

Those Canada Turned Away: Remembering the Komagata Maru Incident

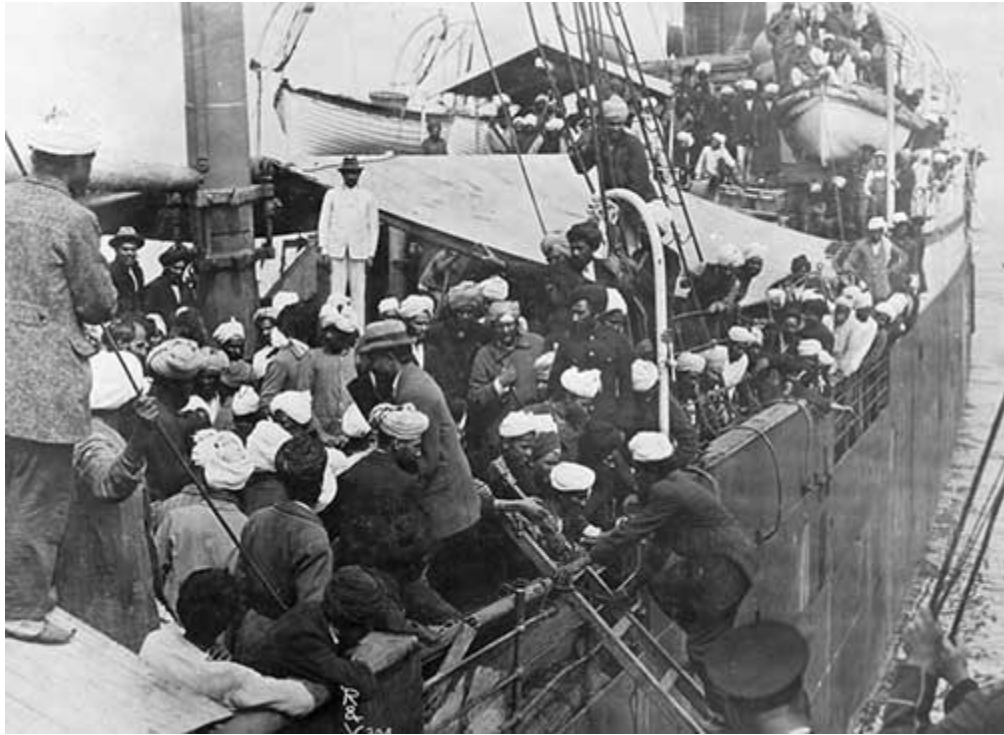
When Harbhajan “Harb” Gill arrived in Canada with his father in 1969, they were not the first of the Gill family to have set foot on Canadian shores. The family’s first link to this country of promise and hope took place alongside a dark landmark in immigration history when Canada was quite the opposite. To find it Harb goes back to 1906, the year Rattan Singh Gill, his grandfather, landed in Vancouver with many others from the same village. “I think ... we had about 4000 people by 1906,” he says of the budding community of Indians in Vancouver “up to 1908 there was about 5200 people.”

Rattan was living and working in this close-knit community when, on May 23, 1914, the ship *Komagata Maru* sailed into the Burrard Inlet just off the coast. What Harb does know is that as this contentious incident in history was unfolding, his grandfather was hard at work delivering wood for heating houses. “So when the *Komagata Maru* ship did come over, my grandfather was here trying to help with the community” he says “what needed to be done at the time.”

Harb can only imagine how his grandfather would have felt about what would eventually be deemed an example of racist and nativist immigration acts and policies. That definition would come decades later. At the time, Rattan would likely have only felt frustration, sadness and outrage as the events unfolded before his eyes.

Komagata Maru was a steamship on which a large group of British Subjects attempted to emigrate from India to Canada, and were denied entry. It is an incident steeped in years of building racist and xenophobic sentiments directed towards people of Asian origin. These resulted in the [Continuous Journey Regulation](#), which prohibited the landing of any immigrant who did not arrive via non-stop voyage from the country of origin. This regulation, along with another that demanded Asian immigrants arrive with \$200 each, instead of the usual \$25, was intended to exclude “undesirable” Asian immigrants.

These rules prevented the 376 people on board the *Maru* from even setting foot onto Canadian soil. The passengers mounted an appeal, but after weeks and weeks, the ship and passengers languishing just off the coast, the appeal failed, and “after 2 months fighting, no food on the ship, lots of suffering, they went back,” says Harb.



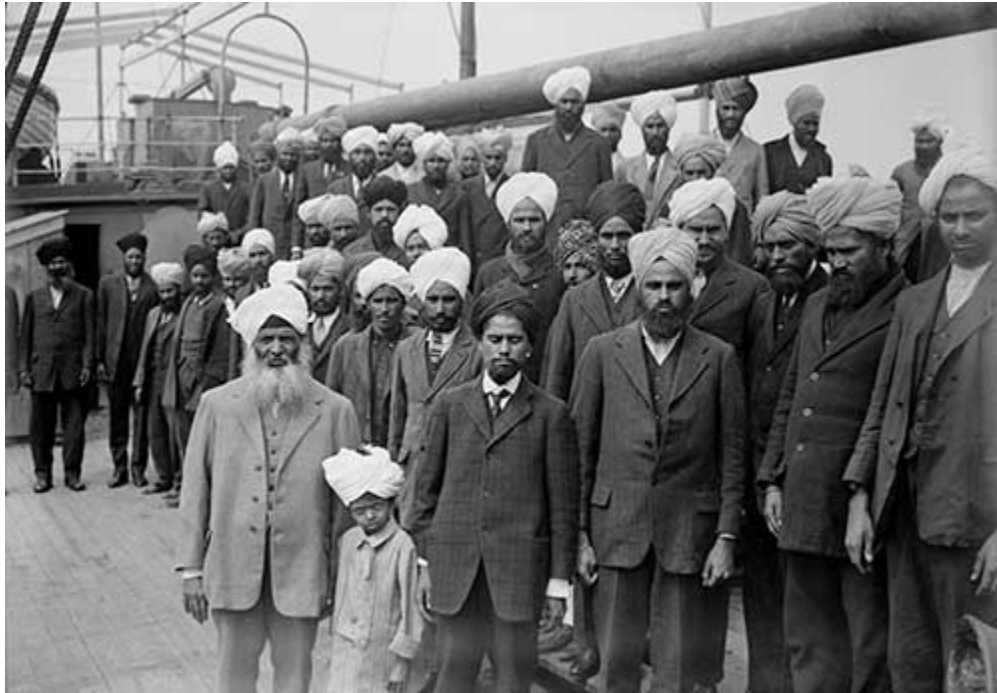
Sikhs on board the *Komogata Maru* in English Bay, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, 1914.

Credit: Library and Archives Canada



The S.S. *Komogata Maru* with passengers on decks.

Credit: Vancouver Public Library Historical Photographs



Sikhs aboard *Komagata Maru*.

Credit: Vancouver Public Library Historical Photographs

Upon return to India, *Komagata Maru* once again encountered barriers. As Harb explains, the British government was restricting passengers from spreading the word about what had happened, why they had returned. “There were so many people enlisted with the British military,” he says, “if word got out, this is what had happened to Indian people and we’re fighting for that British Raj?” With a possible uprising in the minds of politicians, the ship’s passengers were deemed potential political agitators and were placed under escort. When they resisted, a riot ensued and 19 were killed.

Back in Vancouver, in the 5200-strong Indian community, outrage had spread. As Harb explains, following the incident, the majority of the Indian community could no longer tolerate living in Canada, “ninety percent of these people went back to India... that included my grandfather.”

Fast forwarding to 1976 and 21-year-old Harb, recent graduate of UBC’s film program, is taking a leave of absence from his job at Canada Post to go to India. He is hoping to find inspiration for a film in his birthplace. “I ended up staying in India for 5 years” says Harb, describing how he would travel back and forth from Punjab, where he had family, to Bombay, where his career was launching. Harb found success producing Bollywood movies, but has also created more serious films, tackling themes of gambling, the caste system, and family complexities. “As long as they don’t lose money, I don’t mind making these films,” says Harb.

Harb got married, an arranged union, and brought his family to Vancouver. Now a seasoned filmmaker and passionate storyteller, Harb felt a need to continue sharing stories from his community. “*Komagata Maru* interested me,” and his passion to bring the story to light ignited as he began to ask people what they knew about the incident.

With Harb's prompting, a floodgate opened and stories began flowing out of the community. Harb soon found himself involved in a community outcry to parliament for a formal apology. "We went through the parliament fighting to get an apology after the Chinese people got their apology for head tax, and Japanese for the internment... so we thought, you know, these same types of things happened with those other communities I believe we should have had an apology in the parliament from our government as well."

Over the next few years there would be an apology from the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, followed by another from former Prime Minister Stephen Harper at the 13th annual Ghadri Babiyon Da Mela festival in Surrey, BC, and finally a formal apology from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in the House of Commons. "It was a very big deal in the community," says Harb of the formal apology, "and not just for our community I think it was for human society that something wrong was done and there was a government willing to say it was wrong."

Harb continues to share stories of the *Komagata Maru* incident, now as President of the *Komagata Maru Heritage Foundation*, and is also working on a film project he hopes to announce this summer.

May 23, 2018, marks the 104th anniversary of *Komagata Maru's* arrival.