

# THE CONTINUOUS JOURNEY REGULATION, THE GHADR PARTY, AND THE KOMAGATA MARU



A factsheet by Tanesha Bhangu



This factsheet distills **Hugh Johnston's** article "**The Komagata Maru and the Ghadr Party: Past and Present Aspects of a Historic Challenge to Canada's Exclusion of Immigrants from India.**"

## CONTINUOUS JOURNEY REGULATION

The **Continuous Journey Regulation** of 1908 restricted the entry of South Asian immigrants by mandating that an individual must arrive through a continuous journey from their country of origin. According to many scholars, including Johnston, this Act intended to make Canada a "white man's country."

## THE KOMAGATA MARU

The sailing of the **Komagata Maru** from Hong Kong on April 4, 1914 intended to challenge the *Continuous Journey Regulation* by testing Canada's immigration regulations. This ship arrived at Vancouver's Harbour on May 23, 1914 and remained there for two months as Canadian immigration officials barred passengers from entering under the terms of the *Continuous Journey Regulation*.

## GURDIT SINGH

Singh chartered the ship and led the voyage. Initially, he had no intention of going to Canada, but after meeting many South Asians in Hong Kong needing to go to Canada, he organized the *Komagata Maru*. Singh was a businessman and viewed this as a business transaction. On the ship, he made space for a *gurdwara* (temple) with the Sikh Holy Book. This allowed for *kirtan* (chanting of sacred verses from the book), which supported the passenger's mental and emotional wellness.



City of Vancouver: Komagata Maru Charterer Gurdit Singh and Passengers  
<https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/komagata-maru-remembrance-day.aspx>

## THE PASSENGERS

There were 376 passengers, primarily from the Punjab region of India (a British colony at the time), aboard the *Komagata Maru*. 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims, 12 Hindus, and all were British subjects. Each passenger sailed to Canada for their individual reasons. Some had economic motives such as seeking employment opportunities, others wanted to challenge the discriminatory laws, and some simply returned to Canada after a trip to India.

## CHALLENGING THE LEGISLATION

"Canada's South Asian immigrant community had been contesting" the *Continuous Journey Regulation* since it was enacted. Some loopholes were found in the legislation and some South Asian newcomers were allowed entry. One example is the *Panama Maru*, which arrived in Victoria, BC, in 1913. Although initially passengers were denied entry, the judge in a court case permitted them to enter on technical grounds. Following this, revisions were made to the legislation to deter more South Asians from arriving. Six months later, the *Komagata Maru* set sail. Passengers did not know that the loophole had been amended.

## THE KOMAGATA MARU AT VANCOUVER'S HARBOUR

Canadian immigration officials believed that the *Komagata Maru's* voyage to Canada was arranged by the revolutionary Ghadr Party to fight against British colonialism. "Canadian officials became convinced that a core group" of the passengers aboard were dangerous revolutionaries. By this point, public opinion was unsympathetic toward the passengers on the ship who were running out of food, water, and other necessities. Therefore, the passengers were prohibited from entering Canada and confined to the ship.

## THE SHORE COMMITTEE AND THE COURT

Many South Asians living and working in BC in the early twentieth century formed the Shore Committee to support the passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru*.

They protested and took their case to court to defend the passengers, stating that Canada's laws were discriminatory.

They also demanded that they be recognized as full citizens as they were subjects of the British Empire. The trials took place during the ship's two months at the harbour. All 376 passengers were represented by one man, Munshi Singh, so the possibility of finding loopholes would be limited. The final decision was that the ship must be turned back to Asia.

## TRIP BACK TO ASIA

Once the *Komagata Maru* arrived back in India in Budge Budge, passengers were searched for connections to the Ghadr Party. After passengers were questioned, thirteen passengers close to Gurdit Singh were marked as dangerous radicals. To the surprise of British officials in India, the passengers had a strong attachment to Gurdit Singh. The rest of the passengers were still subject to harsh treatment. Some were held at a prison in Kolkata, and the rest were escorted to Punjab, where they were confined to their villages. The events of Budge Budge were censored, allowing British officials to maintain control and suppress the possibility of an uprising against them. Following this, the *Komagata Maru* received little support from the Indians for many years until Gurdit Singh publicized his account of the *Komagata Maru*.

## THE GHADR PARTY

Formed in Oregon in 1908, the **Ghadr Party** was a revolutionary group wanting to overthrow British colonialism in India. Members of the group included students and labourers. Their nationalist aspirations spread among many South Asians in North America. Before 1914, this group was solely based outside of India.

## GHADR PARTY AND KOMAGATA MARU'S POPULAR CONNECTION

While the *Komagata Maru* was in Vancouver, some members of the Shore Committee purchased pistols during a trip to the United States. Attempting to bring the pistols across the border, they were stopped by Canadian immigration officials, who believed they intended to provide the ship's passengers with weapons. Although there was no direct evidence of this, it became a common belief among Canadian officials that the Shore Committee and Ghadr Party were working together. Johnston suggests that purchasing pistols was a random action and the government used this as an excuse to temporarily imprison some members of the Shore Committee.

## 2008 APOLOGY

In 2008, in Surrey, BC, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized on behalf of the Canadian government for the *Komagata Maru*. Johnston highlights that in Harper's apology, there was no mention of the Ghadr Party because it would spark controversy on the true purpose of the *Komagata Maru* and the *Continuous Journey Regulation*. Harper also avoided *Ghadr* because it would not fit his upbeat message promoting inclusivity and multiculturalism.

## JOHNSTON'S ARGUMENTS

- Although the Ghadr Party initially had no association with the voyage of the *Komagata Maru*, both must be understood together as their histories are intertwined. Some passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru* supported Ghadr ideology, but the ship was not chartered by the Ghadr Party.
- The blame for denying the entry of the *Komagata Maru's* passengers cannot be put on one individual; instead, we must acknowledge that this was a result of the racist structure of society in the early twentieth century in Canada.

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