

**CONTINUOUS PASSAGE:
Early Indo-Canadian History**





The first Indians to settle in Canada were Sikh labourers working primarily in the lumber, railway, and farming industries. Most were from farming regions in the Punjab that faced intense population pressures combined with low wages and inflation. Families mortgaged their land to send one member abroad. In turn, he sent most of his wages home, allowing them to buy more land and improve living conditions. Some of these men were enticed by propaganda from steamship lines and ticket agents, above all promising economic opportunity in Canada.

A provincial labour shortage created demand for Indian workers, but the work was unstable, physically taxing, and wages were generally $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{2}{3}$ of that paid to whites. Isolated work camps were often unhygienic and overcrowded, claiming many lives to typhus fever and tuberculosis.

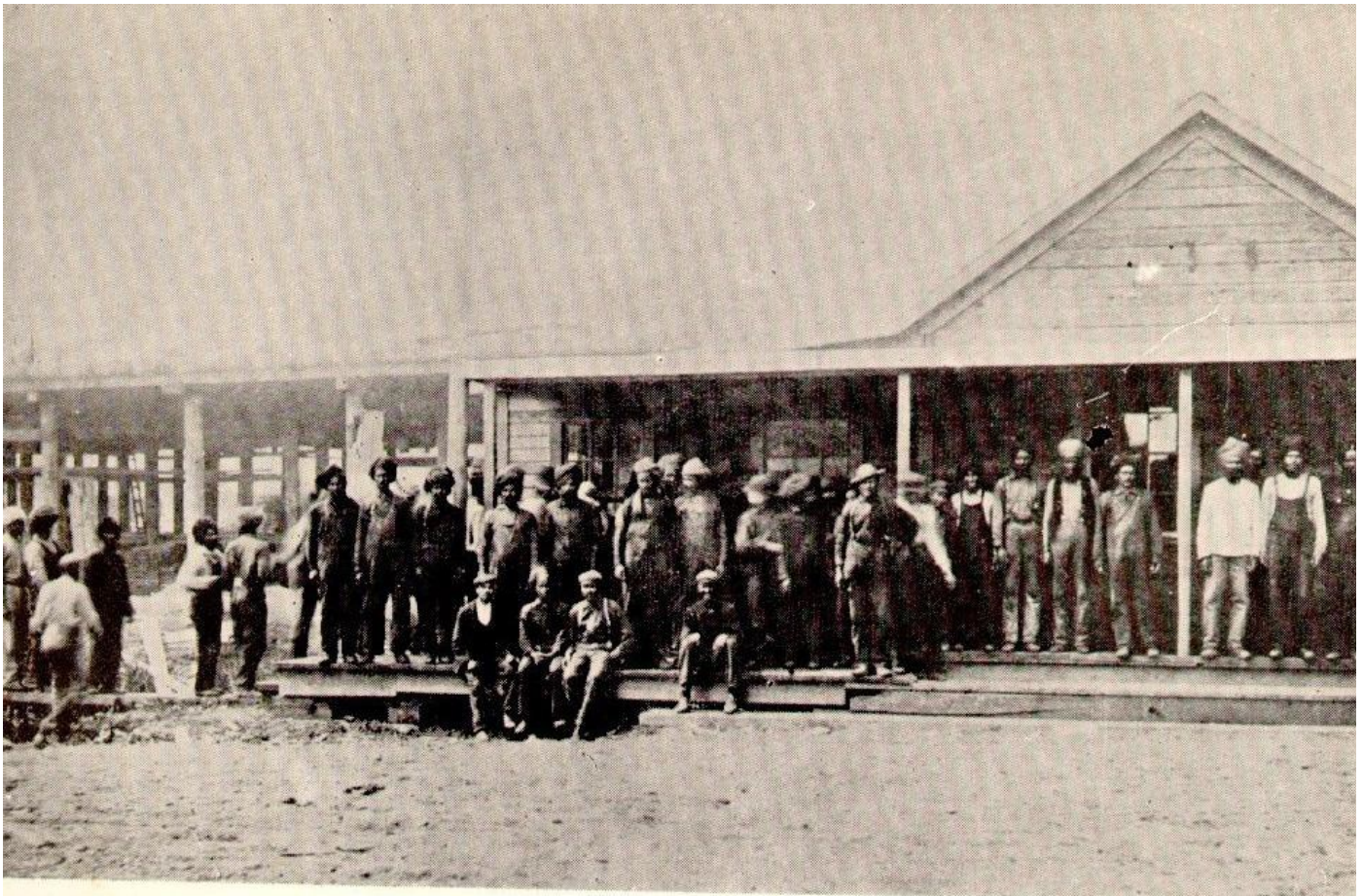


The organized labour movement feared that cheap Indian labour threatened the wages and livelihoods of white working class men, but because many of the Indians were veterans of the British Indian Army, some employers found them preferable to Chinese or Japanese workers.

"These Hindus (sic) are all old soldiers. I would have White labourers of course if I can get them... But I would rather give employment to these old soldiers who have helped to fight for the British Empire than to entire aliens." – The Daily Province, October 1906

Nonetheless, the social climate awaiting these Indian arrivals was less than welcoming. Preceding them, immigrants from China and Japan had begun arriving in the late 1700's and early 1800's. They endured years of legislative discrimination, racism and exclusion, which was especially strong at the turn of the 20th century. There was much anxiety and fear about the evolving ethnic makeup of Canada, with many wishing to restrict immigration to those of European origin. A popular song from the early 1900's captures the ethos of the time:

***“We welcome as brothers all white men still,
But the shifty yellow race,
Whose word is vain, who oppress the weak,
Must find another place.
Then let us stand united all
And show our father's might
That won the home we call our own
For white man's land we fight.
To oriental grasp and greed
We'll surrender, no never.
Our watchword be “God save the King”
White Canada for ever.”***



Indian labour was needed, but the BC government took specific measures to prevent advancement and assimilation. Indians were barred from professions in law, medicine and finance, and were prohibited from buying crown timbre, serving on juries or running for public office. In 1907, they were successively disenfranchised at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels.



The Canadian government wanted to prevent more Indians from coming to Canada, but they had to do this without creating an official ban on Indian immigration. After all, Indians, like white Canadians, were subjects of the British Empire. British and Canadian officials worried about inflaming anger in India's burgeoning independence movement. Thus, it created the "Continuous Passage" law in 1908, which required all prospective Canadian immigrants to arrive on an uninterrupted journey. Due to the great distance, there were no direct shipping lines from India to Canada.

Not content to prevent future immigration, the government also wanted Indians already in the country to leave. It hatched a failed scheme to transport Indians to Belize for indentured labour. J.B. Harkin, secretary of the Minister of the Interior, explained the plan as an *"alternative to the necessity of wholesale deportation to India"* and a *"measure of opportunity in a country climactically better suited to them, in which they would be able to compete more successfully with other labour than in British Columbia."*



7-8 EDWARD VII.

CHAP. 33.

An Act to amend the Immigration Act.

[Assented to 10th April, 1908.]

HIS Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate and House of Commons of Canada, enacts as follows:—

1. Subsection 1 of section 30 of *The Immigration Act*, chapter 93 of the Revised Statutes, 1906, is hereby repealed and the following is substituted therefor:—

“30. The Governor in Council may, by proclamation or order, whenever he considers it necessary or expedient, prohibit the landing in Canada of any specified class of immigrants or of any immigrants who have come to Canada otherwise than by continuous journey from the country of which they are natives or citizens and upon through tickets purchased in that country.”

Prohibition
of certain
immigrants.

OTTAWA: Printed by SAMUEL EDWARD DAWSON, Law Printer to the King's most Excellent Majesty.

“Continuous Passage” was challenged in 1914 by Gurdit Singh, a wealthy Sikh merchant who was approached by a number of Indians looking for passage to Canada. He chartered a Japanese ship, the *Komagata Maru*, to set sail to Canada carrying hundreds of Indian passengers. Citing equality of Indians with white citizens of the British Empire, the ship’s journey held deep implications for Indian-Canadian and Indian-British relations. Much bitterness existed over the British colonial system and its unequal treatment of Indians both in India and abroad. Singh was connected to the Ghadarites, a North American political movement seeking to liberate India from British rule. Ghadarite literature was distributed on board, and prominent Indian nationalists met with passengers en route.

“We are British citizens, and we have the right to visit any part of the Empire.” – Gurdit Singh, May, 1914





On May 23, 1914, the *Komagata Maru* arrived in Burreet Inlet near Vancouver. Federal officials were awaiting its arrival, vowing to prevent the Indians from disembarking. The public outcry was also immediate. The government was flooded with protests and deportation petitions from citizens, community associations, trade unions, and religious groups.



The passengers on the *Komagata Maru* were held captive in Burreet Inlet for two months. Worn down, demoralized, and on the brink of starvation, they finally agreed to leave on the condition that officials provide provisions. Throngs of civilians stood on the rooftops of Vancouver to watch the ship go, cheering as it did.

The Hong Kong government refused to let the *Komagata Maru* return to its shores, forcing it to sail to India, where it docked in a small coastal town called Budge Budge. There, it was overtaken by a British gunboat and its passengers placed under guard. The British government considered the ship's voyage to Canada an act of political agitation against the Empire. It tried to arrest the presumed leaders of the group, killing 20 passengers in the ensuing chaos.

The *Komagata Maru* incident was not only a historically significant event in Canada – it also marked a turning point in India's struggle for independence. The event and its violent aftermath shone a light on the myths of the British Empire—namely, that equality, fairness and justice were available to all of its subjects. In Canada, it is a symbol of the racist and exclusionist regulations that defined Canadian immigration policy until the early 1960s. In 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that his government would formally apologize for the decision in Parliament on May 18.



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