

The Extraordinary Story of the Komagata Maru: Commemorating the One Hundred Year Challenge to Canada's Immigration Colour Bar 驚くべき駒形丸事件 カナダの人種差別的 移民政策に挑んで100年

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One hundred years ago, Gurdit Singh Sirhali chartered the Japanese steamship Komagata Maru and brought 376 Indian passengers to Canada in a direct challenge to Canada's immigration colour bar.¹ The ship's forced departure from Vancouver harbour on July 23, 1914 ended an extraordinary two-month standoff between the passengers, determined to enter Canada, and a Canadian government determined to enforce its anti-Asian exclusion policies, come what may. The ship's departure, however, was not the end of this saga—the passengers faced unimaginable hardships on the return voyage only to be met by the iron fist of British authorities upon their arrival in India.

The Komagata Maru story has tended to be inscribed in national narratives, both Canadian and Indian, but in this article we argue that the 1914 confrontation was a historical moment in which a heterogenous, diasporic movement for social justice became a wellspring for a transborder, anti-colonial upsurge. Entangled in the maw of virulent settler racism and the emerging British-American alliance for global white supremacy, the Komagata Maru saga would have profound repercussions that continue to be felt to this day.

Transnational Background

Pacific coast settlers on both sides of the US-Canada border share a long history of anti-Asian racism. British Columbia and California

were centers of this anti-Asian agitation that would have both national and transnational effects. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in the US and the 1885 head tax in Canada reflected how white supremacy had become integral to the fabric of politics in both countries. Canada, as a dominion of the British Empire, was also part of a transnational racial network that included other settler colonies such as Australia, New Zealand and Natal, where Gandhi cut his political teeth advocating for the colony's Indian population.² Substantial Indian migration to Canada and the United States began in the early 1900s.

In the wake of Japan's victory over Russia in 1905, anti-Asian movements accelerated, precipitating the decision by the San Francisco school board to segregate Japanese students.³ This was followed by anti-Asian riots in September 1907. These riots targeted the Japanese and Chinese communities in Vancouver (BC) and in Bellingham (WA) angry mobs drove Indian sawmill workers out of the town. In response, the Canadian government moved quickly to limit immigration from Japan and from India in response to public anti-Asian sentiment. With the help of the British ambassador in Tokyo, Canadian officials forced the Japanese government to accept immigration quotas. In respect to India, the jewel in the crown of the British empire, colonial officials advised the Canadian government to avoid introducing overtly racist restrictions that might fan the flames of anti-colonialism. Thus Canadian legislation against

Indian immigration, introduced in 1908, came in the form of a ‘continuous journey’ regulation requiring all newcomers to travel on a direct sailing from their country of origin. Since no such tickets or routes were available from India to Canada this became the convenient subterfuge for racism. No reason why it was necessary for anyone to travel in such a manner was ever really provided, but it allowed the government to construct a discourse of ‘plausible denial’ when faced with criticisms of racial discrimination from Indians turned away at Canadian ports.

US president Theodore Roosevelt followed these local events very closely. When Roosevelt learned that Canadian representatives in Japan had refused to include the American ambassador in negotiations with the Japanese to limit immigration, he realized the need for closer relations with the British Empire. Japan and Britain had signed a strategic pact in 1902, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, leaving the US as a secondary power in the Pacific. Questions of race proved to be an important wedge against nascent Japanese imperialism. Roosevelt encouraged the Canadian government to press London to pursue a hemispheric accord to limit Asian immigration. He also sent the ‘Great White Fleet’ on a global tour starting in the Pacific in a flagrant display of gunboat diplomacy aimed at Japan. Thus were sown the racial seeds of British-American collaboration.

To South Asians aspiring to come to the Pacific coast as well as to those already there (since 1904) government policies and public sentiment made it clear that they were unwanted. As a consequence, South Asian communities in Vancouver, Victoria, Seattle, Astoria and San Francisco became centres for social change as reformers and revolutionaries challenged exclusionary immigration regulations and other injustices including the denial of voting rights. Sundar Singh in Victoria; Bhag Singh, Taraknath Das, Teja Singh, and Husain Rahim in Vancouver; G.D.

Kumar in Seattle, Lal Har Dyal at Berkeley and a host of other activists worked with the predominantly Sikh communities in the mill towns to build support for a political movement. Though small in numbers, white allies ranged from members of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) or the Socialist Party of Canada, to members of the clergy and even imperial loyalists such as Isabella Ross Broad in Victoria who called for equality for all subjects of the Empire including Sikhs.

By 1908, the British Criminal Intelligence Office had begun to systematically monitor South Asian activities in the US and Canada. A number of Indian intellectuals and students had gone to the United States for further education. To some, the US appeared as safe haven for anti-colonial agitation given that country’s earlier war of independence against the British. However, British intelligence reports of the time pointed to what they saw as dangerous developments on the Pacific coast where anti-colonialists such as Taraknath Das were making contact with the largely Sikh, working-class communities in Vancouver and Seattle. A secret British intelligence paper concluded “continued friction between Indians and immigration authorities leads to much ill-feeling and unfortunately prepares the ground for disloyal agitation. The main danger lies in the fact that the Indians concerned are mostly Sikhs, many of whom have formerly served in the Indian army, and that on their return to India they are likely to sow the seeds of disaffection amongst the classes from which the Sikh regiments are recruited.”⁴

The Canadian government employed William H. Hopkinson, who was born in India, as an immigration officer, interpreter, and agent charged with spying on Indian communities in British Columbia. He was subsequently also employed as an interpreter for the US department of immigration and began crossing the border regularly. In 1913 Hopkinson

secretly travelled to London for discussions with the Criminal Intelligence Office and shortly afterwards the British Indian government, with the Canadian government's agreement, began paying Hopkinson for "securing information in foreign territories."⁵ He became an important liaison with US commissioner general of immigration Anthony Caminetti. One of his first acts in this role was to secretly transmit a message that the British colonial office hoped the US would arrest Lala Har Dayal, a revolutionary anti-colonial activist in Berkeley.⁶ In the summer of 1913, with the concurrence of the first secretary of labour, William Wilson (founder of the United Mine Workers union), Caminetti moved to restrict Indian immigration by forcing all those arriving from Manila (then a US territory) to a second immigration examination.⁷ This move prompted widespread protest and Hopkinson reported on this resistance to Caminetti. In November 1913, Hopkinson moved to Oakland, California and the following spring travelled to Washington (DC) to meet with officials of the British embassy as well as with the Caminetti.

Hopkinson's move to California coincided with the formation of the revolutionary Hindustani Association of American, founded in Astoria in 1913. Better known by its journal name, *Gadar* (Mutiny), it called for the overthrow of British colonialism in India and quickly gained a small but dynamic audience.⁸ For a number of Indian expatriates, including Taraknath Das and Bhagwan Singh, it had become clear that the struggle for justice in America was impossible without challenging British control of India. By the spring of 1914 the *Gadar* newspaper began to attract a substantial following with 5000 copies being distributed on the Pacific Coast as well as in India and the Punjabi diasporic communities in Manila, Yokohama, Hong Kong and Singapore. Declared a seditious publication it was banned in Canada and postal authorities began to intercept its parcels. Postal authorities later received word that sympathetic Chinese Canadians in Victoria and

Vancouver, members of the Nationalist Party (Guomindang) of Sun Yat-Sen, were receiving and forwarding the *Gadar* in order to subvert postal scrutiny.⁹ This upsurge in revolutionary anti-colonialism generated closer collaboration among Canadian, American and British authorities determined to suppress the movement. It was at this precise moment that a Sikh businessman decided to challenge the colour bar—inextricably weaving together the politics of race and empire.

The Extraordinary Case of the Komagata Maru

In January 1914, Gurdit Singh, a businessman based in Singapore visited Hong Kong where he found many of his countrymen destitute and stranded because racially motivated immigration restrictions prevented them from going to Canada or the US. He resolved to break the immigration colour bar and chartered the Japanese steamship *Komagata Maru* to go to Canada in the hope of establishing a business-venture taking passengers from India to Canada.



1. Gurdit Singh (front row, left with his son) challenged Canada's exclusion laws by chartering the Komagata Maru in Hong Kong and bringing 376 of his compatriots to Vancouver. (Courtesy: Vancouver Public Library, 6231. Frank Leonard photograph)

The Komagata Maru left Hong Kong on Sunday, April 5 and stopped at Shanghai and then in Japan to collect more passengers. On board after departing Yokohama were a diverse group of 376 Indian passengers including Gurdit Singh and his young son, Balwant Singh. Bound by a determination to settle in Canada, the passengers religious affiliation included 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims and 12 Hindus. Two women were on board--Dr Raghunath Singh's wife (he was the medical officer on the ship), with their son, and Kishan Kaur Tumowal with one daughter and one son.

Taking two months to cross the Pacific, the Komagata Maru entered Canadian waters off Vancouver Island on May 21 and proceeded to William Head quarantine station near Victoria. Aware that the ship might be prevented from docking, community activists accompanied by the minister L.W. Hall tried to reach the vessel but immigration officials prevented them from doing so. The ship weighed anchor a few hours later and arrived in Vancouver on May 23. In an unprecedented move, the ship was not allowed to dock. This decision was part of a strategy to prevent any passengers from reaching land. Why this extraordinary treatment? Canadian officials, from prime minister Robert Borden to Malcolm Reid, the Vancouver immigration agent and avid exclusionist, were worried that if the passengers disembarked they would have to detain them, immediately leading to a court challenge. Fearful that they might lose in the courts as they had in a previous case, they prevented the ship from docking even though the passengers were lined up on deck, smartly dressed with packed bags fully expecting to disembark and find work.



2. Immigration agent and intelligence operative William C. Hopkinson (far right); immigration agent Malcolm Reid (3rd from right); and Conservative member of parliament H.H. Stevens (3rd from right) meet with reporters during Komagata Maru crisis (Courtesy: Library and Archives Canada, PA 034017)

From the moment it entered Vancouver harbor an armed launch constantly patrolled around the ship, holding the passengers as virtual prisoners without legal recourse and preventing supporters and lawyers from boarding the vessel. This was an unprecedented act in Canadian maritime history. Recognizing the extraordinary challenge, community supporters organized a Shore Committee to mobilize support for the passengers. Key figures included Husain Rahim, Bhag Singh Bhikiwind, Mitt Singh Pandori and Balwant Singh Khurdpur. J. Edward Bird was retained to act as legal counsel. From the US, the Yugantar Ashram in San Francisco, headquarters of Ghadar activity, sent a telegram of support to Gurdit Singh. Immigration officials intercepted the communication and interpreted it as evidence of sedition and conspiracy.

After a week of being stonewalled, the Shore Committee called a meeting of the Indo-Canadian community to support the cause of the Komagata Maru passengers. About 500

people attended including about 20 women and men of European decent. Hussein Rahim chaired the meeting and explained that the immigration department was deliberately delaying the immigration process and the landing of Gurdit Singh in the hope that the charter would default on a payment of \$15,000 that was due in about 10 days. Failure to pay would result in the ship being ordered to return to Hong Kong. The priest of the Vancouver gurdwara (Sikh temple), Balwant Singh told the crowd that “Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand, had all adopted measures to keep out Hindus, and now Canada was doing the same.’ He reminded the crowd of Sikh battles of the past and urged them not to ‘submit to tyranny.” Over \$5,000 in cash was raised immediately and a further \$66,000 was pledged.

Extraordinarily lengthy on-board medical examinations were finally completed on June 1 and immigration inspectors began interviewing passengers in boards of inquiry. The process was excruciatingly slow with one passenger at a time taken off the ship to be interviewed on shore, with no decisions being rendered. Meanwhile, the passengers were unable to get off the boat and supplies of food and water were running out. Gurdit Singh realized that he and the ship were being subjected to extraordinary and unjust treatment and he refused to allow further boarding by Canadian officials. Instead he sent telegrams to Canada’s Governor-General and to King George V stating: “No provisions since four days. Reid refuses supply, charterer and passengers starving. Kept prisoners.” Canadian officials opened and read the private telegrams before they were sent. The passengers subsequently began a hunger strike to protest their conditions.

On June 6, the British monarch, King George V, actually received Gurdit Singh’s telegram and through his personal secretary inquired what was going on.¹⁰ This caused a flurry of telegrams with the Canadian government

reporting to the British authorities: “Authorities reported only way to handle shipload without danger of escape or riot was to examine Hindus on ship at a short distance from shore and this is being done. They are supplied with food and water, were permitted to consult their solicitors, and arrangements made for charter to unload cargo and reload.”¹¹ The same day this report was sent, the interpreter and secret agent William Hopkinson reported he had ‘visited the boat again, and found the passengers in a state of unrest for want of food’. King George V read only the Ottawa report and approved a reply to Gurdit Singh in which the British government unabashedly told him “the passengers on board Komagata Maru are supplied with food and water and have been permitted to consult solicitors.”¹²

The Shore Committee managed to raise \$11,000 cash and offered it to the ship’s owners toward the \$15,000 owed for the charter. The Japanese steamship company was interested and allowed more time to raise the remaining funds. A few days later its fundraising had reached the \$18,000 mark and the Shore Committee became the formal charterer of the Komagata Maru. The on-shore support of the South Asian community was instrumental in stymying the Canadian government strategy to force a default on the charter. This was a major setback for the government. At the same time word of the standoff was spreading internationally and the British government began to receive telegrams from cities and villages across India protesting the treatment of the passengers.

On Sunday, June 21, the Shore Committee called a public meeting and over 500 people, including about 120 folks of European heritage, attended. Hussein Rahim chaired the session and introduced his comrade in the Socialist Party of Canada, J. Edward Bird who was acting as counsel for the passengers. Bird gave a rousing speech explaining that immigration authorities wanted “to delay matters and delay

matters and procrastinate and delay until such time as these people were starved back to their original port from whence they sailed.”¹³ The authorities hoped to avoid court proceedings by keeping the passengers off shore. The ‘immigration officials’ stated Bird, “have felt that they are little Czars and have proceeded as such, absolutely in the most autocratic manner ever known in Canada.” From the US, Taraknath Das wrote to Rahim around this time stating that in the US, he and others would not “leave any stone unturned” to ensure the passengers present their case in the courts: “To deny the right of justice will lead to the destruction of the British Empire.”¹⁴

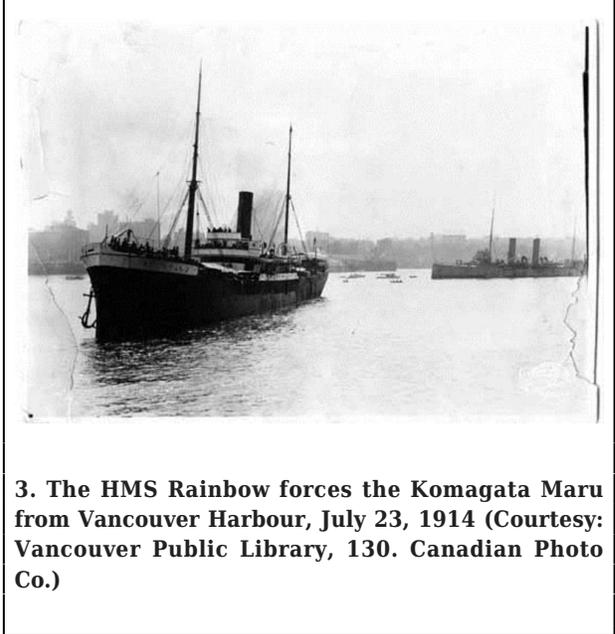
Meanwhile the mayor of Vancouver, T.S. Baxter, called a public meeting to demonstrate support for immigration officials. Endorsed by Vancouver newspapers, a large crowd attended the Tuesday evening meeting and Conservative member of parliament H.H. Stevens addressed the audience telling them “what we face in British Columbia and Canada today is this—whether or not the civilization which finds its highest exemplification in Anglo-Saxon British rule shall or shall not prevail in the Dominion of Canada.” Stevens’ extended speech was followed by former MP Ralph Smith who called on the crowd to support the immigration officials. There was, he said, no work for many white men and so newcomers were unwelcome. A resolution adopted at the end of the meeting declared “the influx of Asiatics is detrimental...from the standpoint of citizenship, public morals and labour conditions.” The meeting called for support of immigration authorities and the enactment of “stringent legislation” to prevent such immigration in the future.

Stymied in its initial strategy and with H.H. Stevens invoking the threat of riots, the Canadian government recognized that they could no longer avoid a legal challenge. However, they still refused to allow the ship to dock and would only allow a single test case

that would not proceed through a regular appeal process but would be expedited immediately to the Court of Appeal for a quick decision by a full bench of five justices. Finally, on June 29-30, the single case of one passenger, Munshi Singh, was argued in the Court of Appeal in Victoria over two days. J. Edward Bird and R. Cassidy argued on both anti-racist and technical grounds. A week later the judges released their decision upholding the discriminatory immigration laws.¹⁵ The Canadian government had adjusted the regulations to eliminate technical loopholes after they lost a case the previous year. On the political level, the justices held that the Canadian government had every right to discriminate. As Justice McPhillips put it, “the Hindu race, as well as the Asiatic race in general, are in their conception of life and ideas of society fundamentally different to the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic races, and European races in general.” The judge further claimed that, “the germ of discontent that would be brought to this country within any considerable influx of people so different in ideas of family life and social organization - better that peoples of non-assimilative- and by nature properly non-assimilative - race should not come to Canada but rather that they should remain of residence in their country of origin and there do their share as they have in the past in the preservation and development of the Empire” The justices had ruled and in so doing layed bare how far the law had strayed from any notion of justice, further proof of the Empire’s callous disregard for its Indian subjects as well as for all Asians.

On July 7, a day after the judgment was rendered, J. Edward Bird finally gained permission to board the ship and met Gurdit Singh to discuss the court’s ruling. The passengers were in dire straits, with few provisions and little water. For ten days immigration officials tried to force departure but the passengers refused to leave without full provisioning of the ship, knowing that without

provisions they would surely perish on the open seas. The shore committee also submitted claims for its huge commitments necessitated by the government's stalling tactics. The passengers, who had taken direct control of the ship, refused to depart. The delays infuriated H.H. Stevens and Malcolm Reid and they conspired with the Japanese captain, Yamamoto, to force their way onto the ship and force it to depart. In the early morning of July 19, the tug Sea Lion was boarded by immigration officials and 150 armed constables. The tug went alongside the Komagata Maru but the passengers took advantage of their location above the tug to rain coal and other objects down on the officials and police. Apparently shots were fired but no serious injuries occurred and the officials had to call off their action. Having been held like prisoners the passengers were in no mood to accommodate their jailers. This debacle prompted a flurry of telegrams to the prime minister with H.H. Stevens suggesting that warships be brought in to force the Komagata Maru out of the harbor. Borden agreed that drastic measures were necessary and that it was the government's intention to "enforce the law firmly and effectively but with no unnecessary violence." Borden ordered the HMS Rainbow to Vancouver harbor from Victoria, and authorized the mobilization of the militia to board the ship as its marine corps. At the same time he asked a cabinet minister, Martin Burrell, Minister of Agriculture visiting in the interior of the province, to proceed to Vancouver to take charge of the situation.



3. The HMS Rainbow forces the Komagata Maru from Vancouver Harbour, July 23, 1914 (Courtesy: Vancouver Public Library, 130. Canadian Photo Co.)

With the warship Rainbow's guns trained on the Komagata Maru, passengers and the Shore Committee negotiated with Burrell and immigration officials. A deal was reached by which the government would provide the food and resources necessary for the return voyage and in exchange the passengers returned the control of the ship to the Captain. Burrell further agreed that an inquiry would be held regarding the financial losses the Shore Committee had incurred in taking over the ship's charter. On July 22, supplies were put on board but members of the Vancouver Sikh community were still prevented from going on board. Finally, in the early hours of July 23, the Komagata Maru weighed anchor and left the harbor under armed escort by the HMS Rainbow as thousands of Vancouver residents watched. What lay in store for them was utterly unimaginable. The Governor General of Canada, Arthur the Duke of Connaught, cabled the Colonial Office, "It is thought here that political agitators or secret revolutionary societies financed the trip of the Komagata Maru", setting the stage for what lay ahead.¹⁶ While at sea, the British Empire went to war with Germany.

Three weeks after leaving Vancouver, the

Komagata Maru arrived in Japan. On August 17, Sohan Singh Bakhna, a Gadar activist met the ship in port in Yokohama and conveyed a message to the passengers that the movement was actively proposing an ousting of the British from India. He proposed that returning Indian nationals should fight for this cause and placed some ammunition that was hidden on board. The passengers were curious about his message but most of them were distant observers to this aspect of the unfolding drama on the ship. Nevertheless, as Canadian scholar Hugh Johnston put it, the Komagata Maru was a marked ship.

A day later, the Hong Kong colonial secretary issued instructions barring passengers from disembarking in Hong Kong. The ship was forced to move to the port of Kobe on August 18. Eighteen passengers disembarked at Yokohama and fifteen at Kobe, some to find an alternate route home and others to find work. On September 3 the ship set sail after lengthy negotiations to cover further costs of the voyage. Shortly thereafter, the British Indian government passed the Ingress to India Ordinance giving the Viceroy the power to arrest anyone entering India considered a threat to the safety of the nation state.

The Komagata Maru arrived in Singapore on September 13 but it was forced to anchor five kilometers from shore. Again, British officials prevented passengers from disembarking – even those who had lived in Singapore previous to their journey, which included Gurdit Singh. After five days being held offshore, the ship departed on the last leg in a long journey that had started with such promise. It steamed in unscathed through naval conflict zones in the Pacific – the German government hoped to sow dissension in the British government by supporting the Ghadar movement.

On September 26, the Komagata Maru arrived at the mouth of the Hooghly River where British officers forced it to drop anchor on the

east bank about ninety kilometers downstream from Calcutta. The ship was quarantined while British and Punjabi police searched the ship and its passengers. Finding nothing, the ship proceeded towards Calcutta. The following day on September 27, the ship approached the industrial town of Budge Budge, about twenty seven kilometers from Calcutta where it was forced to drop anchor. The commissioner for police in Calcutta, Sir Frederick Loch Halliday boarded the ship and told Gurdit Singh that the passengers would be sent by train to Punjab. Gurdit Singh refused this suggestion, as he was extremely suspicious of berthing on the wrong side of the river – direct trains going to Punjab boarded on the west side of the river at Howarah station. The officers treated Gurdit Singh with hostility and threatened to kill all the passengers if they did not disembark. However, some passengers agreed to disembark and under threat of death the others followed suit and Gurdit Singh reluctantly left the ship with the passengers on the 29th of September.

On the afternoon of September 29, an entourage of passengers carrying the holy scriptures, Sri Guru Granth Sahib on their head (as is customary), left the ship and were told that they could be forced to board the train on the platform of whose destination they knew nothing of. The passengers refused and asked permission to deliver the scriptures to the Gurdwara at Calcutta as it would be sacrilegious to carry the scriptures on the train and they refused to enter the train. While waiting on the platform for the request to be fulfilled, and seeing no resolution, the passengers decided to march to Calcutta and left the station with the scripture. However, after having marched for about four miles, they were stopped and convinced by a British official to return to the station and that he would listen to their grievances. Two hours later, at five pm, the passengers arrived back at the Budge Budge railway station only to face a contingent of armed police. They were told to wait on the grassy bank while the officers

decided whether to put them on a train or back on the ship. No water was given to the thirsty and hot passengers and the soldiers mistreated them, pushing, hitting, and verbally abusing them.

At 7 pm, Superintendent J.H. Eastwood of the reserve police plunged into the passengers to capture Gurdit Singh, but he was overpowered by passengers determined to protect Singh. Halliday ordered the troops to fire and they indiscriminately shot into the crowd of waiting passengers. Twenty died and many more were gravely injured. In the ensuing melee, many took refuge in the ditches around the station and some escaped under cover of darkness. British troops hunted down those in the vicinity of the station and jailed them. Gurdit Singh escaped by dressing like a Bengali and fleeing to the other side of the river on a small boat as did many others. Those that ended up boarding the trains arrived in Punjab on October 2, where they were held and interrogated for one week before being discharged and ordered to go to their home villages where they would be under surveillance. A journey that began as a search for justice ended in tragedy, sending shockwaves across Asia and the Pacific.¹⁷

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Komagata Maru incident, Taraknath Das and Sailendra Ghose declared that Indian independence and freedom from racism required an end to 'Anglo-Saxon' imperialism, "the most pernicious imperialism in the world." That Das and Ghose identified the organic racisms connecting British and American imperialism reflected their experiences in the United States and Canada. Theodore Roosevelt's racial initiative to forge closer US-British ties ten years earlier had born fruit as British-US collaboration intensified up to 1914. With the onset of World War I hundreds of Indian expatriates had abandoned the Pacific coast to return to India in response to the Gadar's call for an

insurrection against British rule. The British regime responded by introducing a series of repressive laws and arresting hundreds on charges of sedition. So-called conspiracy trials were convened in Lahore and in Mandalay, Burma leading to the execution of dozens of activists and imprisonment of hundreds. The British government established MI6 in 1916 to spy overseas. By 1918 it had at least 200 agents working in the US monitoring anti-imperialist activities.¹⁸

In the United States, the Komagata Maru incident and the branding of Indian activists as radicals prompted a tightening of immigration regulations. In early 1917, Congress passed a new immigration law, the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, prohibiting immigration from India, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. As Woodrow Wilson brought the US into the war, the British and US governments worked closed to indict Indian and other radicals still in the United States for working with Germans against the British during the war. In what became known as the 'Hindu conspiracy' trial from November 1917 to April 1918, the US government tried 17 Indians, nine Americans and nine Germans. Evidence intercepted illegally by Japanese postal authorities at the request of British officials was used in the trials.¹⁹ The most expensive trial in the US to date, the British government covered \$2.5 million of the costs compared to \$500,000 by the US. The accused were found guilty and served sentences of two to 22 months.²⁰

The diasporic Indian communities in America were a wellspring of anti-imperialism in the early 20th century in ways quite similar to Chinese communities in the Americas.²¹ They clearly perceived that their status abroad was directly connected to the colonized state of their home countries. The Gadar movement and its many allies faced terrible consequences, yet they exerted a profound influence on the anti-colonial movement in India. Gandhi and Congress moved from a position advocating co-

operation and home rule to one of non-cooperation and independence. And the small communities of South Asians in Canada and the US, often bound by their faiths, managed to survive despite tremendous challenges. Once India achieved independence in 1947, immigration would re-open and eventually flourish.

In the aftermath of World War I, the Canadian government continued to press for closer British-US ties. Robert Borden, prime minister during the Komagata Maru affair, wrote to British prime minister Lloyd-George: "You know my own conviction that there is at least possible a League of the two great English speaking commonwealths who share common ancestry, language and literature, who are inspired by like democratic ideals, who enjoy similar political institutions and whose united force is sufficient to ensure the peace of the world. It is with a view to the consummation of so great a purpose that I should be content, and indeed desire, to invite and even urge the American Republic to undertake worldwide responsibilities in respect of undeveloped territories and backward races similar to, if not commensurate with, those which have been assumed by or imposed upon our own Empire."²² Despite British and American hesitations, the US did take on a greater role and, as a number of scholars have argued, the echoes of the Anglo-American racial empires continue to resonate to this day.²³

References and Further Reading

This account draws heavily on the groundbreaking work of Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru* (re-published by UBC Press, 2014) and Ali Kazimi's book *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru* (Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, 2012) a companion volume to his award-winning film, *Continuous Journey*. It also draws on independent research in archival sources including the British Library and the National

Archives in London and works in Punjabi such as *Zulmi Katha* - Gurdit Singh's account of his journey, and *Gadar* newspapers of the time. Other references include [this web archive](#) and the British commissioned report of the Komagata Maru Committee of Inquiry (1914).

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Notes

- ¹ . General references used in the writing of this essay are appended at the end.
- ² . On this topic see Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Jeremy Martins, "A Transnational History of Immigration Restriction: Natal and New South Wales, 1896-97," in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 34, 3 (September 2006), 323-344.
- ³ . See Erika Lee, "Hemispheric Orientalism and the 1907 Pacific Coast Race Riots," *Amerasia Journal* 33:2 (2007), 19-47 and John Price, "'Orienting' the Empire: Mackenzie King and the Aftermath of the 1907 Race Riots," *B.C. Studies*, 156 (Winter 2007/08), 53-81.
- ⁴ . Criminal Investigation Office, "Indian Agitation in America," 17 December 1912, British Library, L/P&J/12/1), 7
- ⁵ . J.A. Cote to the Governor General's Secretary, 8 August 1913 (British Library, L/P&J/ 12/1), 1.
- ⁶ . Handwritten note, O.H. Dumbell to Under-Secretary of State, 9 May 1913 and approved on 13 May 1913 despite Viceroy of India's objections. Lala Har Dayal was arrested in the spring of 1914 and fled the US.
- ⁷ . Seema Sohi, "Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in the Transnational Western US-Canadian Borderlands," *Journal of American History*, 98 No. 2 (September 2011), 430-431.
- ⁸ . On Ghadar see Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011) and Hugh J.M. Johnston, "The Komagata Maru and the Ghadr Party," *B.C. Studies*, 178 (Summer 2013), 9-31.
- ⁹ . R.O. Montgomery to H.F. Bishop, Postmaster, Victoria, 23 July, 1915 (British Library, L/PJ/6/1395/3292).
- ¹⁰ . F.G.A. Butler to Lord Stamfordham, 12 June, 1914 (British National Archives, CO 42/979).
- ¹¹ . Governor General to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 10 June, 1914 (British National Archives, CO 42/979).
- ¹² . Stamfordham to Butler, 14 June, 1914 (BNA, CO 42/979).
- ¹³ . William Hopkinson brought stenographers to these meetings and so we have a verbatim transcript of the June 21 meeting. See "Minutes of a Hindu Mass Meeting," (BNA, CO 42/980), 1-13 as well of a meeting the two days later, see "Minutes of a Public Meeting" (BNA, CO 42/980), 1-23.
- ¹⁴ . Taraknath Das to Rahim, nd (British Library, L/PJ/6/1341/5372 1914).
- ¹⁵ . Re The Immigration Act and Munshi Singh, British Columbia Court of Appeal 20 B.C.R. 243, 29 W.L.R. 45.
- ¹⁶ . Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, 142-143.
- ¹⁷ . A number of murders occurred in the South Asian community in Vancouver in the aftermath including the murder of the agent William Hopkinson by Mewa Singh who was subsequently tried and executed. He remains a martyr for many in the South Asian communities.
- ¹⁸ . Reg Whitaker, Gregory S. Kealey, Andrew Parnaby, *Secret Service: Political Policing in Canada from the Fenians to Fortress America* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2012), 55.
- ¹⁹ . Japanese authorities, in intercepting large

volumes of mail to and from Indians, “have acted illegally and are naturally anxious that the fact should not become known.” W. Conyngham Greene to British Ambassador, Washington and to A.J. Balfour, 16 April 1917 (British Library, L/PJ/6/1559/5784 1918).

²⁰ . On the conspiracy trials see Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, Chapter 3.

²¹ . On the limits of this anti-imperialism

particularly in regard to indigeneity see Renisa Mawani, “Specters of Indigeneity in British-Indian Migration, 1914,” *Law and Society Review*, 46, 2 (2012), 369-403.

²² . Prime Minister to Prime Minister of United Kingdom, November 23, 1918 (Documents on Canadian External Relations, Vol. 2, *The Paris Peace Conference of 1919*), p. 3.

²³ . Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, Introduction.