

Backgrounder

Komagata Maru



Image: James Luke Quiney fonds/City of Vancouver Archives/AM1584; CVA 7-122

The SS Komagata Maru at anchor in 1914.

In the early 1900s, a few thousand South Asians migrated to British Columbia. These South Asians were mostly from the northern part of India. They came for better lives and better wages than they had in India. The workers sent letters home encouraging their family and friends to come to Canada.

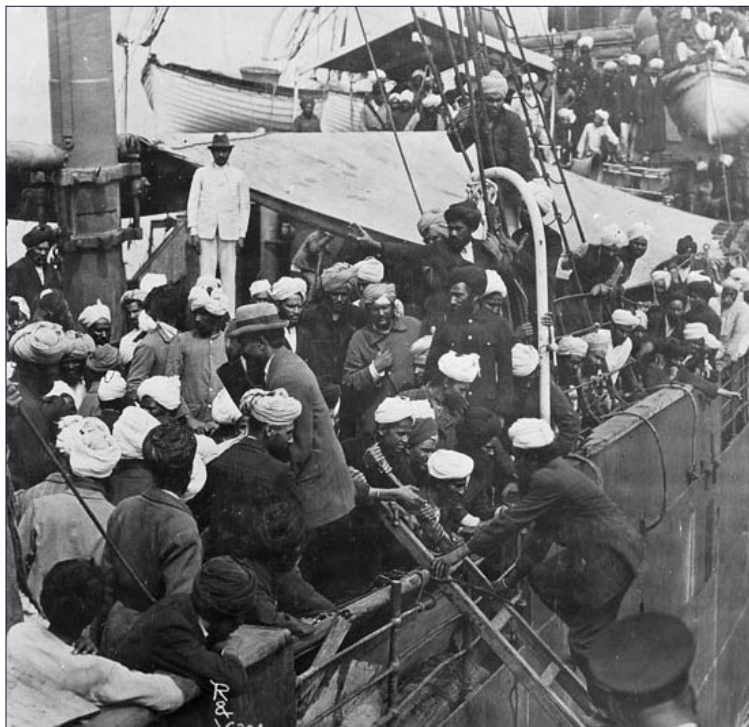
In 1914, Sikh businessman Gurdit Singh chartered a steamship named the Komagata Maru. This ship set sail carrying 376 passengers planning to immigrate to Canada. The passengers were Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim. In May 1914, the ship arrived in Vancouver. Most passengers were not allowed off the ship due to the “continuous journey” law. This law stated that immigrants had to make a non-stop journey from their country of origin to Canada. The Komagata Maru had set sail from Hong Kong, not India.

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For two months, the Canadian government refused entry to the Komagata Maru. The ship remained in Vancouver's Burrard Inlet. The passengers faced hostile people and the government. The *Vancouver Sun* newspaper referred to passengers as "Hindu invaders."

To get the ship to leave, the Canadian government refused passengers food and water. The local South Asian community protested. They launched legal battles and tried to raise money for the passengers. But nothing worked against the racism faced by the passengers from Government officials. The Canadian government agreed to provide food and water to the passengers if the ship agreed to sail back to India. In July 1914, the Canadian navy escorted the ship out of the inlet with the passengers onboard.

The ship arrived in India in September 1914 after World War I had begun. After getting off the ship in India, a conflict with police led to death, injury, and/or arrest of several passengers. The police falsely claimed that the events in Canada were an act of rebellion against the British Empire.



Both images: Library and Archives Canada; ID 3238584 and ID 3629984

Passengers aboard the SS Komagata Maru, 1914.