

EARLY SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRATION TO CANADA: THE STORY OF THE SIKHS

The first South Asians to arrive in Canada were Indian men of the Sikh faith. From their earliest visit in 1897 until Canada's racially-based immigration policies were relaxed in 1951, most of Canada's South Asian immigrants were Sikhs from the Punjab region of India. Their story is essential to understanding the history of South Asian Canadians.

1897-1904:



Sikh Diamond Jubilee Attendant, 1897

In 1897, India was part of the British dominion, and Sikhs in particular were well known for their service as soldiers for the empire. The very first Indians to visit Canada were part of a Sikh military contingent traveling through British Columbia on the way to Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations that year in London.

A second group of Sikh soldiers visited in 1902 on the way to Edward VII's coronation. They made an appearance before a crowd in Vancouver, prompting wild applause. The enthusiastic reception was documented with a headline in Vancouver's *Daily Province* which read, "**Turbaned Men Excite Interest: Awe-inspiring men from India held the crowds**". Sikhs were esteemed for their military service, and Canadians were impressed by their stately and exotic appearance. The group passed through Montreal before sailing to London, and when they returned to India, they brought tales of Canada back with them.

1904 – 1913

ANTI-ASIAN SENTIMENT

In 1904, 45 men from India immigrated to Canada. Indian immigrants were few and far between until 1906 and 1907 when a brief surge brought 4700-5000 of them to the country, most settling in B.C.

Just a few years earlier, Sikh visitors had been warmly received, but the social climate awaiting these Indian arrivals was much less 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."*



Anti-Asian Riots, 1907

This hostility towards Asians reached a zenith in 1907 when a mob organized by the Asiatic Exclusion League descended on Chinese and Japanese shops and businesses, destroying property and terrifying residents.

Entering into this climate, Indian immigrants faced many difficulties from those who wanted the face of Canada to remain white. As fellow subjects of the British empire, Indians had special claim to citizenship in Canada, but their arrival was met with racism and hostility.

SIKH LABOUR IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Many of the early Indian immigrants had been soldiers in the British Indian Army. With the exception of a few Muslims and Hindus, almost all of them were male Sikhs from Hoshiarpur and Jullundur. These were farming regions of the Punjab that faced intense population pressures combined with low wages and inflation. Families would often mortgage their land to send one member abroad. In turn, he sent most of his wages back to his family, 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.



Map of India, Punjab in red



Sikhs in Vancouver, early 1900s

Most of the Indians settled in Vancouver and worked as labourers in the lumber, railway and farming industries. Some went to isolated work camps in smaller B.C. communities, where they often toiled under miserable and unhygienic conditions. In 1906, 40 Indians arrived at Tod Inlet, a tiny region of Vancouver Island, to work for the Portland Cement Company. Their story was recounted in the documentary *Searching for the Sikhs of Tod Inlet*, and evidence of their history can be found in the remnants of traditional Indian brick ovens which are still found on the site.

“In the evenings they used to gather in the field at the back of our house and sing sad and mournful songs.” – Mrs. Parsell, plant engineer’s wife, on the Sikh workers

Fatal diseases such as typhus fever and tuberculosis were common on the work site, leading to many deaths. Photos document a cremation ceremony for a deceased Sikh worker at Tod Inlet, attended by both Indians and whites.

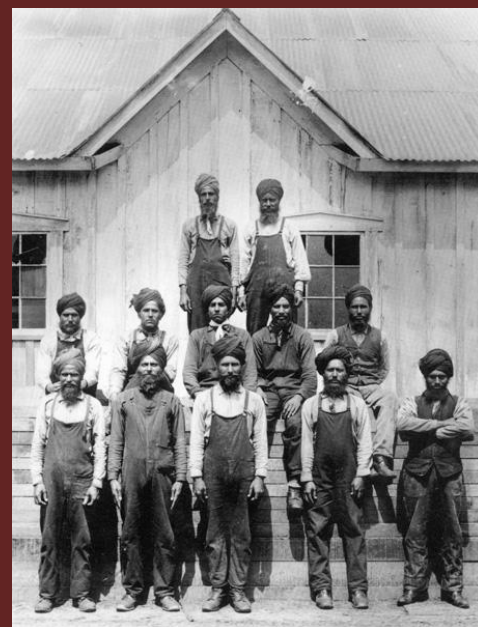


Cremation ceremony of Sikh worker on Vancouver Island

But wherever the Indian labourers settled, the work was unstable, physically taxing and low paying. Generally, wages matched those of the Chinese and Japanese in B.C. – 1/2 to 2/3 of the wages paid to whites.



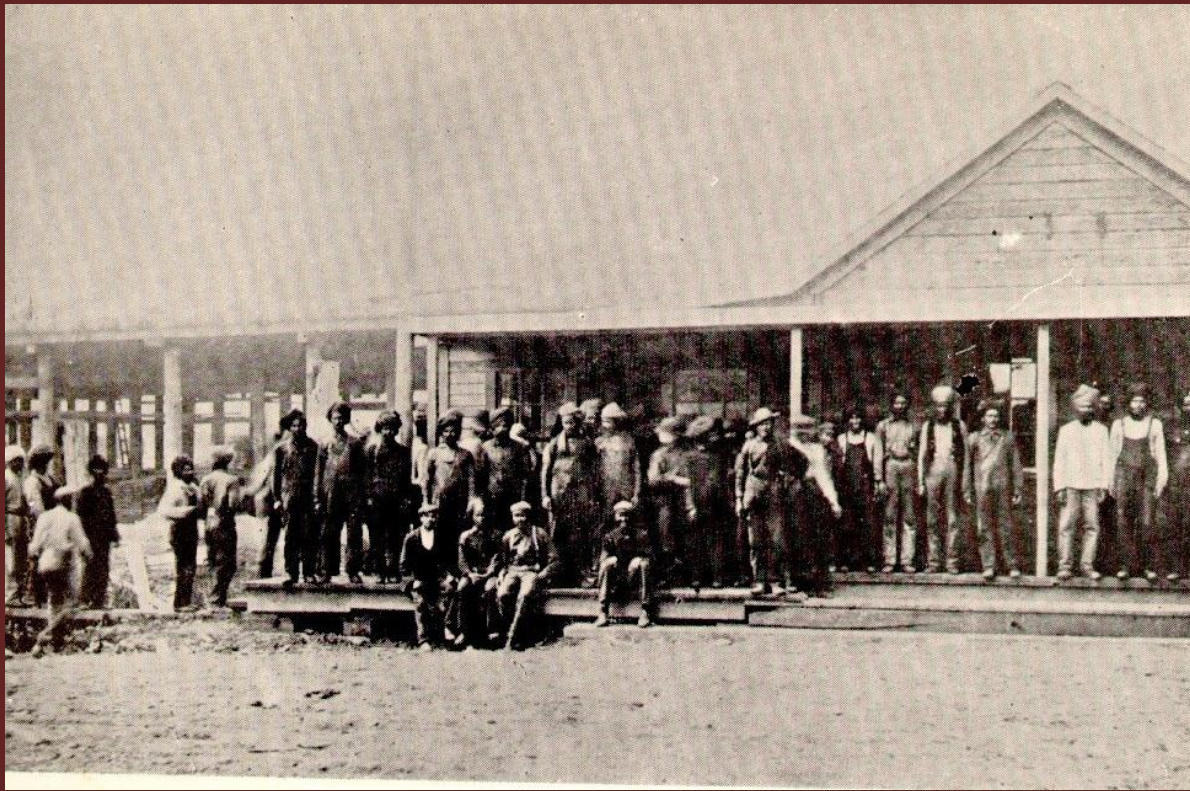
Sikh worker in BC, early 1900s



Sikh millworkers in Barnet, B.C., 1905



Sikh brick workers in British Columbia



Sikh workers for the Canadian Western Lumber Company

DISCRIMINATION AND DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Indians proved to be hard workers, but they suffered discrimination at many levels. They faced hostility from the organized labour movement, which feared that cheap Indian labour threatened the wages and livelihoods of white working class men. The Victoria Trades and Labor Council claimed that Indian workers *“will be the means of excluding the very class of labour that is most essential for the progress and prosperity of the country – i.e., the white worker”*.

Nonetheless, they continued to be hired by B.C. companies because of a provincial labour shortage. Some employers found them preferable to the Chinese and Japanese because of their British status.

“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*

But grudging acceptance did not make the lives of these men any easier. In order to prevent their 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, Indians were successively disenfranchised at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. All persons with their origins in India were denied voting rights unless they were born of Anglo-Saxon parents.

Despite these difficulties, a small number of Indians were able to prosper and establish themselves as independent businessmen and realtors. A few eventually acquired land and owned their own lumber mills. In 1907, the *Khalsa Diwan Society* was founded by Vancouver’s Sikh community, and in 1908 the first gurdwara (Sikh temple) in Canada began to be built in the Fraser Valley. The Trethewey family owned Abbotsford Lumber Company, which employed many of B.C.’s Indian immigrants. In a gesture of friendship, the family donated the lumber used in the gurdwara’s construction, which was completed and officially opened in 1911. For many years thereafter, it would be the center of cultural, religious and educational life for B.C.’s Indo-Canadian community.



Sikh Temple, 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B. C., Canada
built in 1907 (now replaced)

But for most of the early Indian immigrants, life in Canada meant hardship, racism and lack of opportunity. Much of South Asian culture is centered around family life, but Indians were not allowed to bring wives or children to Canada, a source of deprivation that caused much loneliness and pain. Many of them crossed the border into the United States or eventually returned to India.

Even as the Canadian government took measures to prevent Indians from integrating, officials frequently portrayed Indians as unassimilable by choice. In 1908, William Lyon Mackenzie King stated the following:



“It was clearly recognized in regard to emigration from India to Canada, that the native of India is not a person suited to this country, that, accustomed as many of them are to the conditions of a tropical climate, and possessing manners and customs so unlike those of our own people, their inability to readily adapt themselves to surroundings entirely different could not do other than entail an amount of privation and suffering which render a discontinuance of such immigration most desirable in the interests of the Indians themselves.”

THE CONTINUOUS PASSAGE LAW

As anti-Indian sentiment rose, the government sought a way 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 British subjects. British and Canadian officials worried that discriminating against them might inflame anger in India’s burgeoning independence movement.

Out of this concern was borne the “Continuous Passage” rule in 1908. It required all prospective Canadian immigrants to arrive on an uninterrupted journey. Those “of Asiatic origin” had to have \$200 on their person upon arrival, in contrast to the \$25 required from Europeans. Due to the great distance, there were few direct shipping lines from India to Canada. The ones that did exist, such as a Canadian Pacific Line running directly from India to Vancouver, was terminated by ordinance of the federal government. The legislation was crafted carefully, never specifically naming Indians, but its impact was immediate and long-lasting. For the next 40 years, only an average of 20 Indians per year would enter Canada.

Astonishingly, halting future Indian immigration was not enough for the government. It wanted Indians already in the country to leave. A scheme was hatched to transport the 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.”* Harkin took a delegation of local Indian leaders to Belize, in



an effort to convince them to move their community there. Witnessing the deplorable conditions under which they were expected to live, the Indians quickly refused the plan.

PANAMA MARU ARRIVAL AND COURT CHALLENGE



Depiction of the Panama Maru

Nonetheless, the exclusionary immigration law did not go unchallenged. In 1913, a ship called the *Panama Maru*, holding 39 immigrants from India, docked in Victoria B.C. While initially detained and ordered deported, the passengers were eventually released when the case was brought before the B.C. Supreme Court. A technicality in the wording of the continuous passage law caused it to be struck down. This temporarily opened the door for Indian immigrants to once again legally enter Canada.

Indians abroad became hopeful that landing in Canada was possible once more. The stage was set for the dramatic events of May, 1914, which would become known as *the Komagata Maru Incident*.