Indians in Canada: Laying Foundations of a Community, 1905-08

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Abstract
The Indian immigration to Canada is a twentieth century phenomenon, beginning about 1904-05 and reaching increased numbers by 1908 and then abruptly declining within the next year essentially because Canadian exclusionary policies barred immigration from India in 1908 through manipulative policies. The Indians were shovelled out of Canada as opposition to their entry acquired a virulent form. The Canadian labour, backed by the press, politicians, provincial and federal governments, and the citizenry in general, demanded exclusion of Indians from Canada. This happened because at the time racial homogeneity was a widely shared value among white Canadians and exclusion of people, belonging to non-white races, was accepted as something given. Before the arrival of Indians, Canadians had already identified Chinese and Japanese as the unwanted and it did not take them long to slot Indians in the same category. After 1908 Indian immigration to Canada remained closed for almost half a century till it resumed in 1960s. The paper concentrates on the early phase of Indian immigration to Canada and argues that despite virulent racism directed against them, the Indians managed to lay the foundations of their community at a time when Canada and India were British colonies.

Keywords: Canada, Canadian Immigration, Indian Emigration, Indian Immigrants, British Columbia, Vancouver, Punjab, Punjabis, Sikh immigrants, Indian Diaspora.

The saga of Indian immigration to Canada in the early years of the twentieth century reflects two opposites – one of anguish and trauma and the other of change and adjustment. Indians were not the desirable immigrants that Canada sought at the time. Yet Indians ready to take risks to better their lives were able to set themselves up as a community, though a very small one, in the land of their destination. During the early phase of their arrival in Canada almost all Indian immigrants were single men falling in the age range 14-44 years, with most belonging to the age group of 20 to 29 years.1 They had entered Canada as sojourners and were not accompanied by their families, wives or children. This feature easily separated Indians from other immigrants, the Europeans in particular who were entering Canada in hundreds and thousands accompanied by their families, intending to settle down and make Canada their home.

However, what differentiated Indians from other Europeans was that they had ventured out of a British colony. Their colonial status as British subjects meant that they had entered the perfect world i.e. Canada with the queen of England as head of the country just like India. What made their condition even more significant was that they had entered Canada with hopes of making good fortunes and return home. Even though they faced difficulties in adjustments to the new destination they had arrived in, they hoped for a congenial treatment at the hands of other colonials. This feature also fundamentally differentiated Indians from other Asian immigrants in Canada like Chinese and Japanese. Yet immigrants from the colony of British India were perceived as undesirables by other Canadians. It was their very colonial status as British subject races that became the thorn to make Canada, a Dominion country at the time, to devise difficult situations for Indians, so much so that Canada ended up conniving with British colonial authorities to stop Indian immigration by 1908.

The arrival of first Indians in Canada is documented to 1904 – 05 when Canadian immigration recorded 45 entrants from India. By the year 1905 -06 this number became 387, perhaps not of much concern. But when the Canadian immigration reported these numbers to have risen to

1 Aparna Basu and Archana Bhatnagar, ‘Sikh Emigration to Canada: The First Phase, 1905 – 1908’, The Tropical Maple Leaf: Indian Perspectives in Canadian Literature, John L. Hill, Uttam, Bhoite (eds), New Delhi, Manohar, 1989.
2124 in 1906 – 07 and then to 2,623 in 1907 - 08, with the news of many more Indians on the way, Canadians not only took note of it they actually became alarmed to the extent of becoming anxious. By 1908 they halted the movement completely through an order -- in – council after which the number of Indian arrivals faced a steep fall, with the figure being recorded as just 6 entrants in 1909. 2 Following this, Indians were not allowed entry in Canada for the next forty years. Although a new law was promulgated in 2018 but that limited legal entry to only wives and children of the immigrants already present in Canada. Other than this, legal entry of Indians remained closed at least till the mid – twentieth century. Those who chose to remain in Canada in 1908 could be counted on fingertips.

Indians had entered Canada as voluntary immigrants. This meant that Indian immigration to Canada was not regulated by any outside agency, nor did any potential Canadian employer induce Indians through a job contract. In most cases the immigration developed in the form of a chain migration. The few who entered in 1904 – 05 became the medium to spread the news back home through letters that labouring jobs were aplenty in Canada with prospects to earn good money. By early 1906 some returning Indians carried the news home about Canada, thus helping generate interest in others to follow. This did not mean that all emigrants returned home wealthy, there were some who returned empty handed too. 3 But their numbers remained small with the result that many felt enticed to try their fortunes believing in the prospects of good pay and bettering their lives overseas.

What facilitated the departure of emigrants from India was the role of Canadian shipping agents that had offices opened in Calcutta such as Messrs. Gillanders and Arbuthnot Company or Messrs. Thomas Cook and Sons. These agents were in regular touch with their counterparts in the Vancouver city located on Canada’s west coast province of British Columbia like the Canadian Pacific Railway or the Canadian Pacific Steam Navigation Company which appeared willing to carry Indian passengers on their steamers. It is stated that in the year 1907 alone, Messrs. Gillanders Arbuthnot had sold somewhere around 1200 tickets to Indians although not promising anything about job prospects in Canada. 4 The shipping agents could not recruit immigrants as contract labour for Canada under the British colonial law in force in India at the time. The agencies were also barred from advertising such types of news in the local newspapers nor were they allowed to circulate any notice advertising Canada in India. They could not take any immigrant at personal level as well. 5

This meant that emigrants moved to Canada on their own risk, though shipping agents did inform the emigrants about essential requirements regarding deboarding at their destination. When left on their own the shipping agents encouraged those who could show their medical fitness certificates or those who could declare that they carried fixed amount of money that was meant to be declared before the Canadian immigration officials so that the immigrant was not presumed to be a beggar. It is to be noted that most shipping agencies active at Calcutta looked after departing ships going to many overseas countries, but not to Canada as at the time a direct shipping line between India and Canada did not exist. There were two embarkation points for onward journey to Canada, one at Calcutta and the other at Hong Kong. 6 This meant that intending Indian emigrants had to break their journey from Calcutta at Hongkong and board another ship that carried them to the Pacific coast of Canada where immigrants disembarked in British Columbia.

The batch of 45 in the vanguard of Indian influx to Canada had selected the Canadian Pacific Steamship steamer line Empress of India. It is said that their arrival went unnoticed. But the next batch that reached by the same steamship steamer line seemed large enough to warrant official


3 Department of Commerce and Industry, Branch: Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A; National Archives of India, New Delhi, India (Hereafter Commerce and Industry, Emigration).

4 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A; Commerce and Industry, Emigration, September 1907, 13 – 14 A.


attention. In 1905–06 the Canadian Year book listed Indian numbers as 387. However, the census returns of the period are not very helpful in ascertaining the background of Indian immigrants. By the time small trickles turned into large clusters, the Canadian census enumerators were describing Indians as Hindus and Sikhs. Sometimes these categories overlapped, at other times the listing clubbed all Indians as Hindus, at times they were listed under separate religious categories. Be it the district wise distribution of Indians or their patterns of settlements in British Columbia’s major cities like Victoria or Vancouver, the Canadian census are not of much help to find details about Indian immigrants. At best these offer information about their numbers.

In any case, it would not have been possible for an ordinary Canadian to distinguish Hindus from Sikhs had it not been for the dress they wore. Nearly 90% of the Indian arrivals were estimated to be of Sikh background, the rest were Hindus, along with a scattering of Muslims. Ethnically, Indian immigrants appeared as a homogenous lot as described in Canadian newspaper headlines, “…wearing light coloured European style clothes, bearded and turbaned”. Among the Sikhs, their largest numbers came from the Punjab region of India with most declaring their places of origin as the local districts of Hoshiarpur and Jallandhar. Some Sikhs were also listed from the districts of Ferozepur, Ludhiana and Amritsar. A few had arrived from Ambara, Patiala or Lahore. Given the geographical and regional scale, these districts were part of the central and submontane Punjab. Geographical proximity in the areas of immigrants’ origin as well as regional sense as ‘Punjabis’ accorded solidarity ties to majority Indian immigrants. However, within the community there were distinctions between Nanak Panthis and Khalsa Panthis, also dialects in the language varied. Nevertheless, the fact was that majority hailed from the Punjab in India.

It is informed that most Indian immigrants to Canada came from the farmer class. They were in search of greener pastures wanting to escape the life of drudgery under the British colonial rule in India. The Punjabi farmer immigrants had left behind a world where they were deep in debt, facing economic hardships because of small and fragmented land holdings created due to rising population pressure. From 1890s, the situation of majority farmers in the Punjab was considered precarious as they were susceptible to the vagaries of nature. Recurring famines, crop failures, short harvests, scarcity of fodder, cattle mortality, rising food prices were primary contributors to make life difficult for farmers in the Punjab. On top of this wheat exports began to fall and the farmers found themselves bound to the trappings of the money lenders from which the colonial government offered no respite. Rather the government’s revenue department used coercive measures to issue warrants and writs to farmers in order to continue collecting land revenues, that too at enhanced rates. These factors served as the necessary ‘push’ motivating Indian farmers particularly from the Punjab to look for greener pastures away from their own moorings. Under the British colonial rule, emigration out of Punjab appeared to lot of farmers as the most preferred resort in order to become able to provide necessities of life.

Moving overseas was perhaps an easy option for the emigrants from the Punjab, familiar as they were to long distance migratory trends even before the dawn of the twentieth century. Much before they came to know of Canada, Punjabi Indians had been working as carpenters and electricians in East Africa. Many had found their niche in the hardware business in Bangkok. In Malaya they were found employed as car drivers, dairymen and also as mine - labourers. They were found working as policemen, watchmen and caretakers in Singapore and also at Hongkong. It was from Hongkong that majority Indian immigrants having large number of Sikhs among them ventured out to Canada using the facility provided by the Trans Pacific Passenger Service in operation since 1891.

10 Verma, Making of Little Punjab.
11 Basu & Bhatnagar, Sikh Emigration, p 104; See also Verma, Making of Little Punjab.
13 See Johnston, East Indians; Sandhi, Indians in Malaya.
How Indians came to know about Canada may never be known but, the legend goes that in 1897 Indian troops sent by colonial Britain to represent India in the celebration of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in London had passed by the Pacific west coast of Canada. The Indian troops had covered their journey by the Empress of Japan and had even disembarked very briefly at Vancouver. During their very short stay the city’s newspaper coverage gave them positive coverage – “Turbaned Men Excite Interest” -- indicating that the Indian contingent consisted mainly of Sikhs though Muslims were also part of it as the contingent was led by Sardar Major Kadir Khan Bahadur. The contingent had returned to Hongkong on the steamer Empress of China. This short journey for Indian troops was impressionistic and, when they returned home, they narrated glowing accounts of what they saw in Canada. They wrote letters to their families about what they perceived as economic freedom and available opportunities in far off lands and thus made information about Vancouver accessible to others. By 1903 it is reported that at least five Indian men had landed in Vancouver and five others in the city of Victoria located in the province of British Columbia.

It was during the plague epidemic of 1902 that Indians from the Punjab became aware of the importance of going to Canada. Their interest was initiated as some returnees to villages in the Punjab carried information that certain steamships had put up notices in their Calcutta offices advertising the voyage to Canada. The headlines of one of the notices read as follows – “For Hindoos Going to Canada”, the full message stated “…Hindus who desired to go to Canada can have full information from the company’s agents for the Canadian Pacific Railway Royal Mail Steamship Line, No. 8 Clive Street, Calcutta…Every steerage passenger must have with him at least Rupees 50/- (dollars 16.69), coins of India to show to the Immigration Officer so that he can satisfy himself that the immigrant is not a beggar.” The Indians responded, with many intending emigrants travelling by train from Jalandhar railway station in the Punjab to embark upon a ship from Calcutta’s Takhta Ghat for their onward journey to Hongkong. From Hongkong different batches of Indian emigrants boarded the vessels of Canadian Pacific Line and travelled by a number of ships including the Empress of India or RMS Tartar or the Empress of Japan. These ships carried Indians in the steerage class or third class where they slept in the ships’ bunker sections.

The earliest experiences of Indian immigrants were quite trying after they landed on Canada’s western most province of British Columbia. As poor farmers from rural backgrounds Punjabi Indians faced difficulties in adjusting to the glittering city lights, to tall buildings, even to smartly dressed women and children, as they compared their own backwardness and poverty - stricken roots with the affluence in the living conditions of the people in their new destination – “they have electric lamps, we have not even oil lamps”. The difficulty of adjustment was compounded as no officials helped them. The immigrants were on their own, hunting for jobs or looking for favourable employers in a largely unknown land. However, it did not take them long to regard Canada with favour and approbation. The Indians soon discovered that British Columbia had tremendous opportunities to absorb them as labourers. The province was on the threshold of an economic boom with its major sectors of economy rapidly expanding – lumbering, mining, fishing, along with railway construction. British Columbia was participating in an economic boom that spread across Canada with the entry of millions of European immigrants. The situation in British Columbia’s lumber industry was unprecedented as it was progressing rapidly in response to demand from the rest of Canada and also from foreign countries. Soon Indian immigrants found a foothold in British Columbia’s employment sector as they found jobs in lumber mills, logging camps and railway yards around the city of Vancouver and on the Vancouver Island. They also succeeded in finding their own settlements around the centres of their employment. Port Moody on the east coast of the Vancouver Island became famous among the immigrants as the first Punjabi Indian settlement in Canada. Soon other Indian settlements came up in the lumber mills at Arrowhead, Rossland and Robson.

16 Buchignani et al, Continuous Journey, p 7.
17 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, July 1908, 6 – A.
18 N. G. Barrier, Sikhs and their Literature: A Note on Sikh Proscribed Material, Delhi, Manohar, 1970, p 114.
Once the process started, it did not take long for Indians to attain a reputation of respect as deserving workers. Belonging to farmer’s background, they were accustomed to arduous and seasonal work and believed in patience and resiliency. It is informed that lot of Canadian employers seemed keen on keeping Indians as labourers because they were found to be worthy workers, reliable, industrious and law abiding. An officer attached to the Geological Survey of Canada, N. D. Daru, observed how quickly a part of 30 Indian labourers found employment – 24 worked with the Canadian Pacific Railway and 6 went to a fruit ranch. The Canadian Pacific Road Master under whom 24 Indians worked told Daru that they gave him more satisfaction than any other European labourers.

21 C. S. Gonnason of the Gonnason Company in Victoria found Indian workmen “more energetic with a keen desire to learn more”. 22 Other employers like Columbia Lumber Company at Golden too found Indians employed in their lumber yards and saw mills as favourable workers. They were found acceptable in Nelson’s Yale Columbia Lumber Company and Johnon Lumber Company at Cranbrook. The coal chutes of the Canadian Pacific Railway Yards too found Indians as popular employees. Indians were found to be competent not only in railways or lumber mills, even the fruit orchards in Western found Indian labour dedicated and of course they adapted well to farm work, especially looking after cattle. 23 N. D. Daru had made further observations, “so many employers asked me to enable them to get these men that If I had a few hundred more, I could easily have placed them”. 24

It is stated that most Indians preferred to work in groups which Canadians referred to as gangs, under one employer. Initially quite a few of them worked on ‘piece’ basis, but they preferred to work on contract basis as it allowed them greater freedom to distribute their labouring time or better organise the division of labour. More importantly it gave them freedom regarding number of working hours and also to manage their own time of attendance. Contract labour was preferred also because it provided financial security to immigrants as under it all payments were made at definite periods. 25 In any case the time and mode of payment varied, for piece work it involved intensive labour for producing single items on the basis of which payment was made whereas in contract work payments were made fortnightly. Piece work was not a stable mode of payment.

The rates of wages that Indians earned too varied from dollars 1.50 to 2.50 per day depending on the nature of work performed. In the railway construction work and the saw mills, the payment was made on hourly basis ranging from 15 to 20 cents per hour of work. However, the wages were higher in seasonal work, in picking fruits in the orchards for example the Indian wages ranged from 3 to 4 dollars. These figures when compared to their homeland were equivalent to Rupees 9 and 12 in Indian currency, amounting to more than a month’s salary for a soldier in the colonial Indian army. This seemed to serve the primary purpose for which Indians immigrated to Canada. And to save enough, an Indian labourer lived frugally. It is stated that in British Columbia an Indian could comfortably manage within dollars 12 and 14 a month. Colonel Swayne, the Governor of British Honduras where Canada would make efforts to transfer Indians, had estimated, “…there are over 1000 Sikhs…whose savings [may reach] a total of about dollars 35000 a month”. 26

Indians had entered into new roles as hired labourers in Canada’s urban setting but, essentially, they remained rooted in the simplicity of Punjab’s rural village life. Their new status did not cause disturbances at social level with their earning capacity being secured. Though there were some Sikh immigrants who tried to adjust to the life ways of the majority white Canadians after their arrival in Canada, however efforts to contain such ‘deviance’ were quickly made as majority Indians, particularly from Sikh background, tried to preserve and maintain their socio – cultural values with which they entered Canada. The Punjabiya and the notions of Bir and Prah [brothers] remained alive among them so that ties of solidarity remained strong, and in fact these got reinforced because Indian immigrants gave too much importance to ties of kinship based on village connections or pind

21 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A.
22 Das, Hindustani Worker, p 44.
23 Basu & Bhatnagar, Sikh Emigration, p 105.
24 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A.
26 Das, Hindustani Worker, p 54; Puri, Ghadar Movement, p 23; Commerce and Industry, Emigration, September 1907, 13 – 14 A; Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1909, 13 A.

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bhaichara in a new setting. Such feelings, sentiments and values allowed Indian immigrants to preserve and retain their distinct identity.

Religion was integral to the growth pattern of the community. Sikhism became the solidifying force for the community as it was transplanted almost unaltered in the new setting in matters of doctrines, teachings and values. As a first step in 1908 Indian immigrants financed the construction of a Gurdwara from their savings that was constructed at Port Moody. It was popularly known as the Vancouver Gurdwara within the immigrant community. The Gurdwara was meant to fulfil the same functions as a village Gurdwara in the Punjab, imparting Guru’s teachings, giving marg darshan, guidance, to those who devoted from the panth, religion. Granthis, ceremonial readers of the Sikh holy book, were provided like Bhai Bhag Singh and Bhai Balwant Singh who through their efforts tried to arrest “corrupting influences” of the novel environment in Canada and resolved to conduct evangelical work, the gurumat prachar, within the community. A Gurdwara Committee was also formed, a precursor to the later Khalsa Diwan Society, to look after the functioning of the Gurdwara.

With the emergence of a place of worship, a pattern developed within the community that was reflective of the evolution of community consciousness among Indians. Majority Indian immigrants remained in the company of their counymen at work, in logging camps or in bunk houses provided by their employers and they preferred their ethnic food while retaining their eating habits and continued to respect tradition in matters of religious symbols like the turban. All this resulted in the creation of a sub–community culture of Indians overseas in Canada. A concrete example of this orientation was the construction of a Hindu Ghar in the form of a community shelter. The Hindu Ghar was meant to accommodate new arrivals from India, to provide them temporary shelter, given for such time till the community members successfully settled down or found work. Langars, communal meals, were provided in the Hindu Ghar by the better off in the nascent community. The Indians therefore worked through mutual understandings. There was, however, nothing to ensure that the community would be left by itself to allow its ethnic characteristics to grow. This was because Canadians were becoming very restive with continuous arrivals of immigrants from Asia.

When Indians were laying the foundations of their community, the Chinese and Japanese immigration influx had resumed in Canada and their numbers began to rise in the period 1901 and 1908. Canadians appeared very constrained about this, with almost every section of white society in British Columbia opposing their entry into Canada. White public opinion put very strong pressure on their governments, provincial and federal, to achieve complete restriction on the Chinese and the Japanese immigration. As the white British Columbian society became highly polarised on racist grounds, Indian immigrants too were placed in most difficult of the situations. An increase in their numbers meant rise of white prejudice against them. This indicated that Indians too would face the racial brunt of white Canadians.

The city of Vancouver was very conscious about preventing what they perceived as the “invasion” of British Columbia by “Asian hordes”. When Indians were arriving at the rate of just 3 and 4 the city clerk Thomas McGuigan had despatched an angry letter expressing his personal opinion to the federal government. His letter charged that shipping companies were luring Indians to come to Canada on promises of finding them jobs with Canadian employers. However, the same letter also made McGuigan’s official position clear --- “Indians were not wanted in Canada!” Although the Vancouver clerk’s letter was full of inaccuracies, it was clear on one point that “Indians were a non–European racial group”. Such beliefs became widespread as a force to unleash racial hatred against Indian immigrants and gradually gave rise to vociferous drive to exclude all Indians from Canada. The white Canadian leaders, politicians, labour councils took the lead in this and their racial hatred got reflected in the form of riots against Asians in Vancouver, including Indian immigrants.

Concerted opposition against Indians began to take place from 1906 when Vancouver and Victoria’s Trades and Labour Councils communicated their resolutions, passed in general body
meetings, condemning Indian immigration specifically.  

A crisis like situation appeared in the fall of 1906 when the Vancouver city government raised sharp objections at the arrival of almost 270 Indians in a single ship. The government was joined by local federal immigration officials unsympathetic towards Indians and they even ‘deported’ few immigrants taking the plea to send back Indians on medical grounds. What contributed towards opposition becoming public was the response of two of Vancouver’s local MPs as they approached the Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier to demand --- “Hindoos Be Shut Out”. By the end of 1906 when almost 1300 Indians arrived, Vancouver’s Mayor Buscomb brought the context centre stage at the level of national and world politics. Buscomb had contacted a number of British government officials on the issue. With this British colonial government in India too became a participant in restricting Indian immigration to Canada.

In 1906 however the opposition to Indian immigration did not yet represent what was to follow. There was a section of white population that was still kind, pleasant and friendly towards Indians. Owners of lumber and logging mills were eager to have Indian labour particularly on the jobs where white man could not even exist but the “Asiatic hordes thrived”. The railroad construction yards, ranch owners, orchard owners, where labour was the demand of the hour, continued to hire and employ Hindoos. It was this class of people who actually wanted “more” Hindoos admitted. But white labour continued to be restive. When a notice appeared in The Canadian Daily on 30th July 1906, “…owing to the success attending the employment of 300 Sikhs, mostly reservists, in British Columbia arrangements are being made to import 2000 more of those workers from India”, it was inevitable that white labour interests would seize the opportunity.

Much of the prejudice and hostile feelings towards Indians were based on the complaints of white workers that emphasised Indians lowering the standard of living in British Columbia. The wages they earned became a contentious issue because the minimum wage structure for the Asians including Indians, Chinese and Japanese, was much lower than what the white labourers earned. Although wage rates for Indian immigrants were higher among Asians, their wages were not comparable in any way with white labourers. It was an established policy in some of the mills to pay lower wages to all Orientals and Asians in comparison with whites. The arguments were forwarded that while a Sikh or a Hindoo could live and thrive on dollars 12 or 14 a month, a white man could not even exist on that amount. More the employers favoured Indians, more the white labour and their political bodies became hostile towards them. By August 1906 the white labour unions were up in arms against importing “all” alien labour and they seemed to have become organised with Vancouver and Victoria’s Trade and Labour Councils officially placing their emphatic protests against attempts to flood the country with cheap Asiatic labour.

Its notable that Indian immigrants had not followed the Chinese into such employments like domestic service, laundries and hotels or working as cooks, kitchen help or in market gardening. Based on such choices made by Indians, the whites created the impression that what they could or would do was limited. Majority Indians from farmers’ background preferred arduous and rough work outdoors, of course it also paid well from their perspective. They were often made targets of generalisations as claiming the position of equality with white workers hence not wanting peace at any price!

The white labour opposition was supported by press campaigns in local newspapers promoting stereotypes. Victoria Daily Colonist described Indian immigrants as a community of “an unwholesome group of starved decrepit humanity” making attempts to “foist upon this [white] community aged, infirm and impecunious persons”. The local newspapers portrayed India as the “hotbed of the most virulent and loathsome diseases such as bubonic plague, small pox, Asiatic cholera and the worst form of venereal diseases”. As the press campaign of vituperation and calumny continued, the white politicians eagerly tried to make political capital from such opposition,

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31 Buchignani et al, Continuous Journey, p 18.
33 Buchignani et al, Continuous Journey, pp 18 – 19.
34 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A.
35 Das, Hindustani Worker, p 58.
36 Buchignani et al, Continuous Journey, p 18.
38 Verma, Making of Little Punjab, p. 112.
white labour being an important class of voters in the province. The sense of job competition that white labour felt vis–a–vis Asian immigrants was bound to have political repercussions. Soon, British Columbian politicians joined the press campaign and contributed further to engineer hostile feelings. A deputation of two local MPs was sent to meet the Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier in Ottawa, even as the local Municipality attempted to forcibly prevent the landing of Hindoos at Victoria port with the help of city’s police force. The politicians in the province began to demand complete exclusion of Indians when reports poured in by late 1906 and early 1907 about the arrival of about 2000 more Indians. The development was viewed as a welcoming sign by the conservative leadership in the province keeping in mind the pending elections. The federal politicians in Ottawa too took a note of it. The reports of the Department of Interior bear ample testimony to this as these note that “Yankee bosses are playing a crucial role in controlling the labour market” and that “opposition to outside labour is largely political and very corrupt”.

The British Columbians showed profound interest towards the impact of Asian immigration on the quality of permanent settlers that Canada was seeking at the turn of the twentieth century. Their hostility was rooted in widely shared beliefs and desires for racial exclusiveness as whites. Besides the government, even the most ordinary citizen was for the whites. Nothing reflected this more clearly than the premier Richard McBride’s declaration, “British Columbia must be kept white…we have a right to say that our own kind and our own colour should enjoy the fruits of our labour”. A popular doggerel of the time reflected such ideas and attitudes personifying white dominance in Canada:

“we welcome as brothers
all white men still,
but the shifty yellow race,
whose world in vain,
who oppress the weak,
Must find another place.”

It was at this time when cries of “White Canada Forever” were commonplace that Indian immigrants incurred the odium of the white population.

They were considered an inferior race, ignorant of the Canadian culture. Stories abounded, whipping up racial prejudice against Indians that they were caste–minded and polygamous. Indignation was expressed over “their mannerisms, their talking loudly on the side - walks, their unkempt behaviour, their habit of spitting, loudly clearing throats, their unclean habits riddled with disease”. Indians continued to be projected as the impoverished, the unwanted boat people. Their traditional attire, particularly the turban worn by the Sikhs as a mark of their religion, became what a red rag is to an infuriated bull. Whites treated the Sikh turban as the most conspicuous emblem to justify that the immigrants had no desire to be assimilated with the majority. This generated lot of excitement among the white population. Strong propaganda in many other ways continued to be directed against Indians. Charges of begging were placed against them as whites failed to understand their ethnic language. T. R. E. McInnis for example, the secret agent planted by the federal government’s Department of Interior in the community, exaggerated in his report, “…I notice many idle groups of them about all the streets and know that they beg from house – to – house in the Westend for such foods as they will eat”. McInnis was not knowledgeable about Indian languages and most Indians were handicapped in English. Later this shortcoming prompted Colonel Swayne to suggest the appointment of an officer knowledgeable in Indian languages, a task that saw W. C. Hopkinson’s appointment among Indians. He was a military officer called especially from Calcutta.

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39 Buchignani et al., Continuous Journey, p. 19.
40 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A.
43 Basu & Bhatnagar, Sikh Emigration, p 109; Commerce and Industry, Emigration, July 1908, 15 – 19 A.
44 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, July 1908, 6 A.
Indian Immigrants, however, were not without sympathisers, even in political circles. Henry H. Gladstone, nephew of the famous British prime minister wrote, “...Sikhs were unscrupulously clean and I regard them as a very fine race of men”. 46 Dr. S. H. Lawson, surgeon – in – charge on the Canadian Pacific Railway steamers Monteauleg and Tartar that carried Indian immigrants to Canadian shores, shared Gladstone’s view. It was his duty to make thorough physical examination at Hong Kong of all travelling passengers, “…at first I was strongly prejudiced against them…thousands of them had passed through my hands and I had compared them with white steerage passengers I had seen on the Atlantic. I refer in particular to the Sikhs, and I am not exaggerating. They were hundred percent cleaner in their habits and freer from disease than the European passengers I had come in contact with”. 47 Such views, however, represented minority opinion and were of no consequence.

Relations between Indians and whites worsened when rumours spread about riots in the city of Vancouver in November 1906. This made the civic authorities of south Vancouver act on the complaints of few citizens and they threw out a number of Indians from their lodgings or bunkhouses in cold weather, refusing food and fuel to them on another occasion that too on instructions of the city Mayor. 48 The government officials also tried to force the Canadian Pacific Railway to return Indian immigrants to Hong Kong. By that time the federal government declared the Indians liable to be “public charges”. 49 Hundreds of Indian immigrants were forced to spend the night outdoors in the winter of 1906 - 07, while moves to restrict their immigration continued apace. The local public hysteria mounted as Canadians realised that Indian immigrants being British subjects were eligible to vote in Canada. This hardened the resolve of the government and the Minister of Interior sent instructions to the local immigration officer in Vancouver to deport any Indian not able to support himself. 50

As the British Columbian economy slumped in 1907, throwing thousands of whites out of work in Vancouver alone, Indians were also affected. Many Indian immigrants lost their jobs and, in most cases, they simply walked back to Vancouver from other parts of the province. Their return coincided with the arrival of thousands of new immigrants from India via Hong Kong. 51 As their numbers augmented, it became clear that white hostility would influence government policy. Politically, the provincial legislature took steps to place restrictions on Indians already in Canada. In March 1907 British Columbia’s premier Bowser initiated the process to disenfranchise the Indians “not of Anglo – Saxon parents”. The legislature unanimously approved the bill introduced by the premier. 52 By April 1907 changes were made in the Municipality Incorporation Act denying to Indians in Canada the right to federal vote. 53 Simultaneously a host of other rights were withdrawn. This action of British Columbia’s government highlighted that as British subjects Indians were not equal members in the Empire having the same rights, same privileges, same responsibilities as the whites. The belief in equality of the British subjects was just a fiction.

The political disabilities imposed on Indian immigrants remained in force till the next forty years, in 1907 in British Columbia the action of the government was followed by the formation of the Asiatic Exclusion League. On September 7, 1907 its meeting was chaired by the city Mayor who gave directions to the League members in a manner that touched off serious race riots in Vancouver. 54 The Vancouver League members rioted against the Chinese and the Japanese but the Indian immigrants escaped the wrath of white mobs because they lived away from the riot sites. However, quite a few Indian immigrants fearing the danger of its recurrence left for the United States, though situation there wasn’t any better. Evidently, the “Hindoo question” had become an acute one in the winter of 1907. By then it is stated that the Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier had made the decision to terminate immigration from India.

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47 Ibid.
48 Johnston, *East Indians*, p 3; Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A.
53 Ibid.
The Prime Minister Laurier had written to Canada’s Governor General Lord Earl Grey informing that the situation of Hindoos was far more serious. He then made a revealing statement that the movement of Indians to Canada be settled ‘quietly’ in India itself. He justified this opinion by arguing that the immigrants were decoyed by unscrupulous agents in India and were shipped to British Columbia under misrepresentation about the state of Canadian labour market.  

Laurier’s communication to the Governor General indicated that governmental action to restrict Indian immigration would soon follow. The hostility towards Indians increased in 1907 as British Columbia’s economic conditions deteriorated coinciding with the arrival of SS Monteagle transporting hundreds of more Indians even as province’s officials made projections that some 1500 Hindoos and a large number of white labourers would lose employment. Meanwhile, the Monteagle passengers disembarked at Victoria where they had to spend the nights either at cattle pens or in government’s city jail, while many laid off Indians reached Vancouver where they spent the nights at Stanley Park or simply slept on the streets. Seeing the situation, the city’s Mayor Bethune sent furious telegrams to Laurier to urgently contain the situation.

The Prime Minister acted by sending urgent communications to the British government following which the colonial government in India undertook some steps to curtail the movement at the source of origin. The colonial government in India issued ‘serious’ warnings to emigrating Indians. The move however failed to make an impact, as a result thousands of Indians continued to reach the western shores of Canada. The government of India expressed its inability to “openly” support the Canadian government in the matter and did not initiate any legislation against emigrating Indians. Despairing to find solutions by itself the Canadian government looked for other alternatives, even if it meant transporting Indian immigrants physically out of Canada to either Fiji, Mauritius or British Honduras. The Canadian government thought it necessary that Indians should be made to move out for the maintenance of public order.

The Canadian government decided to shift Indian population to British Honduras located on the Caribbean Coast of Central America. The decision was taken in the middle of the economic slump but it was worked upon in 1908. The case was strongly presented by Ottawa – “West Indies proposal looks good because it gets the Hindoo out of a country where there is little but hardship and misery in store for him…and places him in a country where climate and conditions are favourable.”

The Canadian government thus adopted the attitude of a benefactor for Indian immigrants but, internally the government’s view was that “in matters that so vitally affect our own welfare Canada is the best judge of the course to be adopted”. Deportation of Indians from Canada, however, was open to court reviews and more importantly the whole idea was rejected by the Indians. The community guarded its interests by forming something like a labour union of its own through which its leaders like Nagar Singh and Sham Singh visited British Honduras to investigate the conditions there and reported unfavourably about the entire deportation scheme. By then the economic depression had waned with the conditions improving for the immigrants, even the Governor of British Honduras admitted, “all indignant Hindoos in Vancouver had been provided for by the Hindoo community.”

In 1908 unemployment lessened in British Columbia for both, whites and the Indians, as lumber mills and logging yards resumed work. The better off among Indians showed willingness to support their countrymen who remained unemployed. By now some Indian immigrants had shifted to other sectors of economy for example some had taken to farming by purchasing private land. However, politically Indian immigrants remained powerless as Canadians continued to harness the

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55 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A; Buchignani, p 23.
56 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A.
57 Buchignani et al, Continuous Journey, p 22.
58 Ibid.
59 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A; Commerce and Industry, Emigration, September 1907, 13 – 14 A.
60 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1909, 13 A.
61 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1907, 7 – 29 A.
62 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1909, 13 A.
general feelings of white dominance, though some whites did further the argument that Indian immigration should be restricted on the grounds that white labour would continue to ill treat them. 63

The Canadian government considered the question of restricting Indian immigration a tricky one because it involved Indians as British subjects from a British colony while Canada too remained tied to the British crown. Moreover, Canada was aware that the British colonial government visualised its position in India as sensitive, Punjab being the core area for the recruitment of Sikh soldiers in the British army. More importantly, the colonial government in India did not want to stop Indian immigration on racial lines, forwarding such arguments as to prevent Canada from becoming the breeding ground for Indian “seditionists” and “revolutionaries” who might seize the opportunity to act against the British colonial government. 64 The government of India thus stayed away from taking any legislative action against emigrants and informed the Canadian government to devise a mechanism without mentioning race or ethnic origins of Indian immigrants.

Canada appointed the Deputy Minister of Labour, W. L. Mackenzie King, to investigate the matter and make recommendations. King quietly negotiated with India’s colonial and the British governments and found them in concurrence with Canada’s wishes to terminate Indian immigration. 65 The British officials wanted Canada to introduce such methods of restriction that did not create political problems for the Britain in India. It was then that the provision of “continuous journey” was worked out by the Canadian government. This saw amendment of the Canadian Immigration Act which empowered the Governor General to prohibit the landing in Canada of any immigrant who did not reach directly from his country of origin. After this a sub – clause was added that made it compulsory for the tickets also to be purchased in the country of origin. The provision was given effect through an order – in – council dated 27th May 1908. The immigrants from India could no longer travel to Canada as there was no direct shipping service running between Canada and India at the time. The Canadian government by a further order – in Council of June 3rd 1908 ensured to stop the “unwanted” immigration more fully. Under this all immigrants were required to possess dollars 200 at the time of embarkation on continuous journey. 66 This had the desired effect as in 1909 the number of Indian arrivals in Canada reduced to just 6.

The Canadian government put its act together and began to pressure the Canadian Pacific Railway not to accept Indians as passengers from Hong Kong and also not to issue through tickets from Calcutta as the orders – in – council had made the shipping companies liable and responsible to return the unwanted passengers from Canada. After Canada had restricted Indian immigration, the colonial government in India chose to amend its Emigration Act, 1883 by making it illegal for the natives of India to proceed to Canada under an agreement to work for hire. With these promulgations, the Canadian and colonial Indian governments achieved their objective. Afterwards Canada wrote the continuous journey provision into an Act which remained operative for the next forty years.

Thus, the community of Indian immigrants that remained in Canada after their immigration was stopped, could not be treated as a ‘real’ community with the absence of women and children. In the next few decades Indians continued to face Canadian ethnocentrism magnified with such racial stereotypes about them as – inferior, lazy, untruthful, immoral, litigious, and violent. The community, however, remained resilient and battled the racial constraints. Most of the times they chose to ignore the white community. Over the years some individuals in the community gained more from the profits earned and worked hard to redefine their status rankings in the Canadian society.

63 Basu & Bhatnagar, Sikh Emigration, p 113.
64 Buchignani et al, Continuous Journey, p 23.
65 Commerce and Industry, Emigration, July 1908, 15 – 19 A.
66 See Johnston, East Indians; Buchignani et al, Continuous Journey; Johnston, Hugh, The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada’s Colour Bar, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1979.
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