



# CANADIAN NAVAL REVIEW

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**WINNER OF 2016 CNMT ESSAY COMPETITION:  
China as an Emerging Arctic Player**

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# Kept at Bay in Vancouver Bay

Daniel J. Demers



Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Sikhs aboard *Komagata Maru* in Vancouver's Burrard Inlet, 1914.

Canada is a country that is fortunate in being physically isolated from the troubles of the world. Its borders face on to three oceans and the United States. This means that Canada has been insulated from the massive population movements that have so ruffled Europe's feathers. Canada is not experiencing an influx of people via the maritime approaches, but there has been a massive movement of immigrants/refugees across the Mediterranean to Europe (in addition to population movements across the land). Canada, however, has received migrants on its coasts in the past (and likely will again in the future), and the international debate over accepting refugees from Syria is reminiscent of a similar controversy which occurred in Vancouver Bay a little over 100 years ago – the arrival of the ship *Komagata Maru*.

The recent digitization of newspaper archives in the United States – which has not yet been done to the same extent in Canada – allows easy access to local accounts of events, and lets us see how these events were described at the time. It's interesting to see how significantly opinions

(and the language used in the media) have changed, and how Canadian immigration policy has changed since 1914. It's disturbing, too, to see how some of the old attitudes have not changed, or are resurfacing in Europe and the United States.

Often called the 'Crown jewel' of the British Empire, in 1914 India (then including Pakistan and Bangladesh) had a population estimated to be about 315 million of whom about 100 million were in a condition of starvation. During the previous quarter of a century (1889-1914) estimates were that about 19 million East Indians had died of starvation from "famine, caused by poverty, brought on by a merciless [British] taxation."<sup>1</sup> Sources at the time claimed that East Indian farmers paid taxes as high as 65% on their annual income which was abysmal to start with. The conclusion of many people living in India was that they had either to change the conditions in India or get out to make a better life for themselves. This was the rationale for the attempted exodus to Vancouver on *Komagata Maru*.

Anti-Asian immigration protests in 1907 prompted a 1908 law passed by the government of Canada entitled the *Continuous Passage Act* which stated that “immigrants may be prohibited from landing or coming into Canada unless they come from the country of their birth, or citizenship, by a continuous journey and on through tickets purchased before leaving the country of their birth, or citizenship.”<sup>2</sup> And because there were no ships sailing a continuous route, this law seemed to be an effective bar to East Indian immigration. The law and the action in 1914, effectively slammed the door on future East Indian immigration – a far cry from Canada’s current policy of inclusion.

At the time several thousand East Indians (mostly men) resided in British Columbia. The immigration laws denied most of them the right to bring their wives and families to join them, according to at least one era newspaper report.<sup>3</sup> Some of these men had done well in Canada. Gurdit Singh, for example, was a wealthy Sikh businessman who had made a fortune in timber in India and British Columbia. He employed thousands and had become “one of the important men of the province.”<sup>4</sup>

In early 1914 the anti-Hindu law was challenged and overturned by the courts. (At the time Canada and most of the rest of the world did not distinguish between Sikh and Hindu, Sikhs were routinely referred to as Hindus.) In early April 1914, Gurdit Singh chartered the Japanese steamer *Komagata Maru* in Hong Kong to bring 375 Sikhs “to test what the Canadian authorities mean to do under the recent ... judicial decision that Canada is not justified in excluding Hindus [Sikhs].”<sup>5</sup> The ship picked up its passengers in Calcutta.

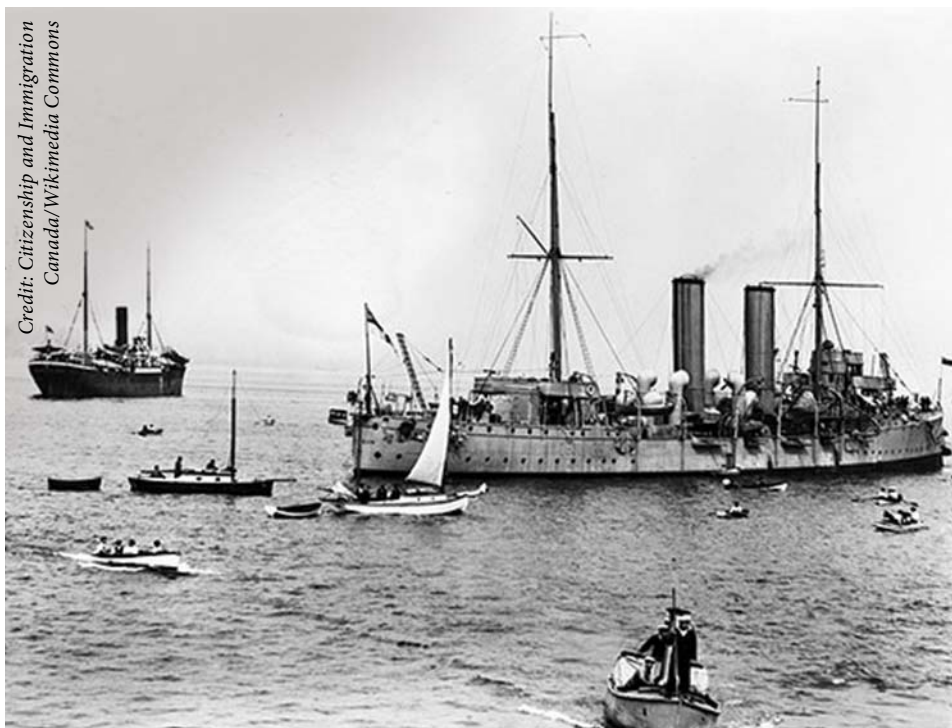
*Komagata Maru* arrived in Vancouver Harbour in May of 1914. Notwithstanding the fact that the Sikhs were British citizens, British Columbian authorities backed by Ottawa refused to allow the immigrants to land and ordered the captain of *Komagata Maru* to return to India. According to an article in *Vancouver Western Call*, the passengers were not allowed to land:

by the immigration authorities because (a) they were likely to become a public charge (170 having no money at all and the balance very little); (b) they had not \$200.00 as prescribed by law; (c) they had not come direct from the land of their origin; (d) they were (88 of them) inflicted with loathsome

diseases; and (e) they came contrary to the ... Order-in-Council.<sup>6</sup>

The Sikh passengers, in turn, refused to allow the Japanese captain to weigh anchor and leave. The result was a deadlock while court processes were invoked and appeals were made.

As the standoff between the shipload of refugees and Canadian authorities continued, several American newspapers concluded that Canada had landed itself in a “pretty kettle of fish ... from which it is having trouble and a lesson in extrication and preparation.”<sup>7</sup> The *Washington Times* reported that a number of the East Indians living in British Columbia “[rallied forth] night after night [and] cart-tail orators among them make incendiary speeches throughout the town, denouncing everything from the policeman on the block up to the imperial parliament; demanding to know what are the boasted benefits of British institutions when such inhumanities are imposed on loyal British subjects.”<sup>8</sup> A further outrage to the East Indians’ sense of fair play was existing Canadian immigration regulations which permitted virtually unlimited Chinese immigration provided they paid a \$500 ‘head tax’ (which is about \$15,000 Cdn in current values). Every year several thousand people from China entered Canada, and apparently about 700 Japanese entered Canada per year.<sup>9</sup> In fact in June, midway during the crisis, 600 Chinese immigrants were permitted to land in Vancouver. In further indignation, Canadian immigration law required East



*Komagata Maru* (furthest ship on the left) being escorted by HMCS *Rainbow* in Vancouver Harbour in July 1914. A swarm of small boats filled the harbour to watch the ships.



Credit: City of Vancouver Archives/James Luke  
Quinney for the City of Vancouver Archives/http://  
www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca

Onlookers on the Vancouver wharf, July 1914.

Indian immigrants who were allowed into the country to pay \$200 each to enter while Europeans were required to pay only \$25. An opinion article in the *Ogden* [UT] *Standard* wrote “the people of India ... though they are British subjects ... have none of the rights of the white races under the British flag and are discriminated against and ostracized.... [T]his incident may be the incentive of a general uprising.”<sup>10</sup>

While the court battles and appeals took place over the next two months, the Sikhs were forced to remain aboard the ship. Newspapers reported government authorities used local tugs as ‘guard boats’ to circle the Japanese ship to keep the passengers from attempting to get ashore.<sup>11</sup> In mid-June the press reported large contingents of harbour police were on watch fearing the Sikhs would set fire to the ship and “leap overboard.”<sup>12</sup> Two Japanese Navy cruisers, *IJS Asama* and *IJS Azuma*, appeared in Vancouver Harbour and dropped anchor. They announced their intention of escorting the Japanese steamer and its passengers back to South Asian waters.

The matter came to a head in July when all court appeals had been exhausted. Authorities ordered the ship to leave the harbour and Canadian waters. On 20 July a “pitched battle between immigration inspectors, special police and the Hindus [Sikhs] took place” aboard the ship, according to newspaper accounts.<sup>13</sup> The ship’s officers asked for help

from local police to handle “their belligerent passengers” who had taken over the ship and were using force to prevent the crew of *Komagata Maru* from getting the ship underway.<sup>14</sup> The ship’s captain was apparently taken prisoner by the passengers. At one point, 125 Vancouver police officers and 35 immigration officers went out to the vessel in a tugboat but were unable to board the ship because of the Sikhs’ resistance.<sup>15</sup> The officers tried to use high pressure fire hoses but to no avail. According to newspaper accounts,

Last Saturday night a tug load of police, armed with Ross rifles went out to the Hindu ship.... [W]hen the tug made fast to the *Komagata*, and peace officers attempted to board her, they were showered with bricks, pieces of coal, cord wood sticks, and anything the maddened Hindus could throw down upon them. Every man of the boarding party received more or less serious scalp wounds.... [A]fter fifteen or twenty minutes, the tug bearing the police officers was compelled to pull away, amid fanatical cries of victory from on board the *Komagata*.<sup>16</sup>

The Canadian government ordered the naval cruiser HMCS *Rainbow* from its Esquimalt Naval Base on Vancouver Island to Vancouver to help with the standoff. *Rainbow* was “fully manned and equipped with

ammunition to enforce ... the order to escort [the ship] out of the harbor ... [and served *Komagata Maru*] with an ultimatum giving them until noon [the next day] to decide whether to surrender or fight.”<sup>17</sup> *Rainbow* had a complement of 300 men and “trained two 12 inch guns on the boat,” according to the *South Bend News-Times*, and “this undoubtedly convinced the Hindus [Sikhs] that the Canadian government meant business.”<sup>18</sup> The *Rock Island Argus* added, “thousands thronged the [Vancouver] waterfront expecting to witness a moving picture drama.”<sup>19</sup>

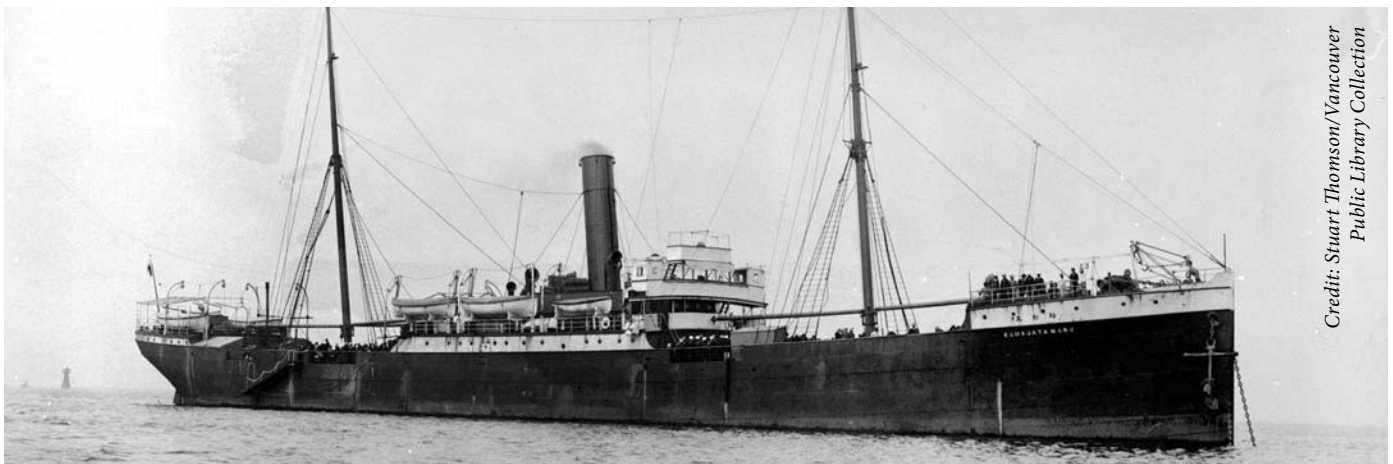
Negotiations were actively underway aboard the *Komagata Maru*. A small mutiny occurred when the Sikhs apparently threw half of the Japanese crew overboard. Further problems were averted when Canadian authorities agreed to provide provisions for a return trip including “one chicken for each man aboard for every day on the return trip, two cows, some live sheep and other things.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, an agreement was reached and at dawn on 22 July 1914 the vessel weighed anchor and escorted by *Rainbow* departed. Twenty-two (some accounts say 20) of the Sikh passengers who were able to demonstrate they had previously lived in Canada were permitted to remain.<sup>21</sup> The Japanese cruisers – which had been in the area standing by while the negotiations occurred – followed with the stated intent that they would escort *Komagata Maru* back to South Asia. It would not be allowed to deviate from its course by further mutiny. As the ship left port a movement was started by a number of local Sikhs to enlist Canada’s East Indians to return to India “to preach revolt against the British empire.”<sup>22</sup> Ironically, a month later Canadian East Indians formed a regiment to assist Britain in its war against Germany.<sup>23</sup>

Two months after *Komagata Maru* left Vancouver (October 1914), it was reported that some of the ‘rejected’ Sikhs had participated in the Bajaj mutiny (aka Ghadar Mutiny)

when many of the returning passengers refused to board a train to Punjab.<sup>24</sup> Sixteen of the Sikhs – some reports say 20 – were killed in the melee. The mutiny, British authorities thought, was part of Imperial Germany’s effort to foment Indian independence from Great Britain through revolution, part of its strategic military policy during World War I.

The *Komagata Maru* incident left bitter feelings with the East Indian population of British Columbia. In mid-October 1914, William Hopkinson one of the immigration inspectors who had aided in excluding the Sikhs was shot and killed in the Vancouver courthouse by a local East Indian.<sup>25</sup> The 35 year-old Hopkinson was the Head Dominion Interpreter. He was apparently killed because he spoke the East Indian dialects and had interacted with the ship’s passengers making him the best known of the immigration officials with whom they had dealt. In retaliation Vancouver police raided all East Indian boarding houses in the city. A day later 150 ‘legal’ East Indian residents left Canada claiming they were “going home because we have to.... There is no more work for us in Canada.... We are leaving our property behind.”<sup>26</sup>

The *Komagata Maru* event would have far-reaching consequences for Great Britain and its empire. Without free movement, the empire was problematic. Indeed, the entire incident was perceived by some as a Canadian snub to Mother England but London did not even attempt to rebuke Canada. With war in Europe beginning, Britain did not want to have to choose between Canada and India. The *London Times* supported Canadian authorities beginning midway through the crisis. An editorial asserted that British citizenship did not give “unrestricted entry into any and every part of the British Dominions.... [Such thinking] is preposterous because it ignores the facts ... the fact is free people have a right to say whom they will admit into their country, just as free men have a



*Komagata Maru* at sea (no date).

Credit: Stuart Thomson/Vancouver  
Public Library Collection



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau formally apologizes in the House of Commons for a 1914 government decision that barred most of the passengers of *Komagata Maru* from entering Canada, Ottawa, 18 May 2016.

right to say whom they will admit into their home.”<sup>27</sup>

The intransigent position of Canada and BC in 1914 – which was both racially and religiously motivated – and the federal government’s use of the Canadian Navy and private merchant ships played a significant role in severely limiting East Indian immigration into Canada for many years. India achieved its independence from Great Britain in 1947, the same year that Canada enfranchised East Indian residents within its borders, and the same year the *Continuous Passage Act* was taken off the books. And in the 1960s Canada began rewriting its immigration laws which were designed to be inclusive to all races and religions.

An April 2014 *Canada Immigration Newsletter*, which was published exactly 100 years after the Vancouver Bay incident, states that 30,000 Indians immigrate to Canada each year.<sup>28</sup> According to the *Newsletter*, through Canada’s “generous family sponsorship laws, many permanent residents are able to sponsor their parents for either permanent residency or extended visitor visas, thus ensuring that families are reunited.”<sup>29</sup> Today Indo-Canadians are the third largest non-European immigrant group in Canada (exceeded only by Chinese and Filipino).<sup>30</sup> Now many Indo-Canadians have achieved high political office including major city mayors and federal and provincial Cabinet ministerships. As well, they have become prominent novelists, sports figures, actors and businessmen.

The BC government formally apologized in May 2008 for its actions towards *Komagata Maru*, and a monument was unveiled on Vancouver’s seawall in 2012, funded by the federal government. In May 2016 Prime Minister Justin

Trudeau issued an official apology for the federal government’s actions in the *Komagata Maru* incident. This illustrates the change in Canadian immigration policy over the past 102 years. 🇨🇦

#### Notes

1. Taraknath Das, “Hindu Student, Educated Here, Explains Immigration Fuss in Article for Star,” *Seattle Star*, 22 July 1914, p. 6.
2. Government of Canada, “The 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Continuous Passage Act,” January 2016.
3. “Canada and the Hindus,” *Washington Times*, 20 July 1914, p. 4.
4. See *ibid.*; and “Canada’s Asiatic Problems,” *New York Sun*, 22 July 1914, p. 6.
5. “New Invasion of Hindus,” *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, 29 April 1914, p. 12; “Canada May Deport Hindus,” *The Anderson Daily Intelligencer*, Anderson, South Carolina, 19 April 1914, p. 6; “A Test of Asiatic Exclusion,” *New York Tribune*, 20 May 1914, p. 8.
6. “Sahib Mayor Baxter and the Hindus,” *Vancouver Western Call*, 24 July 1914, p. 1.
7. “Canada and the Hindus,” *Norwich Bulletin*, Norwich, Connecticut, 23 July 1914, p. 4.
8. “Canada and the Hindus,” *Washington Times*, 20 July 1914, p. 4.
9. Das, “Hindu Student, Educated Here, Explains Immigration Fuss in Article for Star,” p. 6.
10. “Hindu, Japanese and White Races,” *Ogden Standard*, 3 June 1914, p. 4.
11. “Hindus Repel Inspectors; Ottawa Hears News,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, 21 July 1914, p. 1.
12. “Hindus May Burn Ship,” *The Sunday Gate City*, Keokuk, Iowa, 21 June 1914, p. 1.
13. “Hindus Repel Inspectors; Ottawa Hears News.”
14. *Ibid.*
15. Amy Husser, “Komagata Maru Apology: Ship’s Story Represents ‘Dark Chapter’ of Canada’s past,” CBC, 18 May 2016.
16. “Hindus in Fighting Mood,” *Enderby [BC] Press and Walker’s Weekly*, 23 July 1914, p. 1.
17. “Guns Back Order for Deportation,” *Rock Island Argus*, 21 July 1914, p. 1.
18. “Hindu Passengers to Return to India,” *South Bend News-Times*, 22 July 1914, p. 2.
19. “Guns Back Order for Deportation,” p. 1.
20. “Hindus Are Gone; Wanted Chickens Each Day of the Trip,” *East Oregonian*, 23 July 1914, p. 1.
21. “Fourteen Hindus Released,” *East Oregonian*, Pendleton, 11 June 1914, p. 7.
22. “Barred Hindus are Going Home to Preach Revolt,” *Calumet News*, Calumet, Michigan, 16 July 1914, p. 1.
23. A condition of the formation of the regiment was that “two [white bilingual] British subjects [be appointed] at the head of their ranks.” See “Bola Singh et al.,” *Kelowna Record*, 17 December 1914, p. 3; and “Alec M’Nab Goes Off to War at Head of Hindu Regiment,” *Seattle Star*, 18 August 1914, p. 8.
24. “Ghadar Mutiny; Sikhs in Mutiny after Returning to Native Land,” *Pensacola Journal*, 3 October 1914, p. 1.
25. See “William C. Hopkinson,” *Kelowna Record*, 29 October 1914, p. 7; “Canadian Official Killed,” *Evening Times-Republican*, Marshalltown, Iowa, 21 October 1914, p. 1; “Immigration Inspector Shot Down in Cold Blood by Fanatic Hindu,” *The Daily Missoulian*, 22 October 1914, p. 1.
26. “Hindus Quit Canada for Far East,” *Washington Evening Star*, 22 October 1914, p. 2.
27. *London Times* as reported in “‘Thunderer’ Backs Stand of Canada,” *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, 26 June 1914, p. 6.
28. “The Story of Indian Immigration to Canada,” *Canada Immigration Newsletter*, April 2014.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*

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