Indo-Canadians - 1920s and 1930s:

By the end of WWI in 1918, fewer than 2000 Indians remained in Canada. Most were still concentrated in B.C., where they comprised less than 0.5% of the population. Their low numbers resulted from the Continuous Passage law and regulations restricting the entry of Indian women and children into Canada.

Before 1920, only 9 Indian women lived in Canada. Most of them were wives of influential Sikh leaders who were able to negotiate for special exemptions. But the majority of Indo-Canadian men lived in bachelor societies, deprived of the comforts of marital and familial life. The restrictions on women were put in place to prevent the growth of Indo-Canadian communities.

“The policy of setting strict limits to Oriental immigration is necessary to preserve British Columbia for the white race. If the demands of the Sikhs were granted, the Sikh families would be the nucleus of a growing colony. The Oriental problem can be kept under control but not if it is rooted in the soil by family life.” – The Globe and Mail, 1917

Indian culture emphasized marriage and children as essential components of a full and happy life, so this deprivation was very difficult for the Sikhs. In 1919, political pressure from Sikh leaders in Canada and India finally succeeded in convincing the government to allow “British Hindus (sic) residing in Canada” to send for their wives and children.

Perhaps another motive for allowing Indian women to immigrate was the fear of mixed-race unions between Indian men and white women. In the early years of Asian immigration to Canada, public warnings were delivered to women contemplating such unions:

“The State Department has issued public notice... that marriages between women of British nationality... and Moslems, Hindus... should not be allowed, unless these women are first warned that such marriages may be repudiated by the husbands if they return to the country of their birth. The influx of Hindus in British Columbia with the exclusion of their womankind lends point to such a warning.” – the Globe and Mail, 1914

Once Indian women and children were allowed into Canada, the community began to grow and prosper, but Sikh women did face unique difficulties. In India, they had lived in large households with extended family members who helped with domestic work and childcare. But such arrangements were not possible with their limited and sporadic numbers in Canada. Sikh women thus lost some of this support in their new home country, along with the rich social and community networks they had developed in India.

Both women and men had to make many sacrifices and adjustments, but the presence of Indian families in Canada immediately brought increased stability to the Indo-Canadian community. By the mid 1920s, about 300 Indian women and children had settled in British Columbia. Indian children went to school with Canadian children and wore Western clothing, which also helped to hasten their integration.

For Sikhs in Canada at this time, the gurdwaras (Sikh temples) soon became the major centers of activity and support. By 1920, there were gurdwaras in several communities across B.C., including Vancouver, Victoria, Nanaimo, Abbotsford, Fraser Mills, New Westminster and Paldi. Philanthropy is a very important element of Sikh religious belief, and through the gurdwaras many were active in raising funds for community members and charitable causes in India. By 1920, $300 000 in donations had been raised in Vancouver alone.
As families developed, Indians were able to quickly form tight-knit and strong communities in spite of continuing discrimination from the wider Canadian society. Xenophobic groups like the Native Sons of Canada organized in B.C. with the aim of keeping the ethnic composition of Canada white and Anglo-Saxon. These groups not only discriminated against Indians, but also other Asians, Jews, and Eastern and Southern Europeans. In the workforce, there continued to be wage disparities between white and non-white workers, and some establishments and housing developments still excluded Indians and other Asians.

For most of the early 20th Century, Indo-Canadian labour was concentrated in the forestry and farming industries. Gradually, some Indians were able to save or pool enough money to start their own lumber companies and other entrepreneurial ventures.

One of these was the Kapoor Lumber Company, which was started by Kapoor Singh Sidoo in 1928. Kapoor was originally from Ontario. He had had been recruited to B.C. by another Sikh man named Mayo Singh, who years earlier had opened three lumber mills on Vancouver Island, including one in a B.C. community founded by Mayo called Paldi. Kapoor was initially hired to be Mayo’s bookkeeper, and eventually opened his own mill along the railway line at Sooke Lake. Kapoor and Mayo were both successful and well-known B.C. businessmen. They differed from many of the Sikh men in Canada at the time because Kapoor was formally educated, and both spoke fluent English, did not wear turbans or keep beards, and dressed in genteel Western clothing.

By the 1930s, 10% of the Indo-Canadian population was self-employed, and Indian business owners were even employing white Canadians and those of other ethnic backgrounds. They gradually started expanding into other industries, such as the fuel business and fisheries. Many Indo-Canadian men, and later women, would work in fish canneries such as those owned by B.C. Packers in the Prince Rupert and Steveston regions of B.C.
Through their increased presence in varied industries and the enrollment of Indian children in Canadian schools, assimilation and social interaction with other Canadians began to increase. During major Sikh celebrations, small numbers of white Canadians even visited gurdwaras to celebrate with Indian friends.
Sikhs at Old Hillcrest Lumber Company celebrate the arrival of the Granthsahib (holy book)

Sikh celebration, at Old Hillcrest Lumber Company, 1930s

Interior of gurdwara at Old Hillcrest Lumber Company, 1930s

Though Indo-Canadians began to be more established during this era, it was not until the 1950s that immigration law in Canada changed enough to allow significant numbers of South Asians to land and settle in this country.