

# Komagata Maru passengers remembered with Vancouver monument

BY MIKE HAGER, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 24, 2012

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The monument to the Komagata Maru was unveiled along the seawall near Convention Centre West in Vancouver, B.C., on July 23, 2012.

**Photograph by:** Steve Bosch, PNG

Almost a full century after its 376 South Asian passengers were escorted out of Vancouver's Coal Harbour, the Komagata Maru freighter — and its would-be immigrants — have been honoured with a monument acknowledging Canada's past discrimination.

Municipal, provincial and federal politicians attended the unveiling ceremony Monday afternoon, as well as members from the Khalsa Diwan Society, which runs Vancouver's Ross Street Sikh temple and designed the federally funded monument in consultation with the park board.

"In a day like today, where Canada really embraces multiculturalism in a different way, it's startling for people to think that 98 years ago it could have been so different," said Vancouver park board commissioner Niki Sharma. "We're a country built on immigrants so the policies of the past really help us to realize how important it is to not go back there again.

"Having parents myself that are from India strikes a chord with me, because if things hadn't changed, my future here would have been a lot different."

The monument was designed and created with \$82,500 in federal funds and an additional \$104,000 came from the Canadian government to develop a museum at the Ross Street temple.

The Komagata Maru, chartered by Sikh Gurdit Singh from British Malaya, arrived in Vancouver on May 23, 1914, with 376 British subjects from India aboard. The ship's point of origin in Hong Kong violated a 1908 Canadian law that required a continuous passage.

Under Canada's strict immigration laws of the day, the passengers were not allowed to land. And although they should have been able to settle in Canada as British subjects, public and political sentiments and policies at the time were overtly racist.

The Komagata Maru was escorted out of Vancouver by the navy on July 23, 1914, after the ship and its passengers sat in the city's harbour for weeks.

Because those aboard were thought to be anti-British, police fired upon the group when it arrived back in India, killing and injuring dozens of people.

Sohan Singh Deo, president of the Khalsa Diwan Society, said Monday that today's Canada is a much more accepting and multicultural country than the state that barred immigrants based on the colour of their skin. However, he said "discrimination is always everywhere, you can't deny that." The monument — which includes the names of all the passengers denied entry — will help future generations recognize the danger of such discrimination.

"No matter how far you go, history comes along," Deo said.

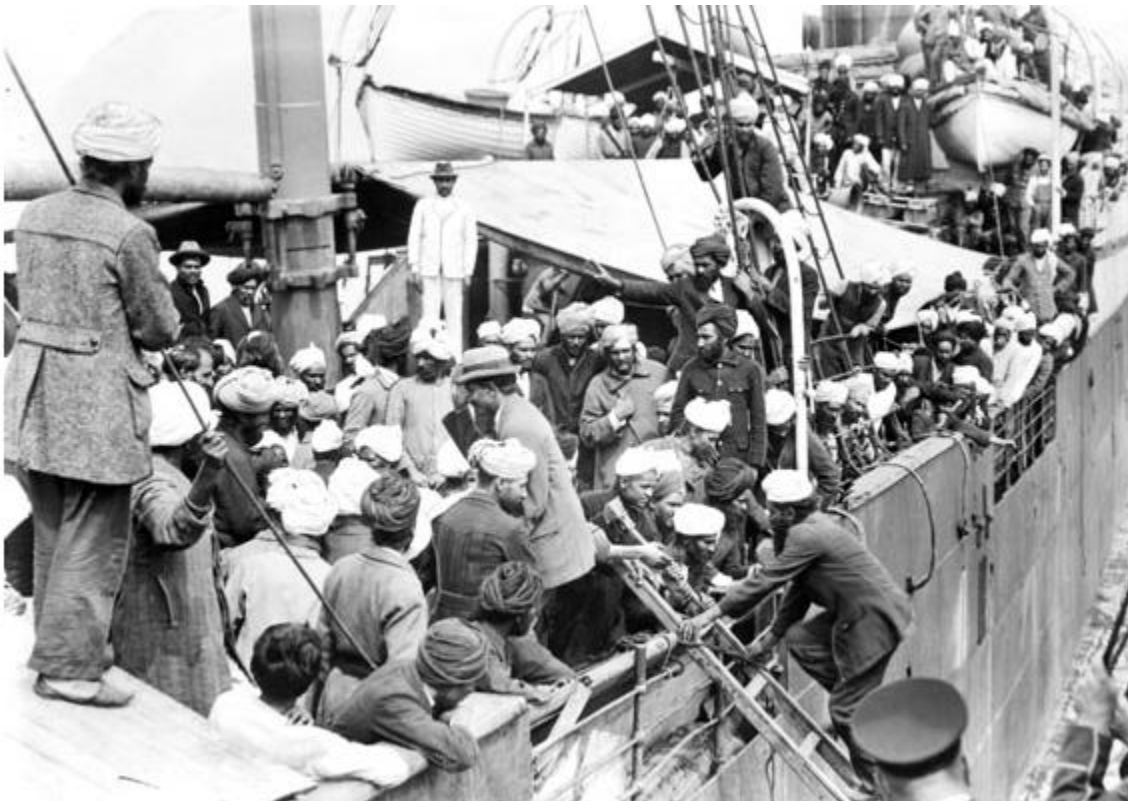
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The crowded deck of the Komagata Maru in 1914.

**Photograph by:** Leonard Frank, Vancouver Public Library Archives

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