canada, people will never forget the tragedy of the "Komagata Maru" ship, which resulted in a deadly confrontation with law enforcement officers and soldiers near Kolkata on the ship's return to India after an unsuccessful and ultimately physical standoff with authorities, police, and the military at the Port of Vancouver.*

Key Words: *Komagata Maru, ship, Canada, Indians, Migration, Kolkata, Vancouver.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The term "diaspora" refers to the movement of people from their homeland to developed nations in search of a better life and future. In general, "diaspora" connotes "forced exile," the negative aspect of migration. The two most prevalent instances of forced exile are "war" and "partition." "Mass Migration" refers to the movement of a sizable population from one region to another. Migration can be attributed to a number of factors, including social, economic, political, religious, food, trade, slavery, a brighter future, etc. (Kadri, 2020). The study of Indian migration history to Canada has been fascinating. The primary reason for Indian migration abroad was their poor economic condition. It is widely believed that the Sikh community was the first to immigrate to Canada from the Indian subcontinent. The Canadian government deliberately created a 'continuous journey clause' to prevent Indian immigrants in Canada. There were minor differences in the policy of prohibiting the entry of Indians in America and Canada, though America was a free country and Canada was a British colony. Already many Sikhs, in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Manila were finding their way to North America. Many Indians had left the Punjab hoping to get into America via the way of the Philippines. But unfortunately, in August, American immigration officials at San Francisco had closed this way of entrance; and even though they had prevented twenty-two Indians who had come from what was an American territorial possession. In Manila and other ports in the Far East, hundreds/thousands of Sikhs waited for the judgment of a California District Court; the judgment came down on 5 December, and it upheld the immigration officers. That made the news from Canada doubly important. Daniel Keefe, former chief of the American Immigration services, had a conversation with two Sikhs whom he met at a crossing during his stay in a Hong Kong hotel on 27 December. One of them Sikh exhibited him a letter made on behalf of six hundred Sikhs in Hong Kong for forwarding to their friends in America. In a letter, they were asking help to get in America- For God's sake, help us to enter in the U.S or Canada; the new Canadian law will come into effect on 15 March 1914, after which time few Hindus will be allowed to enter into Canada. Entering Manila in the last six months has been more difficult than ever. Australia and New Zealand have excluded us. For God's sake, come to help us so we will be able to enter into the U.S or Canada. The only steamship companies operating between the Far East and British Columbia, the Canadian Pacific, the Blue Funnel Line, and the Osaka Shosen Kaisha—the Japanese line that owned the Panama Maru- would not give tickets to the Sikhs. They knew that if they sell tickets to the Sikhs, they would have trouble with Canadian authorities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Migration has been a common phenomenon in every creature on the planet, and humans have been no exception from this. There are various purposes for migration, such as socio-economic, religious, slavery, poverty, climate change,

human trafficking, forced exile, voluntary migration, war refugees, etc. Humans have been migrating for food and essential needs of life. With time the needs of humans have been changed. History shows that people migrate in almost every case to better their circumstances in life. The desire for a better life has been the primary motivation for migration. The journey to unknown, faraway lands has abounded with uncertainties, fear, and dilemma; as said by Ellsworth Huntington, "history in its broadest aspect is a record of man's migrations from one environment to another" (Izuka, 2021).

The Indian diaspora in Canada is a phenomenon of the 20th century. Although it began in the early 1900s when both India and Canada were colonies of the British Empire. It began with the creation of the Canadian Pacific Railroad and the employment of Sikhs in the timber industry to work in the fields. It has been ups and downs in the number of Indian migrants entering Canada. Uma Parameswaran writes from her personal experience of migration that she has lived in Winnipeg for over forty five years, and she has seen the Indian community grow from fifty individuals to fifteen thousand. The ratio is roughly the same across Canada. There are almost one million Indo-Canadians, and this number is increasing by 20,000 per year. Each year in Canada, about a tenth of all immigrants come from the Indian subcontinent. There were no Indo-Canadian writers who had been published in 1960. Very few books have recorded the life of the first wave of immigrants to Canada. Maluka (1978) was the first Indo-Canadian English novel written by S.S. Dharmi. There are another two books that state the first wave are Dharma Rasa (1999) by Kuldip Gill and a remarkable photo collection titled Zindagee that came out a few years ago, which includes the brief life stories of Indo-Canadian women born between 1900-1950. In the context of the humiliation faced by Sikh immigrants in British Columbia, Sadhu Binning's examinations in a poem with parallel Punjabi-English original books act as a significant reminder of another difficult, often unspoken, history so as to evoke precisely that ethical relationship to one's past:

"we forget the strawberry flats we picked stooping and crawling on our knees we forget
the crowded windowless trucks in which like chickens we were taken there . . .

we forget the stares that burned through our skins

the shattered moments that came with the shattered windows we forget
the pain of not speaking Punjabi with our children . . . multiplying one with
twenty-five our pockets feel heavier changing our entire selves and by the time
we get off the plane

we are members of another class."

(cited. Mishra. 2007. p.17)

Reflection of the past demands that we continually review our trauma as part of our moral relationship with migratory ghosts. The poem describes the Punjabi lifestyle in the past and when they get off the plane they become the members of another class.

3. THE TRAGIC STORY OF THE "KOMAGATA MARU SHIP:

The Komagata Maru voyage was a personal enterprise and a business transaction. There was no political reason behind it. Gurdit Singh was a businessman and moneylender in Singapore and Malaya states. When Gurdit Singh was living in Singapore in 1913, He went to Hong Kong with a suit against a partner, Mool Singh, who, he said, had run off with \$1,200. He lived at a gurdwara in Hong Kong and ran his business from an office there. During his stay at gurudwara, he became aware of the condition of his countrymen that there were many helpless, illiterate people looking for a ship to Canada, who had been up to two years in the Far East. They were unemployed or taking what work they could; they mortgaged their family property; people could not go home until they had an opportunity to earn enough money. Earlier, Behari Lal Verma tried and failed to organize a trip to Canada. The Canadian government had deported Behari Lal Verma, and he wanted to hire a ship in Hong Kong to begin a voyage to Canada, but unfortunately not succeed.

Gurdit Singh and his associates had seen several other ships before taking on leased the Komagata Maru. After seeing many ships, Gurdit Singh met A. Bune, a German shipping agent, offered Gurdit Singh a small steamer which was being used to carry coal. This steamship Komagata Maru was owned by the 'Shinyei Kisen Goshi Kaisya' of Japan. In 1890, it was built as a cargo ship and had previously been known as both 'SS Stubbenhuk' and 'SS Sicilia.' After some time, it was renamed 'Heian Maru.' In 1913, the ship had acquired by the Shinyei Kisen Goshi Kaisha Company. The company had four-five individual owners and, they possessed one other ship; it had renamed the Komagata Maru. Komagata Maru was about 100 meters long, 13 meters across, and was driven by a 265-horsepower steam engine. There

were a few cabins in the housing on its upper deck, and there was a deck below which was as dirty as one might expect from its cargo. The conditions were six months at \$11,000 Hong Kong per month: the first month to be paid upon signing; Another within a week; Third and fourth within two weeks; And within two months of commencement of the remaining charter. The owners will provide the captain and crew, but the ship will not have wireless telegraphy facilities. On 25 March, Gurdit Singh captured the Komagata Maru, and at his own expense, the lower deck was cleaned, fixed up with toilets, and furnished with 533 wooden benches, something like third-class railway seats without backs. There were no other installations except a barrelshaped, portable coal stove and benches; the distance between benches was every one and a half meters. Gurdit Singh hired a Punjabi doctor and a Granthi or priest, cleaned the ship with a health officer, and announced that Komagata Maru would leave at 10.00 am, Saturday, March 28. On Monday, 30 March, the governor of Hong Kong, F.W.May, cabled the Canadian government that 150 Indian Sikhs didn't have tickets on through India; and they have chartered steamer from here to British Columbia. He suggested that local emigration clauses do not apply to other than Chinese emigration. Please telegraph, in Canada, whether they will be permitted to land in these circumstances. But, he could not get any response from the Canadian government. Then, Gurdit Singh consulted a British firm of top lawyers in Hong Kong to see if he could land his passengers from Hong Kong to Vancouver without restrictions. Thus, after being equipped with the legal opinions of lawyers and receiving a positive response to his cable, Gurdit Singh embarked on his venture to travel to Vancouver.

After knowing he could leave, Gurdit Singh went straight to the gurudwara and informed his people to get started. He arranged prayer meetings and named the ship 'Guru Nanak Jahaj.' And they took with them their sacred book, 'Granth Sahib.' In his letter to Gurdit Singh's lawyers, Severn clearly stated that permission to leave Hong Kong does not mean permission to land in Canada. Gurdit Singh knew that, but to make sure that his passengers did, the Hong Kong police aboard the steamer, with a printed paper, the most recent notifications of Canadian immigration regulations they could find, but it did not impress anyone. After all, Gurdit Singh had just been to meet the Colonial Secretary and had been said that he could leave.

On 4 April 1914, the Komagata Maru sailed from Hong Kong. There were a total of 376 passengers:24 Muslims,12 Hindus, and 340 Sikhs; the Muslims were from Shahpur in western Punjab, but most of the passengers came from the districts of Amritsar, Patiala, Ferozepore, Ludhiana, Jalandhar, and Lahore, the heart of the Sikh homeland. The highest number of passengers came from Amritsar, the district of Gurdit Singh; due to irrigation and poor drainage, people had been migrating from their land for the last ten years. On the steamer, all except fifteen passengers were seated on the lower deck and shared a common kitchen; these were as following: Gurdit Singh and his young son had a cabin. The young medical officer, Dr. Raghunath Singh, was traveling with his wife and a child; Another passenger, Sundar Singh, his wife, and his son and daughter also had a cabin. Daljit Singh, Bir Singh, Harnam Singh of Khabra, Amir Mohammed Khan of Ludhiana had played a primary role in organizing the voyage; so, the remaining cabins had been given to them. There was enough space in the area next to the main deck to create a temple space for daily worship led by a Sikh priest. The room was used for political lectures and readings of political poetry as well.

Almost all the passengers were from aristocratic landowning families and the primary source of recruits for the British Indian army was the sons of these landowning families. Most of the passengers had attended in the army or in the police of Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, and other British outposts in East Asia. These people were independent and self-financed, and for them, migration was a speculative venture aimed at individual and joint-family advancement. Generally, they were looking for external jobs available to unskilled workers; they were ready to do small things that they would not do in India. Judging by the pattern of establishing Punjabis in North America, they got inspired, and they intended to stay abroad for several years to earn money and save before returning home. North America's great attractions were high wages and immediate investment opportunities in small businesses, farms, and city lots.

The Komagata Maru anchored on the far shore of the Burrard Inlet, opposite Vancouver, on 23 May. The passengers were well dressed and ready to go ashore. Gurdit Singh and his associates knew that they would have to face a struggle to gain entry for everyone in Canada because Canada had been preventing South Asian immigrants for the last six years. However, Gurdit Singh, his associates, and other passengers were not prepared for the stubborn steps taken by the Canadian authorities. Except for 20 returning habitants and a very few exceptional cases, other passengers were not permitted to land on the coast, not even for the preliminary examination. Most passengers found themselves confined to steamer ships throughout their time in Canadian waters. There was a long struggle between the immigration department and the passengers as the immigration department forced the passengers to leave voluntarily. The following vigorous actions included - stopping their transmission with the world, preventing their effort to take their case to a Canadian court, refused to provide food and water to the ship, attempting to take charge of the steamer ship by the police. On the other side, friends of Punjabi and South Asian passengers on the coast hired lawyers on their behalf and tried to negotiate with the officials. They also provide food and water on the steamer when the condition became devastated. And finally, after a month, the two sides agreed to take a case to the British Columbia Court of Appeal. This case ended with a judgment in favor of the Canadian government and against the passengers of the steamer. The court

did not find any principle in Canadian or British law that gave passengers the right of entry. Gurdit Singh and the passengers admitted the decision of the British Columbia Court of Appeal without trying an appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada. Now, they wanted to return to India as soon as possible and tell their friends and relatives who were in the British army about the insults and humiliation which they were subjected to by the government of Canada and their refusal to land on their land. Finally, the government of Canada accepted the responsibility as far as Hong Kong, and 355 dissatisfied and radicalized passengers left for Asia on 23 July. At Yokohama there was a letter from the Colonial Secretary at Hong Kong for Gurdit Singh; it was threatening to arrest the passengers for vagrancy if they landed there. Gurdit Singh wrote to the British Consul at Yokohama that his passengers were willing to go to any port in India if they provide provisions; the Consul did not give any instructions to guide him and refused to help. The Komagata Maru owners ordered the captain of the ship Yamamoto to bring the ship to Kobe. At Yokohama, some passengers had left the ship, and another fifteen got off at Kobe. The Komagata Maru passed through the Strait of Malacca and crossed the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, approaching close to Rangoon. At the Calcutta port, shipping was much reduced; as a result, several casual laborers on the docks became unemployed, an emergency that the District Charitable Society tried to meet by voluntary subscriptions for the purchase of food. There were several excuses that the Indian officials needed to use the new Ingress to India ordinance against the travelers of the Komagata Maru, such as the state of war, unemployment in Calcutta, and the suspected Gadar connection with the ship. In counsel with the Government of the Panjab and the Government of India, the local Government of Bengal, decided to take the passengers off at Budge Budge before they reached Calcutta; and decided to shift most of them by train at government cost to their homes in Punjab, arresting and detaining any who appeared to be revolutionary.

On 26 September, the Komagata Maru entered Hooghly and anchored at Kalpi, a small village near Calcutta. The passengers themselves were not permitted to go ashore. On Sunday morning, three high ranking officers had aboard the ship: James Donald, magistrate and chief administrative officer of the surrounding district, 24-Parganas, F. S. A. Slocock from the office of the Director of Criminal Intelligence for the Government of India, and R. Humphreys, a Deputy Commissioner from Hoshiarpur District in Punjab. They accompanied with police head constables, superintendent, and police officers, and police were not in uniform. And for a while, Gurdit Singh thought that they were friends. Police were searching for weapons and copies of Ghadar in cabins, storage areas, and luggage. On Monday, they returned to discover the luggage and find some of the passengers again, and they found nothing. And the Komagata Maru was permitted to go ahead slowly up the Hooghly towards Calcutta. The Komagata Maru reached the industrial town of Budge Budge on 29 September. On the ship, the same officials who had been at Kalpi stepped on board, and Sir Frederick Halliday, the Commissioner of Police for Calcutta, was with them. The Komagata Maru decreased speed and tied up at a floating jetty near Budge Budge railway station. Deputy Commissioner Humphreys called Gurdit Singh and told him this was where the passengers had to get off to take a special train to Punjab. Gurdit Singh refused because there were no railway bridges at Calcutta or below. Most of the passengers wanted to go to Calcutta and put their grievances before the governor, and they wanted to settle their accounts with one another and secure financial help from their friends there. They were not aware that the government had armed itself with war emergency powers. They took a road to Calcutta but were stopped from going there. So, they returned, sat down, and started to say their evening prayers. It was during their prayers that an officer went insultingly to call Gurdit Singh. This incident enraged the passengers. Then, the congregation had stood up to finish the last part of their prayers. The officer behaved aggressively with Gurdit Singh, and a scuffle ensued in which a bullet was fired, killing the officers. Sikhs and the officers believed that it had been shot by the other. Then, The Royal Fusiliers had entered Budge Budge and fired around 177 rounds of .303 bore. When battalions opened fire, most of the passengers found refuge in the ditch behind them. Some ran towards a grocer's shop; others hid behind a watchman's hut and a large tree. Within an hour, almost all the passengers had worked their way along the ditch and had slipped off in the darkness in the direction of the oil tanks and the river beyond. Others ran from behind the watchman's hut and the shops and escaped into the night. The battalions fired a volley after them, and all was quiet. It had almost nine months passed that the Komagata Maru had sailed from Yokohama with 376 passengers. In the latter part of January, from the prison eighty-seven, passengers were sent home. One of the passengers had died in hospital shortly after arriving in Vancouver. Twenty returning residents had landed in Canada. Thirty-three had got off in Japan, and the two Sindhi brothers had got on. Fifty-nine had boarded the train for Ludhiana at Budge Budge. Twenty-two died in the violence, and twenty-seven were fugitives; 179 had been released from jail in Calcutta, and thirty-one remained prisoners.

It is well-known that the average Indian makes no distinction between the government of the United Kingdom, that of Canada, that of British India, or that of any colony. To him, these authorities are all one and the same. (Josh.1977.292).

After the Komagata Maru massacre, demand for equal treatment of Indians echoed all over India. The law of restrictions on Indian wives and children to join their husbands and fathers in Canada became a central point after the First World War. Further restrictions on Indian migrants remained in practice. After the independence of India and Pakistan, Canada

realized the urgency of coming to an understanding and arrangement with them. Canada concurred to accept a small fixed number of South Asian immigrants. By the 1960s, Canada's economic need for skilled manpower had grown tremendously while the ideas of Social Darwinism declined. From several parts of Europe, the Europeans came and changed the Canadian outlook. Economic prosperity and fundamental changes in Canadian commercial and industrial life allayed fears of Asian takeover. The development of intense transportation and communication in the world helped to create a better understanding. The Canadian government decided to apply its immigration regulations without racial regard. There are socio-economic reasons behind these variations of the Canadian immigration policy, from utter debarring to equal acceptance. It is a paradox of history to find Indians being barred when India was part of the British Empire, and now being accepted when the Empire is part of history. In Vancouver's Coal Harbour, a monument honouring the passengers of the Komagata Maru has been present since 2012. Before the House of Commons on May 18, 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau issued a formal apology for the incident. The Komagata Maru incident was apologized for by the City of Vancouver in May 2021. The City Council also declared May 23 to be a recognized day of remembrance. Later that year, in September, the City of New Westminster also apologized (Johnston 2006).

4. CONCLUSION:

"Diaspora" is the term used to describe the movement of people from their homeland to developed nations in search of a better life and future. For Indians, the primary reasons of the migration to abroad were their poor economic condition and the exploitation of the Britishers and Sahukars. The migration history of Indians to Canada has been alluring. It is believed that the Sikh was the first community to emigrate Canada from India. It was not easy to settle down there, they had to face many obstacles, and racism. The Komagata Maru ship tragedy has left a scar on the history of Indian migration to Canada. Lamentably, most Canadians soon forgot the phenomenon of "Komagata Maru," and it remained largely forgotten for several generations, except among Punjabi Canadians. The story of the Komagata Maru passengers' encounter with Canada was basically about race. The Komagata Maru incident reminds us the racism was the primary reason in the mind of the Canadian government to prevent letting them in Canada.

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