

# Background to the Komagata Maru incident



## Background Briefs

Historic injustices and redress in Canada



The *Komagata Maru* and its stranded passengers from India.  
Source: City of Vancouver Archives. Item number CVA 7-125.

### Historical context

At the turn of the twentieth century, over two-and-a-half million people arrived in Canada during a period historians refer to as the first great wave of immigration. However, not all newcomers were welcome, and many experienced harsh treatment, discrimination and exclusion. For example, in western Canada, many Canadians felt that the growing number of immigrants from India would take over their jobs in factories, mills and lumberyards. As anti-Asian immigration sentiment grew, many western Canadians wanted the “brown invasion” to stop.

Pressure was put on steamship companies by the Canadian government to stop selling tickets to Indians. In 1907, a bill was passed denying all Indians the right to vote. The province of British Columbia began to pass strict laws discouraging the immigration of Indians to Canada. Indians had to have at least \$200 in their possession to enter British Columbia and had to have come directly from India, without stopping at other ports along the way. With such obstacles in place to restrict the entry and integration of Indians into Canadian society, the stage was set for an explosive incident like the one that befell the passengers on board the *Komagata Maru*.

### Details about the *Komagata Maru* incident

As a way to deny entry into Canada of those labeled “undesirable” immigrants, restrictive laws and regulations were passed. The most severe restriction to curb Indian immigration to Canada was the passage in 1908 of the *Continuous Passage Regulation* by the Canadian government. This law stated that immigrants must “come from the country of their birth, or citizenship, by a continuous journey and with tickets purchased before leaving the country of their birth, or citizenship.” On May 23, 1914, a crowded ship from Hong Kong carrying 376 passengers, most of whom were immigrants from the northern state of Punjab in India, arrived in Vancouver’s Burrard Inlet on the west coast of Canada.

The passengers on the *Komagata Maru* were in violation of the *Continuous Passage Regulation*. As a result, the ship was prevented from docking by the port authorities. Passengers, who remained on board the ship for over two months, experienced severe hardships. The conditions on the boat quickly deteriorated and became unsafe. Passengers lost whatever money they had paid to take the journey. Only twenty Canadian residents returning to Canada and the ship’s doctor and his family were eventually allowed to stay in Canada. The ship was escorted out of the harbour by the Canadian military on July 23, 1914 and forced to sail back to India.

### Significance of the *Komagata Maru* incident

The *Komagata Maru* incident exposed the deep-rooted anti-Asian/Indian feelings in Canada in general and in BC in particular. The incident reinforced the outsider status of those who had

immigrated from India. As a result, they faced greater obstacles to creating a life for themselves and their families in Canada. More than just an isolated incident, the plight of the passengers

on the *Komagata Maru* reflects the deliberate, exclusionary policy of the Canadian government meant to keep out newcomers based on their race and/or country of origin.



Crowded deck of *Komagata Maru*, 1914.  
Source: Vancouver Public Library, accession number 6232.

