

Remembering the *Komagata Maru* Episode....a century later

It is our past that informs us about the present that shapes our future. No single event in Canadian history better characterizes or symbolizes the Indo-Canadian experience of exclusion than the *Komagata Maru* Incident of 1914. It is a reminder to Canadians that we need to commit to an open society in which mutual respect and understanding are honoured, differences are respected, and traditions are cherished.

In 1989, to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the *Komagata Maru* Incident, I had the pleasure of coordinating a number of events on behalf of Khalsa Diwan Society at 8000 Ross Street, Vancouver. These events included a photo exhibition, food bank drive, unveiling of plaques at the Gurdwara and Portal Park at 1099 W Hastings Street in Vancouver. All levels of Government released proclamations to acknowledge and commemorate the Incident. Since then, there have been many events held annually by different organizations to remember the Incident.

The 1914 incident of the *Komagata Maru* (*Guru Nanak Jahaz*) ship is one of the most tragic and shameful events in Canadian history. Bhai Gurdit Singh had chartered a Japanese freighter (*Komagata Maru*) to fulfill the Canadian Government requirements of a "continuous voyage" and "\$200 per head". On May 23, 1914 the ship arrived in Vancouver. Obsessed with racial bigotry, determined to keep Canada all white, the government flouted every norm of social justice and kept the ship-load of 376 Indian immigrants (12 Hindus, 24 Muslims and 340 Sikhs) from landing. These immigrants, though they were British subjects, they were denied entry into Canada. For two full months the ship stood in the Burrard Inlet, its passengers suffering from hunger, thirst and humiliation. On the morning of July 23, *Komagata Maru* with 353 passengers

onboard was finally pushed out of the Canadian waters with the powerful guns of the Canadian Naval vessel H.M.C.S. Rainbow pointing at it. On return to India nineteen of the passengers were killed by gunfire upon disembarkation and many others were imprisoned.

Like the issue of the Chinese Head tax, the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, the residential experience for the Aboriginals, the *Komagata Maru* Incident needs to be recognized as a historical event for all Canadians. This recognition needs to be included as part of the Canadian History taught in the schools.

Simon Fraser University has created a comprehensive portal in the shape of a digital museum at <<http://komagatamarujourney.ca/>> to commemorate the *Komagata Maru* Incident in a unique way. This has been done through digitized content, interviews of key scholars and community members, short videos and learning modules. As a contributor and advisor for this project I believe it is important to contextualize the *Komagata Maru* Incident through a variety of perspectives and see how the ripples of that "incident" still affect us today.

I believe it is important to look back in history and celebrate the achievements of Sikhs in Canada. It reminds the youth and new immigrants of our rich heritage and how the Sikhs helped shape the present day Canada with its Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Even today, we hear about incidents of racial discrimination, so we constantly need to remind ourselves of the past, be proactive in the present, and be vigilant so that in the future we don't re-visit a time when there was open exclusion and discrimination.