

# *A letter to The Maru*

**1914, Dated 1994**

*To the unknown passenger,  
who I will name Ranjeet...*

When you arrive in the early hours of the morning, you will not see the grey-green sheath of The Georgia Strait, you will look into the darkness and know you have entered a new land. You will see the dark foaming waves as they cut against the rusty old ship. The distance offers a few waking lights streaming on the dark

waters, and in that moment, you will drift in to waking slumber. The sweet air, remnant of spring, will be familiar to your lips, and the past seven weeks at sea— an unfamiliar rite of passage— will have been worth it. The day is May 23, 1914, and the ship that carries your dreams is named *The Komagata Maru*.

When the ship's anchor drops, your eyes draw to the rising land mass known as North Vancouver. Awake. Awoken. The dawn plays tricks on your eyes. You start to see shapes taking form, colossal shapes, square shapes that hulk over the harbour like figures to be reckoned with, while your mind still sees your farm as it was in your boyhood, before you took your place in the British Armed forces and before serving the British Raj, where you waged war in the Sudan, in Somaliland, in China and at Saragarhi, on behalf of your master. You remember the corn, rice, red peppers and sugar cane at the farm, knowing the meaning of the season and the blood that rages through your body is the same life force that drives the roots up into your fields. You wonder why Mathaji sold two parcels of your land for you to journey to this new place, why your family still could not afford to keep you, without sending you away into a world unknown. And the remaining two parcels of sugar cane you



harvested will be income to the local government; the vizeer, the mayor, the British civil servant.

Not knowing how much you were impoverished by your master. That the annual drain on your home cost your home millions of pounds annually, of which 17.5 million was drained away without a penny's return.

Not knowing during that time, your home paid England's debt at about 244,000 pounds sterling since 1900 with annual increases. You will not know that the compounded interest amounting to 72 and-a-half million sterling was the key reason for India's famine; not failure of rains, or over-population. Awful poverty caused by enormous foreign tribute, and an equally expensive tribute to the Indian Durbars; royal families that squandered away your culture.

This letter is to you my friend, because you have unwillingly sacrificed yourself to the greatest of endeavours: the song of freedom, as you try to find ways out of the complete poverty of your arrival in the new land, and the living poverty at home on the farm.

You will not know these things because these points of light have not been shone in your eyes. You, the unwilling event that once again gives birth to the idea of freedom and self determination in your homeland; the idea, not the death.

As you place your foot up on to the plank and look to feel the earth again under your feet, a voice from the shore line will shout out to you "Keep off the land," or, "Drive the beggars back to the Ganges." You comply, 70 years have seeped into your actions, your thoughts



—you comply to every demand and order meted out by the European. You will step back and take your place amongst the others and await for the next move. In front of you will be the charterer who convinced you in Singapore that life in Canada will be one of good living. Gurdit Singh asks the shore man: "Immigration Inspector Malcolm Reid, why the delay?" Reid replies: "The whole boat will be quarantined for medical checkups, and following that, each individual on the ship will have to have \$200 in his pocket and be travelling direct passage from his place of birth." (Implausible since there are no ships travelling non-stop from India to Vancouver, Canada.) You will step back, deprived of community and wait out a medical check up lasting over ten days, as opposed to the customary 24-hour check.

The rations on the ship will diminish in the following fortnight. As day turns into day and your ship becomes Vancouver's marine zoo, you will have nothing left. By this time a 3-shift watch consisting of two

armed police guards will keep an eye on your every move, as you slowly descend into yourself and feel your whole world has been squeezed into this ship. When asked for food by Gurdit Singh, Inspector Reid will say it is Gurdit Singh's responsibility to feed the passengers, knowing Singh has as much mobility to move and acquire funds for foods as the rest of the ship. In effect, this will have denied you more than landing on Canadian soil. You have been denied your humanity.

On land, the stories written about you will never reach your ears, yet you see the hate on the mob's face and read it in their actions. *The Vancouver Province* will run stories saying "the right-thinking people know that the natives of Hindustan...should not be allowed in this country, except for circus purposes...We do not think as Orientals do. That is why the East Indians and other Asiatic races and the white race will always mis-comprehend each other..." or "The Sikhs are like the Irish raised to nth or the fourth

dimension. They are remorseless politicians and disturbers. They are complex and quite unaccountable... For the sake of the picturesque I am glad to have a few specimens. But those who came last (on the Komagata Maru) are not quite up to the sample. They must be returned as such."

On your behalf, there are those in the Indo-Canadian press who applaud your arrival. The Hindustanee paper published by Husain Rahim: "We extend a cordial welcome to Bhai Gurdit Singh and his party of 375 East Indians on board the Komagata Maru which arrived in this harbour. All kinds of spectacular and alarming stories in which the arrival of this ship has been termed a Hindu invasion have been indulged in by the local press day after day in their sensation mongering dailies, while the Empress boat, bringing 650 Chinese at the same time, was welcome...."

Again in a week, and after days of negotiations for food, you will have received provisions, but in the height of summer, you will parch, as the fresh-water supply runs out on the ship. Amidst the politics of whether the community of South Asians living in Vancouver should foot the bill, or whether the government who have imprisoned you as innocent people on the ship should foot the bill, your mouth runs dry and you find yourself drinking "bad dirty water, in which you become sick with cough and throat sores." When the dirty water is finished, you will have to wait till the politics subsides, and Inspector Reid having accepted and then deferred his legal responsibility gives the City of Vancouver the legal choice of deciding whether your parched life is worth helping under the Public Charges Act.

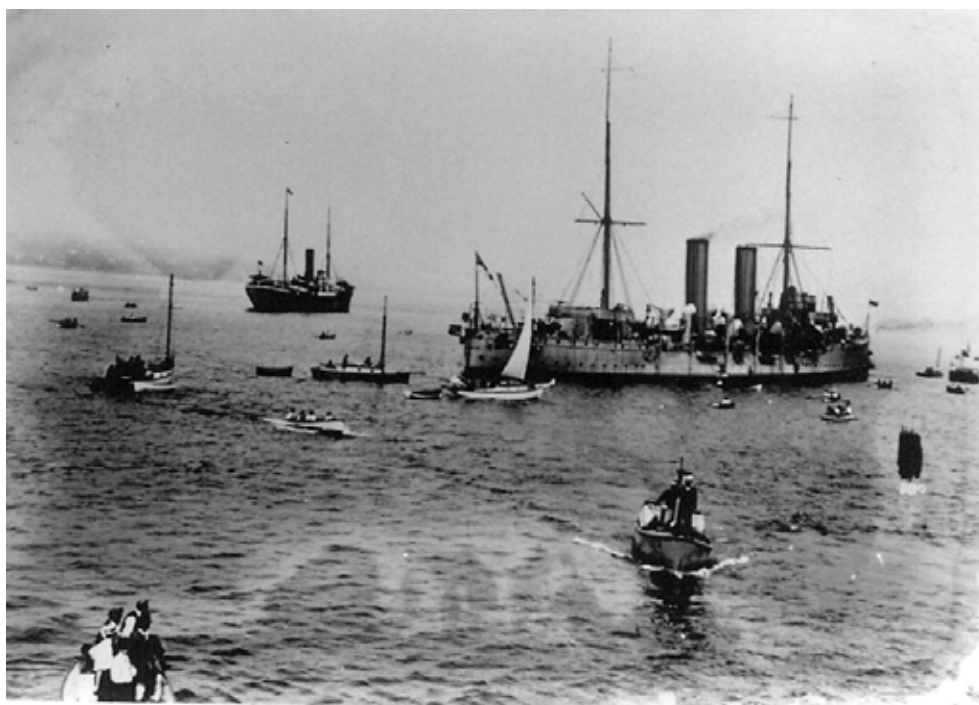
By now you will again look at your surroundings and the faces will tell you all.

You are in a run-down freighter without drinking water, with a poor diet of food items and a claustrophobic life cramped in filth-ridden captivity.

Dominion Day smiles will be your misery, as more onlookers crowd the harbour enjoying the spectacle of your misery as recreation. You are left with one meal a day, consisting of potato soup and rice, which leaves no water supply for drinking. By July 9, it will be for saving Reid's public image that you are supplied rations that will last a few days. Because you are undernourished, pangs of hunger drone on in your mind and stomach as your heart shrivels a little day by day. The battles you fought in will not equate to the misery and degradation that is now your life in the new land.

The Battle Of Burrard Inlet will not begin by your actions, and will not end with your surrender. On July 19, at 1:30 am, the assault begins against the beaten body of the old Maru, that still has not lost spirit. Through pangs of hunger and a parched mouth, you look for what would defend you from the state-terrorism that prevails upon the scene. With fire-brick, pieces of machinery, hatchets, coal, iron bars, and make-shift clubs, you defend yourself against a jet stream of fire hoses, and you know shots do sing by your scalp. Though the night report will say that you had the pistol and they decided not to use gun fire.

You succeed in one thing: to have been victorious in one battle for the freedom and equal movement within your notion as a citizen of the British Empire. In this act you are politicised as a martyr for the cause, though your eventual journey to imprisonment and death still awaits across



changing waters.

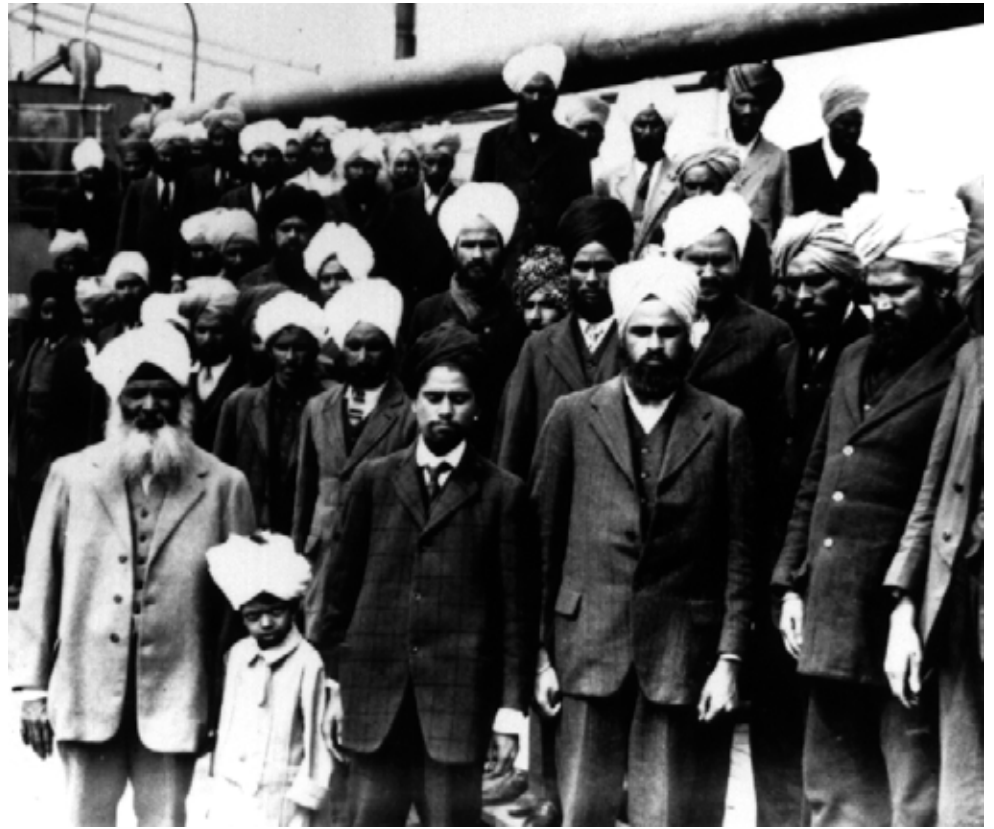
Defenceless, still a pauper you will see from the distance a warship coming your way. The HMCS Rainbow, arriving at 8:15 in the morning, will anchor 200 yards away from your freighter. The whole of Vancouver will be out to see your demise as their morning's entertainment. The Rainbow's arsenal consists of two six-inch and six four-inch torpedo tubes. The ammunition supply consists of old fashioned shells. The tubes are aimed directly at your head, along with this is the Vancouver Militia including the sixth regiment and the Irish Fusiliers and Highlanders. And all you have in your freight is coal.

Why...Why...a life laid down for the British Armed Forces, you say to yourself, as the lunar light cut's across the wave and lingers on in your mind? A question asked out of exasperation leads to the heart of revolution. Once an ally, now the enemy.

The irony is well suited, Dr. Skeltou writes to Sir Wilfred Laurier: "this nucleus of the new Canadian navy was first used to prevent British subjects from landing on the British soil."

You drift out to the sea at 5am in the morning on July 23 1914. You have provisions, your sleep will be at ease, but the final sacrifice awaits you at Budge Budge, India where as a criminal you will lay down your life as 177 rounds of .303 bore pierce your group and the first shot fired from the ship is quickly droned out by the hissing of the Royal Fusilliers.

There, you have been killed because you protested enforced repatriation. The massacre which many say go beyond the official count of 26 killed,



will not go unnoticed.

I offer this one last piece of information in your memory—a quote from a British Loyalist Sir John Roberts—dated Jan 5, 1914:

*“What good has India done us? First it has increased the small island of England to the largest empire in the world, and has given them wisdom, strength and happiness.*

*I will tell you the benefits one by one. All the regiments have been formed from India. All our merchant ships steaming in all ports of the world have been built by the wealth of India. All the big buildings in London are built out of Indian money. If it were not for India, England would be unknown today. The modern towns of Edinburgh, Cheltenham and Bath have all been built with Indian money. It was by the help of the Indian merchants and Indian money that we were enabled to fight Napoleon Bonaparte. It was only by the help of Indian money that we were enabled*

*to defeat and bind him and deport him to an island in the Atlantic Ocean. These benefits have been done for England by India, but the Indian people are not aware of their strength.”*

Ranjeet, your life is of the greatest value, and your sacrifice will live on. I write this to share your breath, and to hold the truth of your condition up to books written that dismiss and trivialize your Canadian contribution. You have given me life in Canada. Life in Britain, life in America. Your actions with your return to India, was one more example of The Empire's injustice, and the fuel towards self rule in India.

*With love and respect*  
Phinder Dulai  
Vancouver, British Columbia, 1994

