

COMING TO CANADA

The *Komagata Maru* Affair

FOCUSSING ON THE ISSUE

*Newcomers from South Asia began arriving in British Columbia in 1903.
Why did government policy discriminate against them?*

Battle in the Inlet

As the world prepared for war, conflict of another kind broke out in Vancouver. Racial tensions had been evident in the city for many years. (See page 24.) In 1914, the *Komagata Maru*, a tramp steamer crowded with 376 people, lay at anchor in Vancouver harbour. The passengers, mainly Sikhs from India, wanted to live in Canada. But city authorities would not allow them to land. Government policy at the time forbade immigration from India except under special circum-

stances. The *Komagata Maru* arrived at Vancouver on 23 May 1914. It was immediately **quarantined** at anchor and no one was allowed to disembark. Immigration officials ruled that the passengers were inadmissible to Canada.

Meanwhile, there was a growing fear that Sikhs already living in Vancouver might try to smuggle some of the passengers ashore. Officials ordered the captain to depart, but the passengers would not let him. As food and water on the ship ran low, demonstrations broke out in the city. Tensions

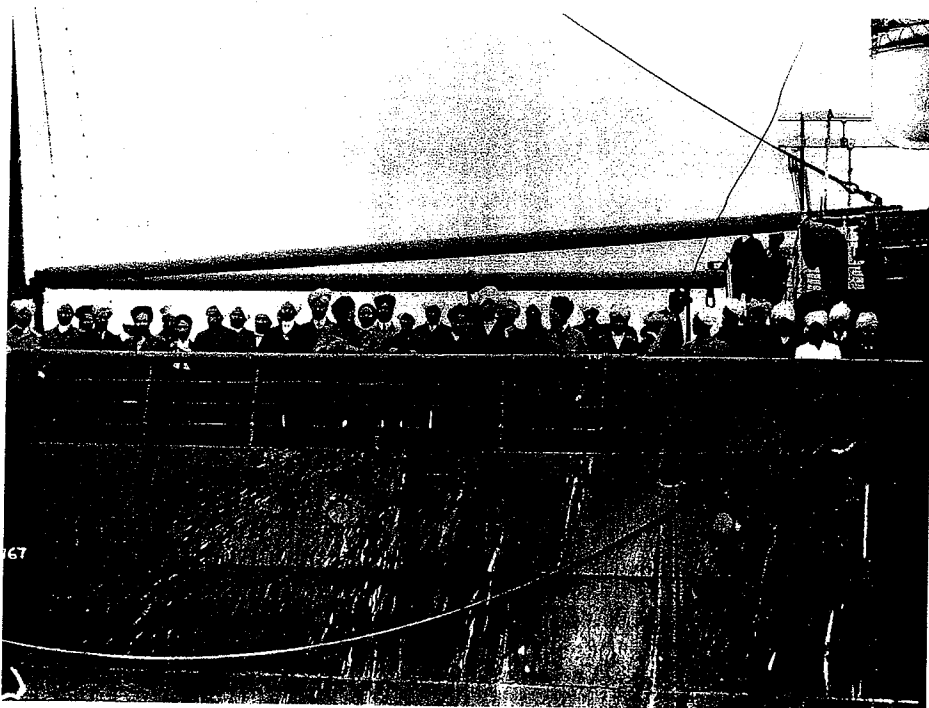
between white and South Asian residents neared the breaking point.

On 18 July, in the middle of the night, a tug carrying 160 armed police made its way out to the *Komagata Maru*. The plan was to take control of the ship and force it to leave. The resulting "Battle of Burrard Inlet" was a fiasco! As the tug approached, passengers showered it with coal, bricks, and scrap metal. After almost capsizing, the boarding party had to beat a hasty retreat back to shore. Finally the government called in the naval vessel HMCS *Rainbow*. The appearance of the navy convinced the people onboard the *Komagata Maru* that they had no hope of changing the government's mind. They agreed to leave, and on 23 July, the ship departed Vancouver.

But the affair was not over. Sikhs in Vancouver deeply resented the treatment of the people on the *Komagata Maru*. They responded by attacking police spies. Several people were shot, including an immigration official, William Hopkinson, who was murdered while attending a trial at the Vancouver courthouse. His killer, Mewa Singh, was executed for the crime.

From India to Canada

The first immigrants from India to settle in British Columbia came in 1904. Within a few years there



Passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru* waited to be allowed permission to disembark at Vancouver. What does this photograph tell you about the passengers?

were 5000, almost all Sikhs from the Punjab in northern India. Many were single men who hoped to earn a good wage in Canada, then return to their homes in India.

The newcomers were met with hostility by resident British Columbians who wanted to keep the province "white." The majority, who were British or American in background, were prejudiced against people with different skin colours, religions, and cultures. They did not believe that people from Asia could adapt to the Canadian way of life. Prejudice was worsened by the issue of jobs.

Immigrants found jobs working in lumber mills, clearing land, and building railways. Some employers were happy to hire Asians, who worked for lower wages. British Columbians accused "foreigners" of taking their jobs.

The BC government put pressure on the federal government to do something to reduce the flow of immigration from Asia. In 1908, the law of continuous passage was enacted, which required all immigrants from India to travel directly to Canada without stopping anywhere else. Since there was no direct travel connection between

the two countries, the law effectively stopped all immigration from India. This situation led to the *Komagata Maru* incident.

After the war, immigrant men already in Canada were allowed to send for their wives and children. Otherwise, the same restrictions were in force and the community remained small. South Asians in Canada did not receive the vote until 1947, and they were barred from many jobs and organizations. It was not until changes were made to the immigration laws in 1967 that the South Asian population began to increase in Canada.

WHO ARE THE SIKHS?

Sikhism is one of the world's major religions. It was founded in northern India hundreds of years ago. The Sikhs suffered persecution at the hands of their enemies, so one of their leaders, Guru Gobind Singh, organized a fighting force known as the *Khalsa*, or brotherhood.

Members of the *Khalsa* are extremely devout. They take a vow never to cut their hair or beards; long hair is associated with spiritual strength. Members tie their hair in a knot on top of the head and cover it—with a turban for men or with a scarf for women. The turban is worn in public at all times; it is a sign of deep disrespect to remove it. Another traditional custom is carrying a

ceremonial dagger, called a *kirpan*. All *Khalsa* men take the name Singh, meaning "lion." Women take the name Kaur, meaning "princess."

The centre of Sikh religious and community life is the temple, or *gurdwara*. Here Sikhs worship and socialize. The first *gurdwara* opened in Vancouver in 1908. Today there is a *gurdwara* wherever there is a community of Sikhs.

1. a) Do you think there was a connection between Sikh customs and the antagonism met by early immigrants?
b) Do you know of any instances of prejudice against South Asian Canadians today?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. Research your family history. How long has your family been in Canada? What has been your family's experiences in Canada? Write a journal entry in which you reflect on these experiences.
2. Discuss whether or not an incident such as the *Komagata Maru* affair could happen today. Give reasons for your answer.

KEYWORDS

quarantine