

THE KOMAGATA MARU INCIDENT

The first East Indians to arrive in Canada had come late in the nineteenth century. Initially their numbers were very small, but by 1905 enough had entered British Columbia to attract at least brief notice. Then, in 1906 and 1907, a sudden surge had brought 4,700 to the west coast province, just as migration from China and Japan reached one of its periodic peaks. The resulting eruption of white nativism had led to the riot of 1907. In the wake of the incident, federal immigration restrictions sharply curtailed the East Indian influx. During the next seven years, therefore, fewer than 125 Indians were permitted to land. In all, between 1905 (when statistics first were recorded) and 1914, just under 5,300 East Indians entered the country, a minuscule proportion of the 2,500,000 immigrants who came to Canada during these years.

Once they arrived in the country, however, very few Indian immigrants moved east from British Columbia. The majority lingered on the coast, for the most part in the Vancouver area. Moreover, a substantial number of those who arrived did not remain for long. Perhaps as many as 1,500 soon moved south across the American border. Others apparently stayed only a short while and then returned to India. At no time could the East Indian population of British Columbia have stood at more than 4,000, a peak perhaps reached in 1907 when immigration was at its height. Thereafter the province's East Indian population dwindled perceptibly. Quite likely not even 2,000 remained on the eve of World War I. A small but visible minority, they comprised less than half of one per cent of the provincial population.¹

Although their numbers included a handful of Muslims and Hindus, virtually all of the Indian immigrants were Sikhs. The majority came from Hoshiarpur and Jullundur, two districts in the north-eastern region of the Punjab, where the Sikhs were especially numerous. The remainder were from several centres scattered throughout the Punjab. Hoshiarpur and Jullundur were wheat-

growing districts, and consequently most of the Sikhs in British Columbia were steeped in the peasant farming traditions of the Punjab's subsistence wheat economy. Perhaps a thousand were former soldiers and had once had some military training as well.²

Why did East Indian immigrants come to Canada? Previous explanations have emphasized forces external to Punjab society. Mackenzie King, for example, concluded in 1907 that they had frequently been lured to British Columbia by glowing propaganda from steamship lines, ticket agents, and fellow-countrymen who sought to exploit them.³ But strong imperatives toward male emigration were also rooted in Punjabi life. The regions from which most emigrants came suffered intense and growing population pressures during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1904 the population density of Hoshiarpur was 867 persons per square mile of arable land; that of Jullundur was only marginally lower. Both were among the most densely peopled areas in the Punjab. Wage rates for labour were low in these districts, a problem aggravated by sharp inflation in land and staple commodity prices during the 1880s and 1890s. Furthermore, by the end of the century, in these regions migration had become a common solution for economic problems.⁴ The overwhelming majority of emigrants were male. They commonly represented a landowning family group, one which could spare a labourer and which often mortgaged its holdings to send the emigrant abroad. He, in return, sent his savings back to his family, which used the income to advance the family's interests, typically through purchasing land or improving housing. Because it produced additional income, migration thus benefited the family. In the Jullundur village of Vilyatpur, during the early twentieth century, those families which sent emigrants abroad gradually expanded their landholdings at the expense of those who did not. Often emigration was permanent and in many cases the emigrant did not even marry. By seeking work in a foreign land, he was usually making a great sacrifice for the common good of his family.⁵ For these reasons East Indians in Canada were almost exclusively male sojourners. Perhaps even more than their Chinese counterparts, their chief object was to earn surplus wealth and remit it to family members across the Pacific.

Once they arrived in British Columbia, about two-thirds of the East Indians settled in Vancouver, New Westminster, and vicinity. The remainder scattered themselves in several centres throughout the province. For the most part they sought work as common labourers. Many found it in sawmills, lumber camps, and on railway construction gangs, while land clearing and seasonal farm work

engaged others. With few exceptions, East Indians were not employed on a contract labour basis and in consequence they were absorbed into the existing provincial labour force. Unemployment remained a serious problem for many of the migrants; as most East Indians were casual labourers, they were especially prey to the vagaries of provincial demands for labour. Within a short time, however, at least a small number acquired land holdings while another handful established themselves as independent businessmen and realtors.⁶ In this way the East Indian community somewhat broadened its economic base. While wage rates for East Indians varied considerably, they were close to those paid to both Chinese and Japanese. Generally East Indian workers, like other Asians, earned one half to two-thirds of the wages paid whites for similar sorts of work. Like their Chinese counterparts, East Indian immigrants accepted arduous, short-term, low-paying jobs and intermittent unemployment. As sojourners, their primary concern was to earn surplus income and send it to India. All other considerations were subordinate to this task.

Like the Chinese before them, the East Indians in British Columbia were only marginally integrated into west coast society. To some extent, of course, work and commerce bound whites and Indians in a network of formal, impersonal relationships. At the same time segregated housing never divided the two races as much as it had whites and Chinese, there being no Indian equivalent of Chinatown. But these exceptions aside, hosts and guests shared no significant social bonds. Soon after they arrived the East Indians began to found their own religious, social, and political organizations. First among them was the Khalsa Diwan Society, formed in Vancouver in 1907 to meet the Sikhs' religious, educational, and philanthropic needs. In addition, faced with white hostility and legislative discrimination, the Indians quickly organized to protect their mutual interests. They also took a growing interest in Indian politics and by 1908 radicals within the community were calling for national revolution in India. The Sikh Temple became a centre of political activity and over the next several years the immigrants formed a series of societies committed to two goals: self-defence in Canada and Indian nationalism. Internally, however, the community was far from united. On the contrary, it was marked by several cleavages, the deepest being that which divided radical from moderate nationalists.⁷ But whatever its internal structure, it stood well apart from the host society, clearly distinguished by separate social, cultural, and political institutions. Moreover, as sojourners, the East Indians had no incentive to assimilate. Consequently, like the Chi-

nese, they formed a small, distinctive segment within west coast society. In doing so they reinforced its structurally plural condition.

That white British Columbia objected to pluralism its long history of Sinophobia clearly indicated. And after 1900 the East Indian segment within west coast society stirred the same concern for racial homogeneity that the Chinese presence had long aroused. But how, precisely, did antipathy toward the Chinese (and, increasingly, Japanese immigrants too) affect evolving white attitudes toward East Indians? These related prejudices were not simply additive. Yet when they arrived, Indian migrants entered a community of heightened racial awareness, enduring racial cleavage, and recurring racial tension. Consequently white perceptions of East Indians were framed by the community's fixed assumptions about previous Asian immigrants. The entire history of west coast race relations left its mark upon the East Indian image, for in one sense the new arrivals seemed merely another dimension of the province's longstanding Oriental problem. Nevertheless in themselves these older conceptions of Asians could not determine in detail the various East Indian stereotypes. When numbers of Indians began to come to British Columbia, they quickly aroused a series of new objections. Consequently a distinct Indian image soon formed in the minds of west coast whites. It was neither as complex nor as elaborate as that of the Chinese. But certainly it expressed as much hostility.

Popular conceptions of India preceded Indian immigrants to North American shores just as those of China had once arrived in advance of the Chinese. The India which they depicted was a land of teeming millions, of filth and squalor, of exotic, peculiar customs. The Indians seemed a lesser breed of men, given to weakness, servility, and in some cases villainy. Most likely these ideas, part of the western image of India, were widely shared in Canada when the first large group of East Indian immigrants arrived in 1906.⁸ Furthermore, contact between the newcomers and whites soon began to flesh out the bare bones of these stereotypes. Many of the Indians were destitute when they landed. As they frequently seemed penniless and ill-prepared against the weather, many whites concluded that these newcomers from tropical or semitropical regions were quite unsuited for life in British Columbia's more rigorous climate. W. D. Scott, federal superintendent of immigration, who investigated the sudden influx in the fall of 1906, declared that, "the transfer of any people from a tropical climate to a northern one, which for months in winter is damp and cold, must of necessity result in much physical suffering and danger to health, not only on account

of non-acclimatization, but also on account of ignorance in the matter of housing, food and clothing.”⁹ His views soon were commonplace in west coast communities. Consequently the suggestion often was made that the immigration of East Indians should be prevented out of charity to themselves. Mackenzie King took this stand in his report on Indian immigration in 1908. “It was clearly recognized in regard to emigration from India to Canada,” he concluded, “that the native of India is not a person suited to this country, that, accustomed as many of them are to the conditions of a tropical climate, and possessing manners and customs so unlike those of our own people, their inability to readily adapt themselves to surroundings entirely different could not do other than entail an amount of privation and suffering which render a discontinuance of such immigration most desirable in the interests of the Indians themselves.”¹⁰

Some well-established Oriental stereotypes were also applied to East Indians. Like all Asians they often were seen as unclean, diseased, and a threat to public health. “The country from which they come . . . has long been recognized as a hotbed of the most virulent and loathsome diseases such as Bubonic plague, Smallpox, Asiatic Cholera and the worst forms of Venereal diseases,” one critic claimed, “and however strict the medical examination at our ports may be—there is a constant danger of these people being the means of transmission of diseases to our people.”¹¹ Health officials constantly reiterated the charge that they lived in disgustingly filthy and overcrowded conditions.

The fear that East Indians threatened the livelihood of the white working man also derived from older perceptions of Oriental immigrants. Trade union spokesmen often objected that Indian immigration was again flooding the province with cheap Asiatic labour. The Victoria Trades and Labor Council, labour’s most insistent anti-Indian voice, demanded vigorous federal action to stem the intrushing tide. Unless this was done, it predicted, “the introduction of this class of Cheap Labour will be the means of excluding the very class of labour that is most essential for the progress and prosperity of the country—i.e., white workers, who if paid a fair living wage could settle here, maintain homes and rear families and thoroughly fulfill the duties of citizenship.”¹²

In addition, like other Asians before them, the Indians prompted fears for British Columbia’s white destiny. According to their detractors, their caste system, their mode of dress, and their many peculiar social customs set them outside the mainstream of life in the province. “They are a case more apart even than the Chinese,” the *Colonist* declared. “Their habits of life are unsatisfactory. They

do not bring their wives with them, and will not make homes and rear families. They are totally unfitted for a white man's country. . . . For the Sikh in his home we have every respect; for the Sikh in Canada there is no proper place, and it is a great unkindness to a well-meaning people to bring him here."¹³

These fears for the province's racial destiny were strengthened by the common assumption that, like other Asiatics, East Indians could not be assimilated. As the secretary of the Victoria TLC explained:

The people of India, in common with all Asiatic races, are reared and nurtured in and under the influence of civilization and environments that seem to be, in principle, totally opposed to the civilization and environments under which we of the Western civilization are born and reared. In practice they certainly are found to be both unwilling and incapable of assimilating with the people of the western races who have settled and developed this country, and who, for very justifiable reasons, aspire to control the future destiny of this broad and fair land, with the hope that civilization in the best and truest sense may advance and develop to a fuller degree than has yet been achieved. But the invitation or admission of these people, the Hindus, would threaten and even make impossible the realization of such hopes.¹⁴

R. G. Macpherson, the Liberal member of Parliament for Vancouver and a vigorous opponent of all Oriental immigration, agreed. In the fall of 1906 he told the cheering audience at a meeting held to protest Indian immigration:

It is not enough to call it a question of cheap labour; it is not enough to raise the question of colour, race or creed. To be a Canadian citizen, at the beginning of this twentieth century, is no small thing. The men who built up this country, who hewed homes out of the forest, were men of first class, A 1 stock, and the responsibility they left us is great. The sentiment expressed in the proud phrase, *Civis Romanus sum*, becomes the citizen of Canada as well as it became the citizen of Rome. A race of men who cannot appreciate our mode of life, our mode of education, all that goes to make up Canadian citizenship, are not fit immigrants of this country. On the broad grounds of Canadian citizenship I attack this question.¹⁵

In affirming a positive sense of Canadian nationality Macpherson had placed East Indians beyond the pale. As British subjects they had a special claim on entry into Canada, and since India, like all Asia, was seen as a land of swarming masses, this raised the prospect of an unending stream of unassimilable immigrants. Fundamentally, then, East Indian immigrants touched the nativist's central fear that their presence would imbed an alien minority in the social foundations of British Columbia, thus preventing the creation of a homogeneous society.

As was true in the case of the Chinese, there were some British Columbians who stood outside the consensus. East Indians evoked a greater measure of white sympathy than either the Chinese or

Japanese. Among their employers, admittedly, opinion was divided. Some found Indians slow to learn but competent when they were trained, while others considered them unsatisfactory workers and hired them only because of the current labour shortage.¹⁶ Within the larger community the newcomers enjoyed scattered support. Several advocates reasoned that imperial citizenship and past military service entitled these immigrants to special consideration. "It seems to me," argued one staunch champion, "that these Punjabis are entitled to official recognition and protection. Hundreds of these men have been soldiers in our Army and wear medals for their services in the field. They are subjects of our Empire, and are yet denied the rights of citizenship by a large proportion of their fellow subjects."¹⁷ Their future immigration should be prevented, he admitted, but those already in the country should not have to endure any discrimination.

Occasionally Protestant church and social reform organizations, virtually all of them outside the west coast province, also took the side of the East Indian immigrant. They responded most readily to Indian complaints, recurrent after East Indian immigration was virtually prohibited, that their wives and children were not permitted to join them in Canada. In reality immigration law placed no special limitation upon the entry of Indian women and children; existing regulations applied to all, regardless of age or sex. Yet when Indian leaders charged that they were specifically denied the consolations of family life, some sympathetic whites took them at their word.¹⁸ Moreover, unlike the leaders of other Asian immigrant communities, a few prominent East Indians actively promoted the Indian cause among white Canadians. Dr. Sunder Singh, a graduate of Oxford and leading spokesman of the Indian community's moderate nationalist minority, cultivated support in both British Columbia and eastern Canada. At his urging the Canada India Committee was founded in Toronto to work toward better interracial understanding as well as the elimination of all racial discrimination.¹⁹ Ultimately, however, only a small number of whites in British Columbia actively advocated fair play for East Indians, and their attempts to publicize the Indian cause came to very little. By and large west coast whites remained firm in their racist convictions.

In the decade before World War I successive outbursts of racial animus marked relations between East Indians and whites in British Columbia. Predisposed to racial hostility by their fear of racial pluralism, whites emphatically rejected the East Indian immigrant.

The first outburst occurred in Vancouver during the summer of 1906, the torrent loosed by the sudden arrival of several hundred immigrants. Once again west coast nativists called for a white Canada while civic officials did what they could to discourage immigration. Later in the year, as the rate of immigration fell, agitation ceased.²⁰ In 1907, however, heavy Asian immigration and resurgent racial tension once more raised the question of migration from India. While Oriental immigration had long troubled Ottawa, that of East Indians caused particular embarrassment. Most British Columbians objected to Indians as much as they did other Asiatics, and in the wake of the Vancouver riot further immigration restrictions seemed necessary, if only to prevent renewed violence. Yet Canadians and East Indians were both British subjects and, in order to preserve strong imperial ties as well as to prevent unrest in India, overt discrimination was to be avoided. Canadian, British, and Indian officials shared this desire equally.²¹ The task, however, was not an easy one. Laurier considered the Indian problem more serious than that of either the Chinese or the Japanese. "Frankly," he told the governor general, "I see no solution for it except quietly checking the exodus from India."²²

The continuous passage rule, adopted in January 1908, virtually eliminated all opportunity for East Indian migration to Canada. Shortly thereafter Mackenzie King went to Britain to discuss the question further with senior officials in the Colonial, Foreign, and India Offices. Placing Canada's case before them, he urged that restrictions were needed to prevent further unrest, to avoid unseemly legislation, and to protect the Indians themselves. His argument was well received. In the end the Indian government promised to discourage prospective emigrants to Canada, although it did refuse to impose its own legislative restrictions. King was also assured that neither India nor Great Britain would take exception to Canadian restrictions should they ever become necessary. In addition, he discovered, Indian law already prevented the emigration of contract labour to Canada. Therefore existing law in India and Canada was sufficient to bar East Indian immigration to British Columbia. The Canadian regulation which required all immigrants to possess \$25 upon landing was, in King's eyes, a necessity for the Indians' own protection and the amount could be increased if necessary.²³

While these restrictions immediately reduced Indian immigration to a trickle they did nothing to solve the problem of those immigrants already in the country. As a result, federal officials cast about for ways of encouraging them to leave. Late in the summer of

1908 the minister of the interior's private secretary, J. B. Harkin, visited Vancouver and discussed with several East Indian leaders the possibility that the immigrants might accept indentured labour in the West Indies if the Canadian government provided transportation. Indian leaders showed signs of interest and in October two of their number accompanied Harkin to British Honduras to see if it might make a suitable home for East Indians living in Canada. Harkin later explained that "the steps taken in this connection were designed to prevent the possibility of hundreds of Hindus, (using this term to include Hindus proper, Sikhs and Mohammedans) becoming a burden upon Vancouver and vicinity; to offer as an alternative to the necessity of wholesale deportation to India a measure of opportunity in a country climatically better suited to them, and one in which they would be able to compete more successfully with other labour than they are in British Columbia."²⁴ While the party was in Honduras Harkin became convinced that the Indian delegates were satisfied with the prospects the colony offered; he believed that 1,000 would accept the opportunity to move. But the delegates thought otherwise, and when the mission returned, one declared that he had been offered a bribe to report favourably upon the proposal.²⁵ Instead he denounced the plan before a meeting of his countrymen, and in the ensuing commotion the entire project collapsed.

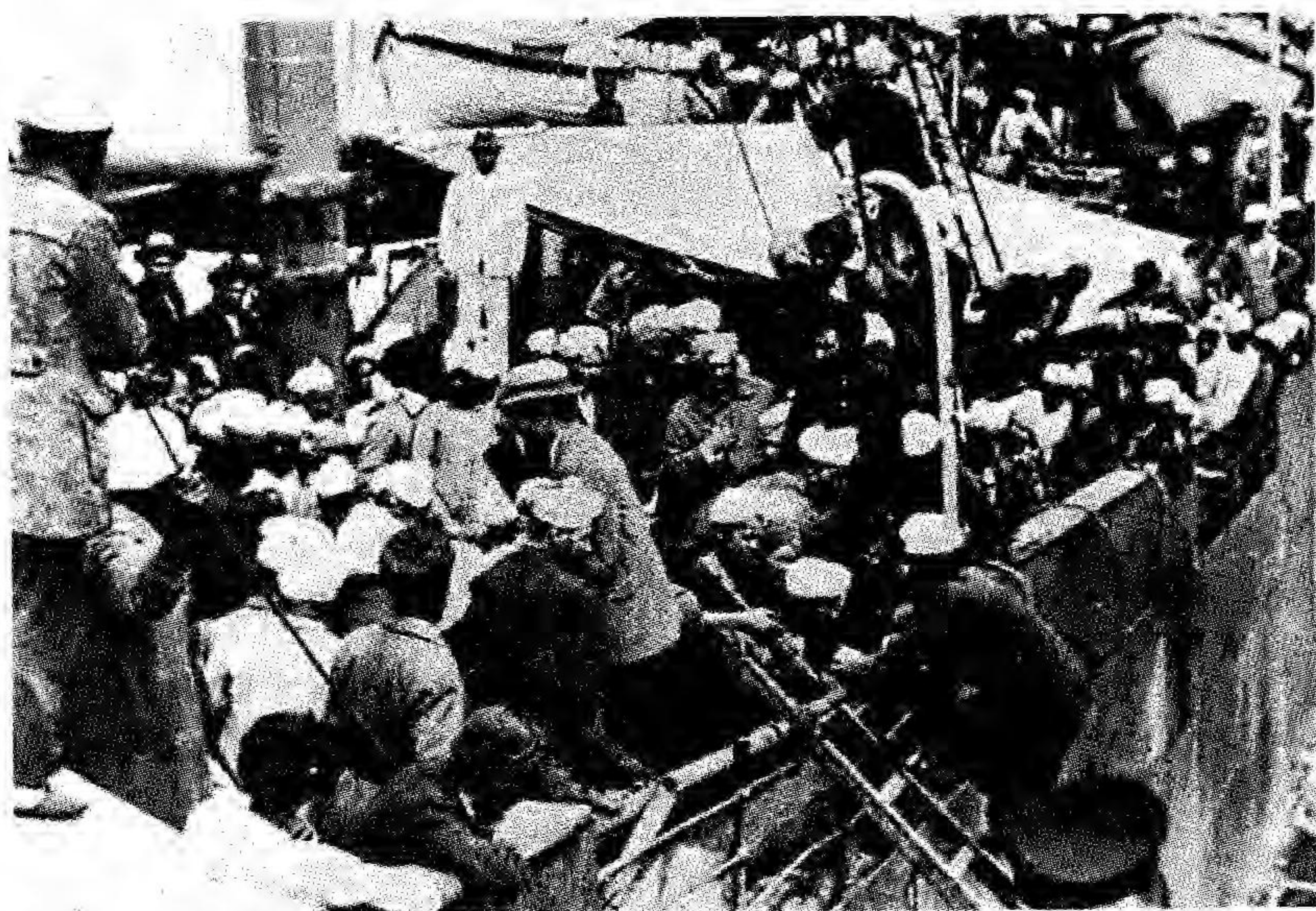
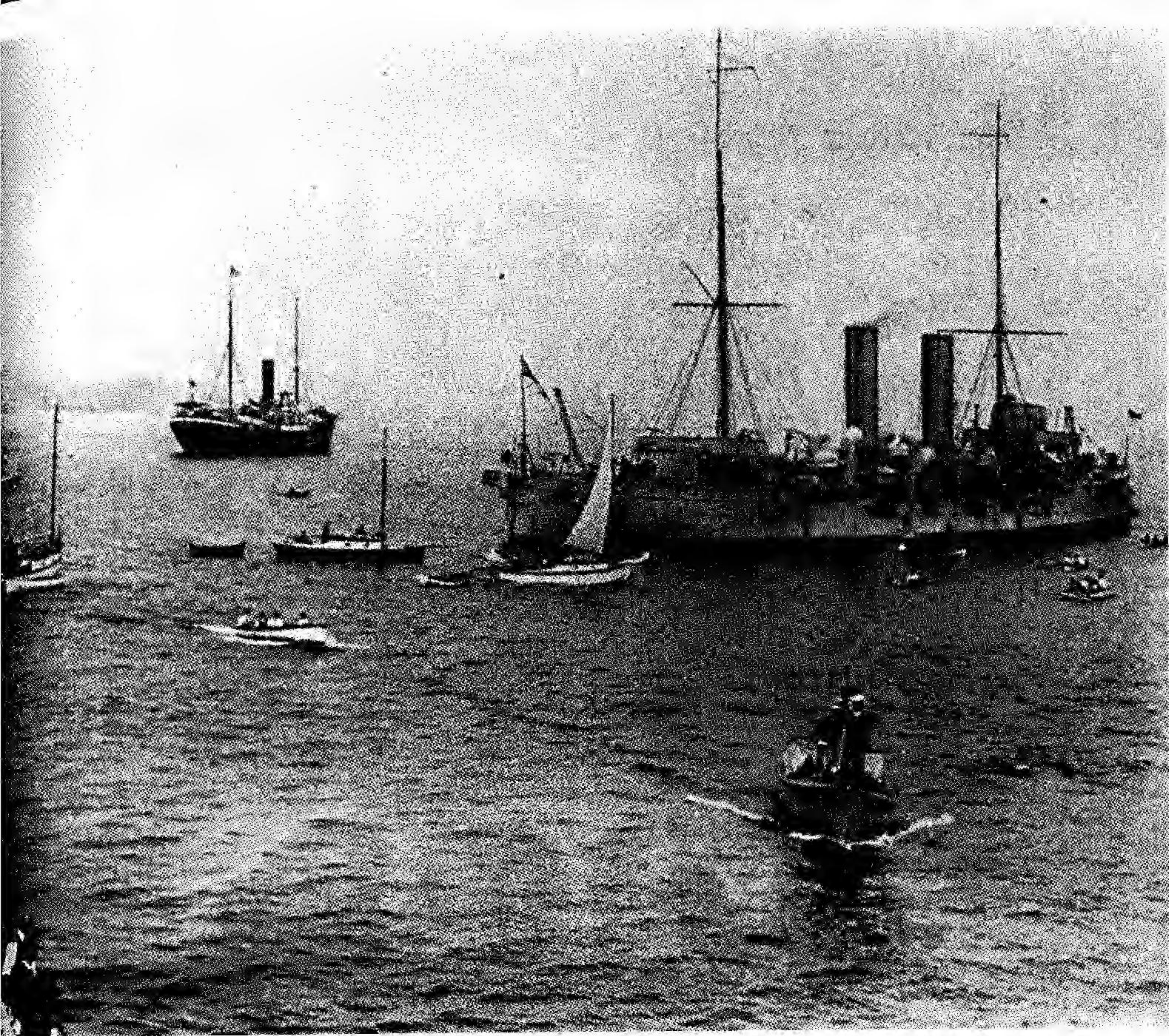
One reason federal officials promoted the Honduras proposal was that, even after migration from India had virtually ceased, anti-East Indian feeling remained strong on Canada's west coast. As one trade union leader observed in Victoria in 1911, "the working people of this City regard all the Native tribes of India in the same light as any other Oriental Nation. The light in which the working people of this City view Oriental immigration and their well-known attitude on that question is one of persistent and unequivocal opposition."²⁶ As long as such feeling persisted, so did the possibility of another racial outburst. Consequently, in November 1913, hostility swelled again when a group of three dozen East Indian immigrants were admitted to the province. Before the Supreme Court of British Columbia they had successfully challenged the legality of federal immigration restrictions, thereby opening the gate for any others who wished to follow.²⁷ But on this occasion the mere prospect of renewed migration from India prodded the nativists into life. Soon after the judgement was handed down they deluged Conservative Prime Minister Robert Borden with a flood of protests. In response the cabinet hastily erected a new barrier to Indian immigration. On December 8 it

approved an order in council which, citing the overcrowded state of British Columbia's labour market, temporarily prohibited labourers and artisans from entering the province.²⁸ Then, early in 1914, the formerly illegal regulations were proclaimed again, this time free of legal flaws.

On May 23, in the face of these obstacles, the *Komagata Maru* arrived in Vancouver harbour with 376 prospective East Indian immigrants on board. The ship was under charter to Gurdit Singh, a wealthy Sikh merchant and contractor from Hong Kong. Why he had chartered the craft and recruited its passengers is not entirely clear. At least three plausible explanations of his motives have been offered. According to one suggestion, Gurdit Singh considered Canadian immigration restrictions an affront to all Indians and he therefore wished to break them down by forcing entry into the country. Another explanation is that, as a fervent Indian nationalist, he hoped to foment unrest in India if the immigrants' entry was prevented. A third interpretation, perhaps a more likely one than the others, is that he stood to gain substantial financial profits if the enterprise was successful and the immigrants were permitted to land. It may even be that he hoped to develop a regular passenger traffic between India and British Columbia.²⁹ But whatever were his motives, in Canada they seemed nothing more than a direct challenge to the policy of East Indian exclusion. This single belief governed all responses in Canada to the ship and her immigrant cargo.

From the moment the Borden government first heard of the ship's departure from Hong Kong, it declared its intention to enforce the recent immigration regulations with vigour. When the ship arrived in Vancouver, Ottawa reaffirmed its determination.³⁰ But far from departing immediately, the *Komagata Maru* remained anchored in Vancouver's harbour, a few hundred yards from shore, for two months before it left. During the first weeks Dominion immigration officials examined each prospective immigrant individually. They permitted twenty who were previous residents to land and declared another ninety medically unfit for entry. Then the legality of the federal exclusion order was challenged in provincial courts, another time-consuming process. In all, seven weeks passed before the provincial Supreme Court upheld the order, removing the last legal obstacle to the ship's departure.³¹

In Vancouver the arrival of the *Komagata Maru* provoked an outburst as intense as that of 1907. By now the city had clearly become the geographic focus of west coast racialism, in part, at least, because of her highly visible Asian minorities. Vancouver's



Above, the Komagata Maru, HMCS Rainbow, and sightseers' craft in Vancouver harbour, July 1914. Below, Sikhs on board the Komagata Maru, Vancouver, 1914.

nativistic tradition sustained persistent racial tensions in the community, even though it was only infrequently that they grew acute. In recent years the climate of white opinion had grown antagonistic toward East Indians, perhaps more so than toward other Asiatics. Consequently Gurdit Singh's apparent challenge to the policy of exclusion, and even more the possible success of his challenge (a prospect which seemed credible as a similar one had succeeded six months earlier), revived the racial fears and animosities which were latent in west coast society. The result was an outpouring of racist rhetoric directed at the Indians, whose arrival prompted objection, and also at the federal government, whose power it was to grant or refuse the Indians' request for entry. Two themes dominated the cries of the nativists: fear of inundation by hordes of Asian immigrants and concern for the unassimilable nature of the Indian.

After the ship dropped anchor the Borden government was assailed with petitions which supported the government's resolve to exclude the new arrivals and urged greater efforts to prevent them from landing.³² Provincial journalists swelled the growing chorus. "It is not a question [of] whether this particular group of Hindus shall be allowed to land," the *Vancouver News-Advertiser* claimed, reviving once more a cluster of popular negative stereotypes.

There are 300,000,000 natives of India behind them, who have the same rights as these. If a million were accepted the remaining 299,000,000 would have the same claim. Every one of them would have the same grievance if he were excluded as this comparatively small group, and the additional grievance that he is subject to an invidious discrimination. The question before the people of Canada is whether the country is to be thrown open to all the people of India or closed to all.³³

It was the Indians' inability to assimilate that prompted another editor's objections. "It is impossible 'to make Canadians out of immigrants whose customs, traditions and habits forms an insurmountable barrier between them and the Canadianization.' [sic]." "East Indians are good men," he declared. "In Canada they are in the wrong place. That is all. Unfortunately for the East Indians it is also everything."³⁴ According to a local Methodist monthly, the economic aspect of the problem was serious,

but the social and moral aspects are much more serious to contemplate. It is not mere unreasoned prejudice that influences Western feeling; it is not that the Asiatics are inferior; it is that they are different, so different that the two races are really incompatible, and such an attempt to fuse them as a common people is useless and would inevitably result in a lowered standard of civilization, which would hardly look attractive to even the ardent advocate of Hindu rights to unrestricted immigration on the plea of the brotherhood of man and fellow-British citizenship. Surely it is utter nonsense to argue from this basis when it is evident that each

race is better off in its own natural environment, and when, too, the unrestrained mixing of the races on this Coast would lead to economic disaster and ethical demoralisation.³⁵

Meanwhile Premier Richard McBride pressed the federal government to stand firm against entry.³⁶

In Vancouver the outburst reached a peak on June 23 at a public meeting of worried citizens called by Mayor T. S. Baxter. The ship had been anchored off shore for a month and no sign of its imminent departure could yet be seen. On the contrary, many city residents seemed to believe that the immigrants would soon land, through subterfuge if through no other means. Long before the meeting opened, 1,500 people had packed the hall while twice that number milled about on the street outside its entrance. "A noticeable feature of the large audience," the *News-Advertiser* observed, "was the solid character of the type of citizen represented, and in the crowded street outside the panama hat was prominent in appearance rather than the cheaper kinds of headgear."³⁷ After speakers had addressed the crowds both indoors and out, the meeting demanded the immediate deportation of all the ship's passengers and legislation to prevent similar incidents in the future.

The highlight of the evening was a stirring address by H. H. Stevens, Conservative member of Parliament for Vancouver and now the city's leading anti-Oriental spokesman. In his remarks, which were repeatedly interrupted by enthusiastic applause, Stevens voiced the central concern of west coast nativists, the belief that unassimilable Asian immigrants threatened the province's cultural homogeneity. Canada was a nation of but seven and one-half millions, Stevens told the gathering, but "in the Orient—at our doors—there are 800 millions of Asiatics," millions which at "the very least tremor . . . would unquestionably swamp us by weight of numbers." "What would have happened if immigration from Asia had been allowed through all these years to come through the Western portals into British Columbia?" he asked. "Canada today would have been swamped with Orientals and there would be left today practically not a vestige of the civilization of which we are so proud." Stevens believed that, fundamentally, Asiatic immigration threatened the nation's destiny. "Very briefly," he assured his attentive audience,

what we face in British Columbia and in Canada today is this—whether or no the civilization which finds its highest exemplification in Anglo-Saxon British rule shall or shall not prevail in the Dominion of Canada. . . . I am absolutely convinced after the most searching inquiry, that we cannot allow indiscriminate immigration from the Orient and hope to build up a Nation in Canada on the foundations upon

which we have commenced our national life (applause). In laying down that principle I cast no aspersions upon the civilization of Asia, but I impress upon you this solemn fact, that these two civilizations are entirely distinct in every important feature. . . . The question is will that civilization or will those brought up through centuries under that civilization assimilate in a satisfactory manner with the people of this country. That is the great problem facing us today, and I hold that no immigration is or can be successful where it is impossible to assimilate and readily assimilate the immigrant (prolonged applause). This is the absolutely fundamental principle of all systems of immigration, and must necessarily be so.³⁸

Although no more protest meetings were held in Vancouver, a similar one took place in New Westminster one week later,³⁹ and so long as the ship was in harbour, the entire community remained on edge. Tension increased when, on the eve of their expected deportation, the Indians seized control of the ship and repulsed a midnight boarding raid of 150 policemen and immigration officers. Negotiations followed and Martin Burrell, British Columbia's representative in the Borden cabinet, intervened. Meanwhile HMCS *Rainbow* stood by to prevent further unrest. Finally, under the watchful eyes of thousands, many of whom stood on the city's rooftops to witness the concluding act of the drama, the *Komagata Maru* weighed anchor and set out through the straits for Hong Kong. Then, and only then, did public concern subside.

When compared with the numbers of immigrants who annually entered the province, the 376 on board the *Komagata Maru* in 1914 were of very little significance. Furthermore, aside from a handful of previous residents, none of the prospective immigrants landed. Yet while the ship lingered in port, racial tensions in Vancouver remained high, as high, indeed, as they had been in 1887 and 1907. Why was this so? The answer cannot be found in direct economic or social conflict, for the Indians remained on board and confrontation was avoided. Perhaps an element of feared or anticipated conflict provided one motive force. But far more important was the generalized fear of Asian immigration engendered by the west coast drive for cultural homogeneity. That a deep and permanent racial cleavage divided British Columbia its white residents were well aware. In assessing the origins of this racial division, however, they could largely ignore the native Indian population for it had long since been pushed aside and seemed to languish in decay. The Asian community, on the other hand, was a dynamic, growing segment in west coast society. Its continued expansion promised only to broaden the racial fissures which already fragmented this society.

Cultural pluralism, then, was unacceptable to the white community. Within it the plural condition generated profound, irrational racial fears. Pluralism stirred a deep longing for the social cohesion

which could only be achieved, it seemed, by attaining racial homogeneity. R. E. Gosnell, a prominent journalist, historian, and public servant, charted the province's course when he declared in 1908:

This vast and in some respects still unknown country has possibilities in store for it not yet, perhaps, dreamed of. It has without peradventure, great possibilities as the home for the British emigrant and as a field for the investor; possibilities as the point of convergence of trade and commerce along the All Red Line to the utmost development of which the statesmen of the Empire are pledged; possibilities as an educational centre as famous as any in Europe; possibilities of great industrial wealth; possibilities in short as a greater Britain on the Pacific, where British arts and institutions will expand under fresh impetus, 'where the British flag will forever fly, where British laws and justice will be respected and enforced, and where British men and women will be bred equal to the best traditions of the race.'⁴⁰

Gosnell's remarks were merely a personal statement, made without reference to the racial question. Nonetheless they offer at least a glimpse of the communal purpose, the social aspirations, and the cultural self-image shared by many west coast whites. It was a vision that admitted no Asian presence.

Yet the hostile outburst of 1914 differed in one significant respect from that of 1907: there was no rioting, even though public feeling was as aggravated as it earlier had been. This was so because by 1914 the federal government appeared sympathetic to white British Columbia's demands for exclusion. In 1907 the Laurier government had seemed deaf to all such pleas, but evidently the Borden government was ready to listen and to act. It was this willingness to turn the East Indians back that ultimately prevented an outbreak of racial violence.

doubt as concerned as their protesting constituents, began to press for total evacuation. Howard Green, the Conservative member from Vancouver South, opened the attack in the Commons on January 29.⁴² The threat of Japanese treachery confronted the Pacific coast, he said, and therefore all Japanese should be removed from the province. During the next three weeks other British Columbian members made similar claims in the House. In private they were even more insistent. On January 28 British Columbians in the Liberal caucus demanded that Japanese Canadians who failed to volunteer for the Civilian Corps be evacuated as quickly as possible. In succeeding weeks, as popular protest reached its greatest heights, King faced successive demands for relocation from provincial politicians, Conservative, Liberal, and independent alike.⁴³

Meanwhile government officials in British Columbia sustained their pressure as well. At the height of the popular outcry the attorney-general of British Columbia told Ian Mackenzie:

Events have transpired recently which add to the danger we have always been subjected to by the presence of Japanese on this Coast.

I cannot urge too strongly the seriousness of this situation and the danger the people of British Columbia feel upon this matter.

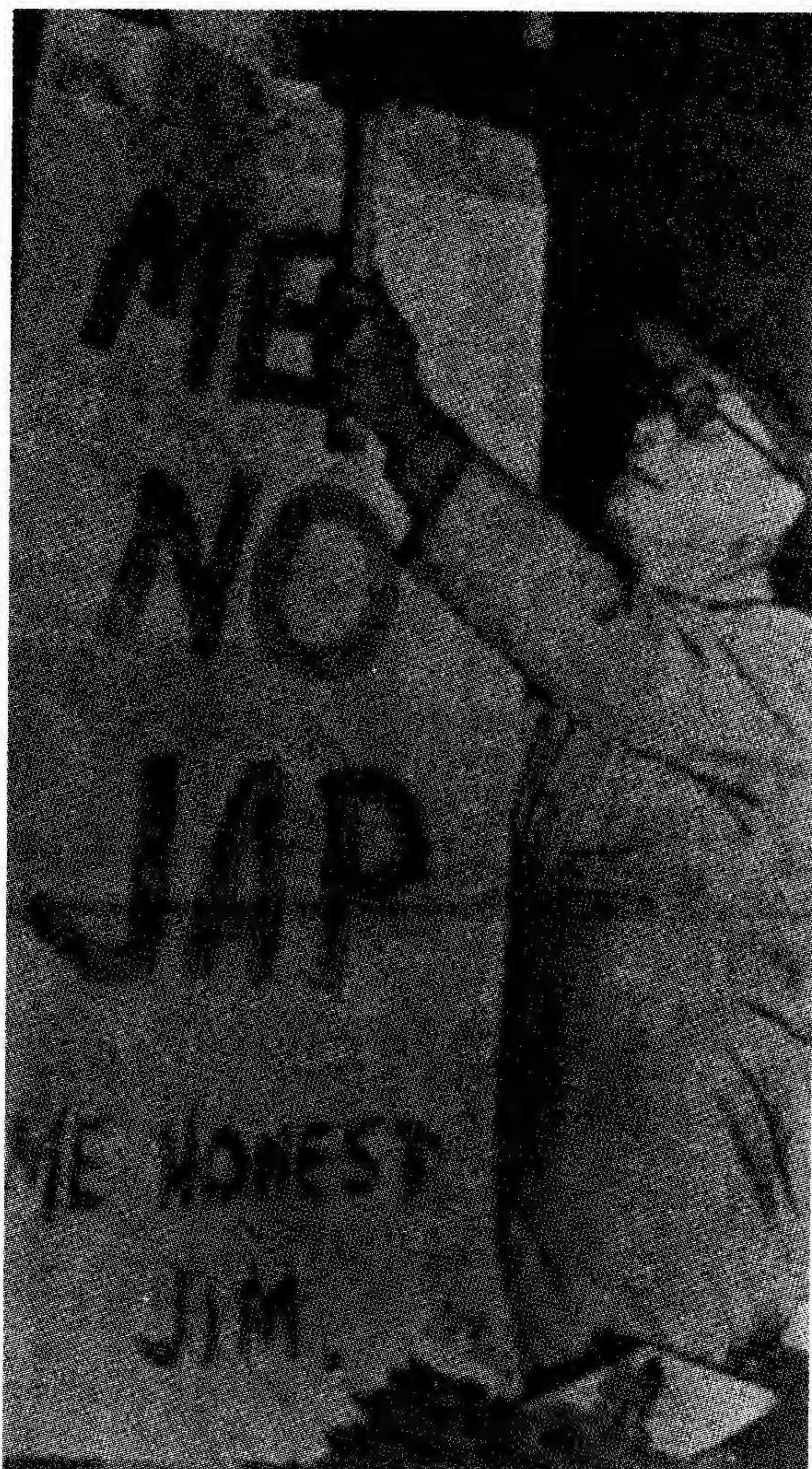
Nothing short of immediate removal of the Japanese will meet the dangers which we feel in this Province.⁴⁴

At the same time the minister of labour campaigned for total evacuation. The lieutenant-governor informed the prime minister that he had "rarely felt so keenly about any impending danger as I do about the Japanese on this coast being allowed to live in our midst." He suggested that at the very least Japanese males be quickly interned. Since mid-January senior officers of the Pacific Command had grown more concerned as well. By the time public protest reached its peak, they too subscribed to demands for total evacuation.⁴⁵

It was Ian Mackenzie who ultimately bore the brunt of this storm of protest. First he received warnings and notes of alarm, then petitions urging evacuation, and finally demands that he resign. But on this matter Mackenzie had long shared the concern of his constituents. In the first weeks after the outbreak of war he grew convinced that all able-bodied Japanese men should be removed from strategic areas. In consequence he considered the partial evacuation policy inadequate. He also believed that the April 1 deadline was too remote. As pressure upon him grew, Mackenzie's alarm at the instability of public opinion increased in like proportion. On



Japanese men leaving for interior road camps, 1942.



A sign of the times, *Vancouver Sun*, February 26, 1942.

February 22, when news reached him of a series of mass protest meetings planned for March 1, his anxiety reached a peak.⁴⁶ Two days later he informed cabinet colleagues of the heated state of west coast opinion and of a call for his own resignation. As he told the minister of justice:

The feeling in British Columbia in regard to the Japanese is so aflame that I consider we should take the necessary powers (if we have not got them now) to remove Canadian Nationals, as well as Japanese Nationals, from the protected areas.