

## An Investigation into South Asian Adversity in British Columbia

Kirandeep Kaur Dogra<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

South Asians have made monumental contributions in Canada. The abundance of South Asian history in British Columbia (B.C.) describes the adversities experienced by Punjabis in the early 1900s. Mewa Singh was a monumental figure who challenged inequalities, and his death incited significant political, social and cultural boundaries in the heart of Vancouver, B.C. The controversy involving the dismissal of the Komagata Maru, William Charles Hopkinson's involvement with immigration laws and the execution of Mewa Singh incited greater understanding of the social and cultural ramifications at this historical time. Implications resulting from these events are examined through a cultural-psychological framework.

*Keywords:* current events, South Asian diaspora, Komagata Maru, cultural psychology, racism

---

<sup>1</sup> Kirandeep.Dogra@email.kpu.ca; Written for Cultural Considerations in Counseling (CNPS 3330). Special thanks to Dr. Tigerson Young for recommending the submission.

### **An Investigation into South Asian Adversity in British Columbia**

South Asians have made monumental contributions in Canada. Many Punjabis abandoned their hometowns and immigrated to Canada in search of greater economic opportunities and a better life for their families. However, as a visible minority, assimilation into a predominantly White nation was not an effortless process. South Asian history in British Columbia (BC) extensively describes the adversities experienced by Punjabis in the early 1900s, as this was a time where racism and discrimination were at its peak (e.g. Roy, 1989; Stanley, 2009; Stanley, 2011). Mewa Singh was a monumental figure who challenged inequalities during this time, and his death incited significant political, social, and cultural boundaries in the heart of Vancouver, BC. This paper seeks to further examine how these implications impacted the relationship between South Asians and Caucasians in Canada.

Mounted on the walls outside the library in Akali Singh Sikh Temple in Vancouver BC lies an image in remembrance of Mewa Singh (see Figure 1). Hardbattle (2013) describes how Singh's experiences were pivotal to immigration laws in BC. Shortly after his arrival from India in 1906 as a sawmill worker followed an incident involving passengers of a Japanese vessel, the Komagata Maru. The ship resided along Vancouver's Burrard Inlet from Hong Kong in 1914 but was halted for two months as a result of the immigration legislation from 1908 (see Figure 2). With the purpose of reducing higher volumes of immigration into Canada, the Continuous Passage regulation required immigrants to come from their country of citizenship by a continuous journey and via tickets purchased directly from their country of citizenship. Notably, the Komagata Maru had stopped midway in Hong Kong, violating this legislation. Despite their efforts to challenge the enforced regulation, 375 British Indian passengers were denied entry into the country. Within two years after the enactment of the legislation, the South Asian population in B.C. dropped by 60 percent (Hardbattle, 2013).

Immigration inspector and Hindu language interpreter William Charles Hopkinson closely monitored any perceived anti-British activities of South Asians at this time, especially after the formation of the Ghadar Party in North America to free India from British rule. Hopkinson's response to these perceived threats included facilitating several assassinations across the province. Bela Singh, an informant of Hopkinson, entered the Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara in Vancouver on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1914, injuring seven and killing two (SFU Library, 2011). Mewa Singh was an avid witness for the suffering of his people who were constantly

persecuted by politicians, newspapers, locals, businesses, and the government. However, witnessing a successful assassination attempt in a religious arena was intolerable for Singh. The situation escalated: Hopkinson and his agents threatened Mewa Singh with death if he did not testify in favour of Bela Singh. Mewa Singh held Hopkinson responsible; he shot and killed Hopkinson in plain sight as he was testifying in favour of Bela Singh in court. Consequently, Mewa Singh pleaded guilty for the murder and took full responsibility for his actions. He did not resist arrest or try to escape, he surrendered (Hardbattle, 2013).

Mewa Singh is the first and only South Asian man to be sentenced to death by hanging in Canada (Hardbattle, 2013). Although Singh's presence in the Lower Mainland was short-lived, his message had a profound social impact on the community. Hopkinson was regarded as a hero, and thousands of people gathered to pay him respect at his funeral procession. However, Mewa Singh's funeral was composed of a humble group of South Asians residing in the community (see Figure 3). These archives are one of the only pieces of Sikh history that are now openly accessible to the public. Mewa Singh's actions are a blatant sign of frustration from years of violence, inequality, and oppression in the province. While some may believe his sentence was completely justified, his course of action may have been one of the only options available to galvanize change in society at this time. Moreover, information is limited on Bela Singh's final ruling from the provincial courts.

Given the considerable amount of evidence involving the marginalization of South Asians, acknowledging the cultural ramifications faced by this group is essential. The Continuous Passage regulation was a clear scheme to allow for the preferential selection of immigrants into Canada to further racism (Salter et al., 2018). Salter et al. (2018) argue that ethnocentrism is mediated by cultural tools (e.g., national holidays, museums, textbooks; Wertsch, 2002). They further that dominant groups construct their ideal reality by selecting past representations that maintain white racial dominance. Likewise, Hopkinson held biased, ethnocentric views against South Asians to the point where he facilitated assassinations, yet he was commemorated by many Caucasian community members at his funeral. The experiences of South Asians at this time fit the mould of the cultural-psychology framework: (1) their everyday environment was rooted with racist actions, (2) is promoted by perceiving the world in a racist manner, and (3) is framed by people who prefer, practice, and perform according to

the racial context of that environment (Salter et. al, 2018). Mewa Singh was a controversial figure who challenged this cultural framework perpetuated by dominant, White men.

Past literature focusing on the experiences of acculturation of South Asians in Canada is limited (Bhatt et al., 2013). Following the incidents of Komagata Maru and Mewa Singh, these historic moments were seldom referenced. In fact, a formal apology was not released until 2016 when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau discussed the adversities faced by passengers on the Komagata Maru (Husser, 2016). The city of New Westminster, BC is currently attempting to proclaim Mewa Singh Day for the community (Smith, 2020). The long period of silence over the decades could be regarded as a failure by the dominant cultural group, as they have not recognized the damage they have caused to Canadian minorities. Feagin (2010) highlights how European identity formation is focused around the self versus other, where Caucasian's perceive themselves as more developed and human compared to people of colour. While there was a global apology for the suffering endured by migrants on the Komagata Maru, Mewa Singh is yet to be recognized by Caucasians on a national level; hence, the need for greater cultural tools is imperative. Continuing to have a gap in the knowledge of adversities and harsh realities faced by minority groups only serves to retain the status quo of White privilege in our society.

The political controversy involving the dismissal of the Komagata Maru and the execution of Mewa Singh incited greater understanding of the social and cultural ramifications during this historical time. The assassinations facilitated by William Charles Hopkinson were a blatant act of racism and should not have occurred in a place of worship. Although Singh's shooting of Hopkinson in court has been deemed immoral, he conveyed a broader message. The death of Hopkinson signifies the oppression, racism, and discrimination faced by South Asians in the community; Singh established a voice by conveying how people were not granted justice in Canada. It was not until recently that this incident has been brought to light, and White privilege may be the reason behind this delay. Ultimately, learning about the impact of adversity on minorities is key to shaping our perspectives of other groups.

### Figures



*Figure 1.* Image of Mewa Singh. From “Mewa Singh was the first and only Sikh to be executed in Canada. He came to Canada in 1906, a time when thousands of South Asians were coming to Canada looking for a better life.” by Brown History [@brownhistory], August 18, 2019 [Instagram photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1U5C3wnmHJ/>



*Figure 2.* The crowded deck of Komagata Maru. From “Crowded deck of Komagata Maru” by Frank, L, 1914 [Photograph]. Retrieved from <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/395>



*Figure 3.* Mewa Singh's funeral procession. From "Radical objects: Photo of Mewa Singh's funeral procession 1915" by Melanie Hardbattle, December 19, 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/radical-objects-photo-of-mewa-singhs-funeral-procession-1915/>

## References

- Bhatt, G., Tonks, R. G., & Berry, J. W. (2013). Culture in the history of psychology in Canada. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 54(2), 115-123.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032645>
- Brown History [@brownhistory]. (2019, August 18). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram.  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/B1U5C3wnmHJ/>
- Feagin, J. R. (2010). *Racist America: Roots, current realities, and future reparations* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Hardbattle, M. (2013, December 19). *Radical objects: Photo of Mewa Singh's funeral procession 1915*. History Workshop. <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/radical-objects-photo-of-mewa-singhs-funeral-procession-1915/>
- Husser, A. (2016, May 18). Justin Trudeau apologizes in House for 1914 Komagata Maru incident. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/komagata-maru-live-apology-1.3587827>
- Leonard, F. (1914). Crowded deck of Komagata Maru [Photograph]. SFU Library.  
<http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/395>
- Roy, P. (1989). *A white man's province: British Columbia politicians and Chinese and Japanese immigrants 1858–1914*. UBC Press.
- Salter, P. S., Adams, G., & Perez, M. J. (2017). Racism in the structure of everyday worlds: A Cultural-psychological perspective. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 27(3), 150-155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417724239>
- SFU Library (2011). *Bela Singh (1883-1934)*. <http://komagatamarujourney.ca/node/14680>
- Smith, A. (2020, January 9). City of New Westminster expected to proclaim Mewa Singh Day to honour martyr who murdered immigration inspector. *The Georgia Straight*.  
<https://www.straight.com/news/1344431/city-new-westminster-expected-proclaim-mewa-singh-day-honour-martyr-who-murdered>
- Stanley, T. J. (2009). The Banality of Colonialism: Encountering Artifacts of Genocide and White Supremacy in Vancouver Today. In S. R. Steinberg (Ed.), *Diversity and multiculturalism: A reader* (pp. 143-159). Peter Lang.

Stanley, T. J. (2011). *Contesting white supremacy: School segregation, anti-racism, and the making of Chinese Canadians*. UBC Press.

Wertsch, J. V. (2002). *Voices of collective remembering*. Cambridge University Press.