

Knowledge, Power and Race through the Komagata Maru

Race is a modern strategy of power “that instituted an entire range of differences (historical, linguistic, corporeal, cultural, climatic and moral) between Europeans and non-Europeans, as evidenced in scientific, social scientific, humanistic, and common-sense knowledge, and as materialized in attendant regimes of violence.”

(Mawani, 2012)



Race Through the History of the Komagata Maru



Historical Context

- In the early 1900s, Canadian dominion authorities wanted to make Canada a "white" nation.
- Frank Oliver became the Minister of Interior in 1905 and pushed a “closed door policy” aimed to limit Asian migrants from coming to Canada.
- In January 1914, a revision made to the Dominion Immigration Act stipulated that migrants may only enter Canada via “continuous journey.” This revision was a veiled attempt to curtail ships coming from India.
- Prior to the January 1914 revision, ships have successfully challenged the “continuous journey” legislation. In 1913, for example, the migrant ship Panama Maru successfully challenged an earlier version which was deemed unenforceable.
- Europeans, especially British, French, and German, were not impacted by this legislation and continued to arrive in large numbers during the early part of the twentieth century. (Mawani, 2012; Johnston, 2013; Satzewich, 2000.)

What Happened?



- On May 23rd, 1914, Komagata Maru, a Japanese steamship carrying 376 passengers (mostly from Punjab) was prohibited from disembarking in Vancouver on the grounds of the “continuous journey” clause. These migrants were not a uniform group. They had a range of political and religious beliefs.
- Members of the Vancouver Gurdwara Society, which consisted of South Asians already living in Canada, organized the Shore Committee. Their aim was to provide support for the migrants on the ship. Hussain Rahim, a member of the Shore Committee, obtained legal counsel to challenge Canada’s decision to deny entry.
- The British Empire was trying to maintain the myth that all British subjects were free to travel within its empire and it realised that Canada’s attempt to exclude South Asian immigrants could shatter that myth which could have damaging consequences to Britain’s grip on its empire.
- Therefore, under pressure from the British imperial government, and supporters of the migrants, the Canadian authorities conceded that one migrant can come forth as a case to test the constitutionality of the Immigration Act.
- The lawyers on the case, K.C. Cassidy, and Edward Bird, selected passenger Munshi Singh as the suitable litigant. He was picked from the passenger list after an interview with Bird.
- The lawyers argued that Singh was an “Aryan” British subject and thus he should not be denied entry into Canada. “Aryan” is a term that was appropriated by western Europeans in the 19th century to label themselves as racially superior. The lawyers further argued that as British subjects, the British Indians had a right to go anywhere in the empire and thus Canada did not the right to deny them entry.
- The appellate court’s Justice McPhillips ruled that British Indians were not equal to whites and Canada’s Immigration Act is within its jurisdiction to enforce the exclusion. The Judges based the refusal on presumed racial “desirability, suitability, and assimilability.” Even though Indigenous people were never consulted in the making of this decision, one judge reasoned that it would be an injustice to Indigenous people if the migrants were allowed in.

(Mawani, 2012; Johnston, 2013; Kazimi, 2004)

Race is a Strategy for Power

- Knowledge production on race was first established by Europeans as a means of justifying early colonial and imperial efforts.
- Racialized knowledges have been used to mark who is privileged and who is marginalized within a nation. Some have been given rights while others have been disadvantaged and dispossessed.
- Race as a strategy is not only centralized (top-down) but it is internalised. In addition to being exclusionary and repressive, race as a strategy of power enfolds us all “through productive forces.” This means that power works through each and every one of us.

Cartoon Analysis

- The figure representing Canada is young and European-looking. He is in Indigenous attire but there “is a mismatch of cultural signifiers as he is wearing a Plains/Prairie headdress, a Prairie/Subarctic hide robe with fur cuffs and a Wampum belt.”
- The young figure representing Canada has appropriated Indigenous attire and is now acting as a gatekeeper. Canada is attempting to represent itself as native to exclude British Indians.
- The key here is that this is Canada’s appropriation of Indigeneity that aims to normalize settler authority at the expense of Indigenous dispossession.



Figure 1. "No Open Door for the Indian!" Hindi Punch, 3 May 1914, p. 16 Courtesy of University of Wisconsin-Madison, Library.

What does the case of Komagata Maru say about Power?

- The denial to disembark and subsequent deportation are examples of Canada claiming indigeneity and displacing Indigenous law.
- The assumption of Canadian sovereignty is written back into the distant past to naturalise it.
- The judge’s ruling showed disregard for the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which proclaimed Indigenous and British coexistence as equal sovereign powers.
- This is not just a ship of migrants, but it is also an anti-racist challenge to the veiled racism of British and Canadian colonialism.
- Racist knowledge production has far-reaching consequences. It has taken Canada most of the twentieth century to start to open the anti-Asian closed-door policy. (Mawani, 2012; Johnston, 2013)



How can we move forward?



- Canadian politicians refer to the Komagata Maru incident as a “sad chapter.” This has long been used as a way to reconcile racism as a thing of the past. The Komagata Maru is not simply a “sad chapter,” but rather it underlines the foundational racism that was an integral part of Canada’s state formation.
- Histories are intertwined. This means that we need a transnational perspective when engaging with histories like that of the Komagata Maru.

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