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Komagata Maru memorial helps heal century-old wounds



Khalsa Diwan Society president Sohan S. Deo stands beside the brand new Komagata Maru memorial in Harbour Green Park, moments after its unveiling.

Dignitaries from every level and persuasion in government put politics aside Monday to join members of the Indo-Canadian community in Coal Harbour for the long-awaited unveiling of a memorial for the notorious 1914 [Komagata Maru](#) incident.

The ship was carrying 376 British subjects, most from India, to Vancouver in a bid to challenge racist immigration laws in a time when Canada was accepting hundreds of thousands of white immigrants.

The Canadian government refused to let the passengers disembark, and two months later forced most of them to sail back to India, where 19 were shot and killed by British military on arrival.

Former Vancouver Park Board chair Raj Hundal, who helped spearhead the initiative and is now running for provincial politics, said the Indo-Canadian community has been waiting for this for a very long time.

“This has been going on for as long as I can remember, well over a decade,” he said.

“It’s a place where the entire community can go to learn about this incident that took place in 1914.”

The federal government contributed more than \$82,000 toward the \$750,000 memorial in Harbour Green Park, which includes an artist’s impression of the hull of the ship, the names of all the passengers, photos, and a descriptive plaque.

“It gives me great pleasure and satisfaction that the current government has taken greater steps to sensitively ease our wounds and recognize the mistake done many years back,” said Sohan S.Deo, president of the Khalsa Diwan Society. It was that society’s members who organized a shore committee to help care for the ship’s inhabitants nearly a century ago.

High-profile politicians including Immigration Minister Jason Kenney, B.C. NDP Leader Adrian Dix, Mayor Gregor Robertson, MLAs, and city councilors all turned out to see the memorial unveiled and denounce the black mark in Canada’s history.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly apologized for the incident in 2008, although not in the House of Commons as many had argued he should. That same year the B.C. government passed a motion formally apologizing for turning the passengers of the Komagata Maru away “without benefit of the fair and impartial treatment befitting a society where people of all cultures are welcomed and accepted.”



By [Kate Webb](#) Metro Vancouver