

Would-be immigrants' rejection remembered

KOMAGATA MARU: Ship from India languished in Vancouver for two months in 1914

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More than 200 people gathered yesterday in Stanley Park to commemorate a dark day in Vancouver's past.

The *Komagata Maru*, carrying 376 would-be immigrants, docked in Vancouver on May 23, 1914, but racist immigration policies barred its passengers — mostly from Punjab, in India, and all British subjects — from disembarking.

The vessel stayed in Burrard Inlet for two months with the passengers living on board like prisoners, until it was forced to leave the harbour on July 23 — 93 years ago today.

On returning to India, a riot ensued and British soldiers shot 20 people dead and arrested many others.

Jag Gill of Coquitlam grew up listening to the story.

"My great-great-grandfather was on the ship," said Gill, 31. "He had to go back to his village [in India] but he was harassed and persecuted by [British officials] because they said he attempted to break the law and cause trouble."

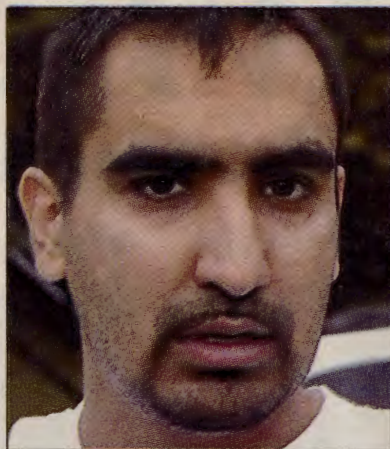


MOTA SINGH JHEETA

Gill's great-great-grandfather refused to come to Canada again, but his son, Gill's grandfather, moved to Vancouver in 1966.

There are 713,330 Indo-Canadians in Canada, the second-most populous cultural group in the country, according to the 2001 census. In Greater Vancouver, the Indo-Canadian population numbers 142,060.

One of the walkers at Lumberman's Arch yesterday was Mota Singh Jheeta, 67, who has lived in



JAG GILL

Vancouver since 1966.

Racism can't be fully eradicated, said the Surrey man, but things are vastly different today than what the passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru* faced.

"[Racism] is an issue but it's not very visible. It may exist but only low profile," said Jheeta.

The walk, which is in its second year, aims to raise awareness about the "very unfortunate incident," said organizer Harbhajan Gill of the



Gurdit Singh and his son were among the passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru* that Canadian immigration officials refused entry in 1914.

Komagata Maru Heritage Foundation.

Gill says the Indo-Canadian community is united in wanting a formal apology from the Canadian government for turning away

the *Komagata Maru*.

"It's a long time coming. At the time, Canadian laws were Canadian laws, but this is something we need to be aware of and remember."

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