

## Remembering a Moment in History

# The Komagata Maru

### Looking Back at a Past Not Forgotten

British Columbia is well known as being a place of diversity, where people from around the world looking to call this land home are welcomed into our communities. Over a hundred years ago, this was not the case. On May 23, 1914, a boat carrying hundreds of immigrants from India to Vancouver became a focal point in the wider struggle against Canada's exclusionary immigration laws.

### Challenging Anti-immigration Laws

One of these laws was the continuous journey regulation which sought to restrict further immigration from India. In January 1914, a Punjabi man named Gurdit Singh Sirhali chartered the Japanese vessel Komagata Maru to take 376 people from Calcutta to Vancouver. The majority of the passengers were Sikh and all subjects of the British Empire. Gurdit Singh knew that such an act would provoke a response and hoped that Indian immigration to Canada could be opened up by forcing the issue.



### Unwelcome Arrival

Upon arrival in Vancouver Harbour on May 23, 1914, immigration officials led by Malcolm Reid prevented the Komagata Maru from being allowed to dock or its passengers from disembarking the vessel. Henry Herbert Stevens, a Vancouver politician, whipped up anti-immigrant sentiment and public opinion in Vancouver against the passengers.



### Stalemate

Passengers were prevented from getting off the ship for months. Food and water were limited and conditions were worsening. A shore committee was established amongst supporters of the passengers to raise money to assist them and to mount a legal case that went before the British Columbia court of appeal. The court ruled in favour of the government's right to restrict entry to the passengers. Apart from a small number of exceptions, the majority of the passengers who had arrived on May 23 were to be deported.

### Departure and Aftermath

By July 23 1914, the Komagata Maru was escorted out of Canadian waters by the naval vessel HMCS Rainbow after having fought to secure provisions.

Upon its return to India, 20 passengers of the Komagata Maru were killed by British authorities. Many more were arrested.



### Apology

In May 2008, an apology for the event was given by the Province of British Columbia. That same year in July, Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized for the federal government's role to a crowd gathered in Surrey. In May 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave a formal apology in the House of Commons.



On June 10, 2020 Vancouver City Council apologized for its role in the Komagata Maru incident at the request of the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society.

In 2020 the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society and the City of Delta agreed that acknowledging the Komagata Maru incident would provide a meaningful opportunity for the community to reflect on systemic racism in Canada. In response, the City installed this interpretive sign so that residents may be better informed of the hardships and struggles that many went through in working towards creating a more tolerant multi-cultural community.