



10

**REVISITING INDO-CANADIAN HISTORY AND POLITICS ON IMMIGRATION BY  
HUGH JOHNSTON'S *THE VOYAGE OF KOMAGATA MARU: THE SIKH  
CHALLENGE TO CANADA'S COLOUR BAR***

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**Abstract:**

*The recent development of a relationship between India and Canada has experienced a lot of tension due to the issues surrounding Sikh separatism and allegations of foreign interference that have led to the study of the past tensional circumstances of Indo-Canadian history and politics. The present research paper revisits Indo-Canadian history and politics on immigration through Hugh Johnston's *The Voyage of Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar (TVKMTSCCCB)*. The paper discusses the rules and laws of immigration in Canada for foreign and Asian countries during the initial period of the twentieth century. The paper will revisit the Indo-Canada-British relationship and its effect on the world during the First World War. The book explores the real-historical character Gurdit Singh and makes him a revolutionary hero for Asian immigrants. The book explains that the ship Konagata Maru is carrying 376 passengers from South Asian Indians to Canada, however, due to unemployment, discrimination, and national identity the Canadian government rejects them. The book also reveals that people struggle for international identity because only 24 passengers are allowed to voyage to Canada and 252 passengers are not allowed to voyage to Canada. The research paper also deals with how Johnston explored discrimination among black, white, and brown people all over the world especially in Canada. At the end of this book, 20 people are killed by police at Budge Budge near Kolkata and for this incident and many authors, researchers, governments, and organisations have written about this tragic incident; however, the researcher has chosen Hugh Johnston's book *The Voyage of Komagata Mar: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar*. Hugh Johnston's book deals with real-historical events, therefore, the paper utilises an interdisciplinary approach to link history, politics, and international relations with literature and the researcher uses the library research method to pen down this research paper.*

**Keywords:** *Militant Nationalism, Immigration, National Identity, Ghadr Movement, Continuous Passage Regulation, etc.*

**Introduction:**

In the current year, there is rapid tensional development between India and Canada; The Canadian government has expelled six diplomats alleging that the Indian government agents have been engaged in a 'campaign of violence' that threatens public safety in Canada, in response, Indian foreign ministry announced the New Delhi would expel six Canadian diplomats (*aljazeera.com*). These kinds of current phenomena between India and Canada stimulate revisiting Indo-Canadian history and politics and Hugh Hugh Johnston's *The Voyage of Komagata Maru: The Sikh*



*Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar (TVKMTSCCCB)* looks upon it by describing the Komagata Maru tragedy. Through this historical book, the researcher attempts to revisit Indo-Canadian history and politics on immigration as well as the rules and laws of immigration to Canada for foreign and Asian countries during the initial period of the twentieth century. In addition, the paper will revisit the Indo-Canada-British relationship and its effect on the world during the First World War.

Hugh Johnston's *The Voyage of Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* is a critical work that assists in revisiting a pivotal moment in Indo-Canadian history and highlights political, racial, and imperial dynamics. It provides a comprehensive account of the Sikh community's challenge to Canada's 'colour bar' politics. His work invites readers to give attention to historical injustices and their enduring legacies, emphasising the resilience of immigrant communities in the face of exclusion and discrimination.

#### **A Brief Introduction of the Author, Hugh Johnston:**

Hugh Johnston was a professor in the subject of history at Simon Fraser University in Greater Vancouver, Canada. Hugh Johnstone served on the board of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute from 1992 to 2001, and he was the president of this institute in 2001 and supported the scholarly exchange program. He has written about British rule, its history and politics, South Asian migration, and higher education in Canada. He has written many books; these are *British Emigration Policy 1815-1830: Shovelling out Paupers* (1972); *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (1979); *The Four Quarters of the Night: The Life Story of an Emigrant Sikh* (1995) and *Radical Campus: Making Simon Fraser University* (2005) and also published many research papers on the life of Indo-Canadian migrator (SFU). For the publication and research for the book a grant and fund were provided from the President Research Fund, Simon Fraser University and it had been taken speed to finish the research work.

#### **Research Gap:**

There are several research papers on the Komagata Karu tragedy, however, these all are discussed from a general perspective, this book can provide a little bit of detailed information focusing on the involvement of leading personalities either directly or indirectly in the tragic incident. The researcher further attempts to glance at the current international relationship between India and Canada with the association of the previous history and political implications with special referencing Hugh Johnston's *The Voyage of Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar*. A deeper investigation into the impact of Canadian immigration policies during this period can provide a more nuanced understanding of South Asian resistance and survival strategies.

#### **Research Methodology:**

There are many angles, shades, and shapes for the story, however, the researcher is working on the work of Hugh Johnston by utilising realistic, historical, and political pieces of evidence and perspectives. The present research is qualitative in nature and the researcher uses the library research method. The primary data comes from Hugh Johnston's *The Voyage of Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar*. Furthermore, the researcher uses several research articles and other related study materials as the secondary source for the present research paper. The researcher uses the present tense to narrate the historical incidents, which may assist in perceiving a feel of the progress of the story in the current mode. The researcher uses a historical



approach to explore the Komagata Maru incident as it is a sense of appropriation for it. The paper utilises an interdisciplinary approach to link history, politics, and international relations with literature to notice this research paper.

### **Background of Komagata Maru Tragedy:**

Komagata Maru is a steamship, built as a cargo ship in 1890 and owned by Japanese Shinyei Kisen Goshi Kaisya. When the Komagata Maru incident occurred; India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were not independent countries but were part of the Indian subcontinent. The prejudicial immigration political policy of Canada and the British had been sabotaged by the Komagata Maru incident where 20 people were killed in a tragic mishap at Budge Budge near Kolkata.

### **A. The Historical Personalities:**

Hopkinson is born in Delhi in 1880; his father works as a sergeant instructor of volunteers in Allahabad. In 1903 or 1904, Hopkinson is appointed as an inspector of police in Kolkata. He comes to Vancouver in 1908, and the Canadian government appoints him as an immigration inspector and interpreter to control Indians. However, he continues to work for the Indian police, meaning he still serves the British government in India (Johnston, *TVKMTSCCCB*, 12). The book suggests that Hopkinson follows militant nationalism, and due to this kind of behaviour, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, 1914, Hopkinson is assassinated by Mewa Singh, a Sikh immigrant who blamed him for oppressing Indians and spreading injustice (Gurpreet Singh). His actions and involvement, particularly in monitoring Indian political activities in Canada, create an atmosphere of mistrust, surveillance, and repression, which contributes to the unfolding of the tragedy.

Gurdit Singh is fifty-six years old with a white beard and a self-taught and self-made man. His father, Hookum Singh, is a farmer in a small village. Gurdit Singh is rejected in the army due to the thin chest by a regimental recruiting officer so he goes to Malaya and starts dairy supplying to the Sikh regiment station (Johnston, *TVKMTSCCCB*, 35). He creates a great influence on the Sikh community. In his speeches in the *gurdwara* on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Sikh Guru, he says "The main purpose of every Sikh is to fight for independence because Guru Gobind Singh died for the nation" (Johnston, *TVKMTSCCCB*, 36). The author makes a perfect description of the central character Gurdit Singh, who is a 56-year-old rich businessman who enters into international politics and contends with the Canadian and British governments for voyage and immigration.

He is the leader of the Komagata Maru expedition and plays a significant role in the events leading to the tragedy. His intentions are rooted in challenging unjust colonial laws. He believes that the British government should have intervened on behalf of the passengers and ensured their entry into Canada, which did not happen. All his attempts indicate that he is not fully prepared for the legal and logistical battle that ensued. The passengers were stranded on the ship for nearly two months without adequate food and supplies, leading to severe hardships. His decision to push forward the challenge without sufficient legal or diplomatic support inadvertently might have placed the passengers in a vulnerable position.

### **B. Rules and Regulations of the Canadian Government:**

Hugh provides the background of the Komagata Maru tragedy; in the earlier period of the twentieth century, though they experienced harsh treatment, discrimination, and exclusion, it was a trend for many South Asian countries' people to migrate to Canada. The Canadians consider that



several South Asian migrants have been capturing their jobs and opportunities, which led to anti-Asian sentiments spreading across Canada. Moreover, the Canadians follow racial discrimination among whites, blacks, and browns as they consider whites are superior, originated, and residential of the place; Blacks belong to Africa and browns belong to South Asia. They believe browns have been trying to invade Canada. This mind-making shaping process compels the Canadian Government to introduce many rules and regulations against the people of the Indian continent. Malaya, Hong Kong, Thailand, Sumatra, Shanghai, North America, Canada, and Manila offer some Sikhs as a policeman, watchmen, and caretakers, which influences Indian immigration to these countries. The related foreign governments consider that South Asian immigrants attempt to capture local jobs and opportunities that influence the government to make strict laws on immigration.

The British Empire already is experienced the bravery of South Asia, especially Sikh Bravery in the Revolt of 1857. The Canadian government learns the lesson from it and pressure voyage companies to stop voyages and stop selling tickets. The province of British Columbia commences to stop the migration from South Asia to Canada and passes an act *Continuous Passage Regulation* in 1908; as per this regulation, passengers should have to pay \$200 per person and they should directly come from India without stopping at any port (Johnston, *TVKMTSCCB*, 4). In November 1913, the Canadian Supreme Court allow 35 Indian passengers to migrate to Canada who fulfilled their *continuous passage regulation* document. This incident inspires Gurdit Singh to plan for many Indians to migrate to Canada. In 1907, the Canadian government bans voting rights for Indians and does not allow Indians in jobs of public office, juries, accounts, lawyers, and pharmacists, however, allows them in Sawmills, railway stations, factories, and lumber yards. Many Indian intellectuals have been writing against it to raise nationalism in several journals. Since the mutiny of 1857, the British prefers to utter Sikhs instead of Hindus and prefers Muslims for the army and civil services, also establishes a Sikh regiment and opens their rituals and allows to carry *kesh, kirpan, kangha, kaccha, and kara* and distinguishes Hindus and Sikhs purposefully.

### **C. Ghadr (Ghadar) Movement:**

In the book, the major characters belong to the Punjab region of India; Sikhs by religion and they experience inequality in job opportunities and behaviour in Canada and the British Empire. Many South Asian people migrate for the purpose of work, jobs, and opportunities in Vancouver, Canada, however due to racial discrimination and dependency on India, they have been contaminated various times leads raising nationalism. Many leaders attempt to find the national identity among Sikh youngsters such leaders are Taraknath Das and Guran Ditta Kumar. They commence political journal the *Free Hindustan* and the *Swadesh Sewak* respectively (Johnston, *TVKMTSCCB*, 19). Taraknath Das was a student at Kolkata University and played a leading role in *Dacca Anushilan Samiti* also established a school for Sikh emigrants and Kumar was associated and contributor with *Bande Mataram* published by Mrs. Bhikaji Kama. Hopkinson is aware about them, therefore, Hopkinson directs regarding them to governments, consequently, the British government prohibits their works from publishing in 1911. The Canadian government exiles them from Canada then they migrate to the USA. Lala Hardayal is residing in the USA and he also starts the *Yugantar* (New Era) journal and establishes the *Hindu Association of the Pacific Coast* for the same reason (Johnston, *TVKMTSCCB*, 26). These activities and journals spread all over the world. Later these activities became *Ghadr*, which means revolt for freedom and its



related various activities occurring at *Yugantar Ashram* in San Francisco. They consider Hardayal as an extremely dangerous man as he influences many young Indian students. These all journals and movements have tried to raise Indian nationalism and to fight for a nation to be independent; consequently, the Indian community has become revolutionary all over the world. The CID filed a complaint against them and other activists in Canada and the United States. They change their name often to survive in Canada. Hopkinson is related to all of them and advocates for the government about bombs and pistols. He files a case against 36 people as a terrorist. Mewa Singh realizes that the condition of the Hindus in Vancouver is as bad as when Muslims ruled India (Johnston, *TVKMTSCCCB*, 146).

T. Veerasha, Associate Professor of History, Govt. First Grade College, Davanagere, provides a conclusion that the various leaders are from the Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims in the Ghadar movement (Party), however, after the 1920s, the Party becomes a local recognition of Punjabi and Sikh identity (645). The researcher finds the movement is originated in the frustration of the British colonial policies, which is not only oppressing Indians in their homeland but also discriminating against in abroad. The Ghadar Party strongly opposes an extension of British imperialism and highlighted these injustices to fuel anti-colonial sentiment among the Indian diaspora.

#### **D. The First World War:**

Many people are willing and waiting to go to Canada, however, the ships are not available. Gurdit Singh manages the Komagata Maru steamship from Kolkata to Vancouver in the ways of Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai announcing on the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1914 that he intends to help his country's people and to earn some money. His partner Diljit Singh has been selling tickets at \$ 210 and has raised \$10000 before any arrangement for a boat so some people file a complaint against him, however, they decide not to file a case against him, whereas, the British government files a case against him. Gurdit Singh stays in jail for some days in Hong Kong. The First World War originates in the European continent on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1914, in two groups; In one group, there are German and Turkish; in the second group, there are British, French, Russia and later USA joins.

In mid-February, Gurdit Singh is looking for a Charter Chinese ship from Kolkata to Vancouver after countless preparations for the ship voyage, the journey starts with 376 Indian passengers among them 240 Sikhs, 24 Muslims and 12 Hindus on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1914 from Hong Kong with infinite obstacles, it arrives on 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 1914. However, the Canadian government does not accept all of them, they accept only 24 passengers and 352 passengers does not allow, because, as voyage starts on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1914 from Hong Kong then it arrives in Shanghai on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 1914 and takes 111 passengers then it reaches to Moji, Malaya and takes 86 passengers then arrives at Yokohama and takes 14 passengers so as per their *Continuous Passage Regulations* 24 passengers allow to stay in Canada. According to the Canadian government, the remaining 352 Indian passengers have not followed the regulation act so they should return to their homeland. When Komagata Maru starts the return voyage the First World War already has begun, therefore, other countries do not accept them. The Indian British government orders them to come to Kolkata port directly without any stop. While Komagata Maru arrives at Kolkata port on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 1914, police capture and brings them to Budge Budge near Kolkata, there is a conflict between them and 20 people die due to militant nationalism and empire politics. Militant nationalism rises during 1908-1911 and again it raises in 1914, the initial period of the First World War. This incident is deeply intertwined with the aftermath of the background of the



beginning of World War I due to its political and racial context, as well as the policies of the time. Though the Komagata Maru incident is not directly caused by World War I, the war's aftermath, including changing immigration policies, heightened nationalism, and racial anxieties, significantly contributed to the conditions that led to the tragedy.

Hopkinson is faithful to his government and is following all the rules of government so many Indians are angry with him, as a result, he is shot down by Mewa Singh with a Caliber revolver on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, 1914. The British Indian government cannot provide an Indian Civil Service pension to Hopkinson's wife, Nellie, as he was working indirectly for the Indian Government, however, the Canadian immigration department provides her job as a stenographer (Johnston, *TVKMTSCCCB*, 129).

Afterwards, the Canadian government did not introduce discrimination immigration regulation so the numbers have been rising dramatically for South Asia, especially India, however, sparked out in the current year.

#### **The Current Scenario of International Relation between India and Canada:**

India and Canada believe in democratic, pluralistic, and international values. India and Canada also have a long-standing bilateral relationship based on the same values. Both countries often attempt to strengthen their international relations through bilateral agreements, official diplomatic dialogues, commercial agreements, education assistance, memoranda of understanding, and so on, however, some of the incidents may create conflicts between these two nations.

The Budge Budge incident was shameful for all related countries; the Canadian Government apologised for this incident, however, on the other side the British government had not apologised openly yet. In 2008, the Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper and in 2016, Justin Trudeau apologised on behalf of the Canadian government for the Komagata Maru tragedy (Wanyee Li). In 1952, the Independent Indian government built memorial momentum to dedicate for their bravery and courage at Budge Budge, and also, minted coins and printed post tickets in memory of the Komagata Maru ship (Inder Singh). Mewa Singh's picture still hangs prominently in the Sikh temple in Westminster, British Columbia, Canada (IP Singh); it is still a proud moment for India and the Canadian government's humbleness on the incident. The researcher would like to mention one more incident; Where relations deteriorated again in 1985 when a Sikh terrorist blew up Air India Flight 182 (Sharanya Hrishikesh).

The diplomatic tensions between India and Canada erupted in September 2023 while the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau alleged India blamed the involvement of Indian agents in killing Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Sikh separatist, in Canada in June 2023; India denied the Canadian Prime Minister's allegations, however, at the same time, India said Nijjar was involved in terrorism (Sheikh Saaliq). Nijjar was fatally assassinated in his pickup truck in June 2023. He was an Indian-born citizen of Canada and owned a plumbing business, and also, was a leader in a Khalistan movement, which demanded an independent Sikh homeland, which is banned in India (Sheikh Saaliq). This conflict has been rising for over a year which influenced Canada to expel the Indian diplomats and in response India expelled the Canadian diplomats and froze some services for nearly two months (Sheikh Saaliq, *voanews.com*, Geeta Pandey and Zoya Mateen).

The G-20 summit took place in September 2023 in New Delhi, India, under the presidency of India with the theme 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'. In this summit, India held several bilateral meetings with many countries, however, failed to arrange with Canada; they met only on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit (*vajiramandravi.com*).



India may consider this issue as part of Canada's domestic as well as internal politics as Sikh communities hold significant electoral influence. This diplomatic row has drawn international attention as developed countries are urging both sides to resolve their differences amicably.

To conclude, the present paper aims to revisit the Indo-Canada-British relationship and its effect on the world during the First World War. The book provides a contemporary perspective to explore the immigration policies of the Canadian government, the British Empire in India and the history of India, however, it does not provide any conclusion. The twenty-first-century people may comprehend the reasons and consequences of the story of this tragic incident. The book explores the real-historical character Gurdit Singh and makes him a revolutionary hero for Asian immigrants. The researcher experiences Canada's white supremacy and the politics of the British Empire towards South Asian people through reading the book.

Literature and history always go side by side to reflect contemporary situations as the book reflected the Komagata Maru incident. It inspired political awareness among the Sikh community and contributed to anti-colonial movements like the Ghadar Party, which challenged British rule in India for some time.

In the contemporary phenomenon, the political relations are at a low point, however, economic and trade cooperation remains relatively unaffected, underscoring the pragmatic approach both countries adopt toward their shared economic interests. The world hopes and prays for the improvement of the international relations between India and Canada through sustained diplomatic engagement.

### **Suggestions for Further Research:**

The researchers can do further study on how the broader British colonial system plays a significant role in shaping Indian migration patterns. One can investigate Canadian policies especially the *Continuous Passage Act* (1908) and other restrictive immigration laws and can examine how Canada's racial attitudes towards South Asians in the early 20th century. One can use a comparative analysis rules and regulations of Canada after WWI and WWII for the South Asian immigrants. One can use a comparative approach among the play *The Komagata Maru Incident* by Sharon Pollock, The film *Komagata Maru: A Challenge to the British Empire*, Hugh Johnston's *The Voyage of Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar*.

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