



GURU NANAK JAHAZ: A HISTORICAL FILM ON MIGRATION AND RACIAL RESPONSE

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Abstract:

The Punjabi film *Guru Nanak Jahaz* is a historical film directed in 2025 by Sharan Arts. The film narrates a story about a Japanese steamship named *Komagata Maru* (also named *Guru Nanak Jahaz* by the passengers) chartered at Hong Kong by a Sikh Businessman Gurdit Singh Sarhali to migrate 376 Indians to Canada in 1914. The Canadian legislation introduced continuous journey regulation against Indian immigration. This law regulated all the new migrants to travel on a direct sailing from the country of their origin. This denial worked as the convenient subterfuge for racism as there was no direct ticket or route available from India.

The ship started after agitation. Passengers were denied entry in Canada after arriving in Vancouver and anchored in Burrard Inlet for two months without any essential amenities. Following the orders in liaison with British Government, the Canadian immigration authorities ordered to sail the ship to Calcutta. Crossing the Mediterranean, suffering from starvation, they returned. The ship docked at Bhaj Bhaj Ghat, resulted death of 20, one drowned, 9 hospitalized, 202 jailed and 28 remained unaccounted.

The film sets Mewa Singh Lopoke, Bhai Bhag Singh Bikhiwind and Gurdit Singh Sarhali as heroes narrating the story of all the stateless refugees for their right to survive. The villains are the British and Canadian government officials as William H. Hopkinson who set the racial rules. The Canadian Punjabis named Bela Singh and Harnam Singh who supported the foreign nationals for their selfish desires are grey characters. The main objectives of the paper are to study the film in juxtaposition of plots of Gadar party leaders, *Komagata Maru* passengers and migrants of Canada. To observe how the close-up narrative of characters has transformed this historical documentation as a martyr film where the people being killed or suffered are not merely mentioned in numbers, but their stories are told.

The study is important as Canada is the flagship migrant nation for Indians specifically Punjabi migrants and this incident has been mentioned as "dark chapter" in Canada's history.

Key Words: *Komagata Maru*, Canadian Immigrants, Racism.

Introduction:

The film '*Guru Nanak Jahaz*' represents the shared status of Canadian immigration, British government and colonial India. The *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914 is remembered as one of the most striking examples of racial discrimination in Canadian history an unsettling contrast to the nation's self-image as a multicultural and inclusive society (Sadhu, 1994).

Two discriminatory Orders-in-Council remained in force until 1947, when they were finally repealed. In the decades that followed, Canada began actively promoting a more progressive multicultural vision, particularly from 1962 onward, as it sought to address its legacy of racial exclusion and intolerance. A major milestone came with the passage of the Official Multiculturalism Act in 1971 under the leadership of Pierre Trudeau, who also created a dedicated ministerial role for multiculturalism in 1972. The following year, the Canadian Multiculturalism Council was established, along with a Multiculturalism Branch within the Department of the Secretary of State. (Roy & Sahoo, 85-97)

Before these reforms, South Asians in Canada faced severe discrimination they were denied voting rights until 1947, barred from public office, and excluded from professions such as law and pharmacy. Today, however, the early struggles of the *Komagata Maru* incident pioneers have borne fruit, with South Asians particularly Sikhs achieving notable success and representation in public life. (Bains, 2024, pp. 1-8)

Scope of Research:

The study is important to be made to make an argument of migration and racism through visual medium, a digital documentation of historical events and evidence.

Objectives:

The objective of the paper is to study the film in juxtaposition of narrative of Gadar party leaders, *Komagata Maru* passengers and migrants of Canada.

Methodology:

For this paper, mixed method has been used. The film *Guru Nanak Jahaz* is analysed based on symbolic elements of diaspora in narrative and plot, characters, technical elements as cinematic perspective, mise-en-scene and editing. Interviews of director and set designer are also conducted.

Secondary research of journals and books has been made for the contextual understanding. The study of historical documentation and newspapers is made to support the argument of migration, diaspora and racism.

Migration to Canada:

The Nationality and Status of Aliens Act of 1914 provided the issue with firm constitutional backing. Earlier, Queen Victoria stated the responsibility of the Empire towards India “to the natives of our Indian territories by the same obligations of Duty which bind us to all our other subjects; and those obligations, by the blessing of Almighty God, we shall faithfully and conscientiously fulfil”. (Naoroji, 2016, p.5)

Canadian policy toward East Indian immigration can be characterized as a mix of selective encouragement and deliberate exclusion. In the latter half of the 19th century, Canadian politicians and immigration authorities openly declared that their acceptance criteria favoured subjects of the British Empire, particularly those of Northern European origin. (Avery, 2008, 125-126)

The earliest arrivals from India were Sikhs from the Punjab region, many of whom served as soldiers in the British imperial army. In 1897, some of these troops travelled from London through Canada on their way to their posting in Hong Kong. As part of the British Empire, Canada drew their interest, offering the promise of improved opportunities and a better standard of living. (Hickman, 2014, p.5)

In the early 1900s, the drive to preserve their culture was so strong amid profound power imbalances and pervasive differences that it created a lasting sense of separation from their homeland in India, particularly their native undivided Punjab and the small villages they came from. These places were deeply etched in their imagination, compelling many to undertake lengthy, months-long sea voyages back home. These journeys helped sustain a long-distance connection, reinforcing cultural preservation and providing the strength to resist the erosion of their collective identity. (Bains, 2024, pp. 1-8)

These early transnational immigrants had not yet fully shifted their loyalties to their new country of residence. They remained deeply connected to their homeland not just as an imagined community, with limited daily contact, but as a tangible reality reinforced by their frequent transnational travels. (Anderson, 1991)

Period	Key Features / Events
Early Years: 1902-1918	Racism, labour and social discrimination, bachelor society, legislated racism, discriminatory laws, media bias, loss of voting rights; small settlements across BC; diaspora activism for independence from the British Raj through the Ghadar movement; establishment of social organizations; legal challenges to racist laws; Komagata Maru denied landing.
The Quiet Years: 1919-1947	Women allowed to migrate; campaigns to overturn racist legislation; immigration reduced to a trickle with some returning to India; regained the right to vote in 1947 after World War II and India's independence.
Post-War Era: 1947-1970	In 1951, 2,148 South Asians in Canada (1,937 in BC); start of migration quota system; political engagement influenced by independence of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka).
Multicultural Bulge: 1970-1990	Increase in migration due to family reunification; labour movements strengthened.
Third Wave of Migration: 1990-Present	Arrival of educated professionals, businesspeople, youth, and families; largest cohort of Canadian-born South Asian children to date.

Participation of Sikhs in First World War:

Major Stringer Lawrence, regarded as the father of the Indian Army, established the first Indian military units in 1748. He also implemented several measures to enhance the organization of the British Indian Army. (The Army in India and Its Evolution, 1924, p. 18)

Following the end of the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46), a new force known as the Punjab Irregular Force was established. Its strength was expanded after the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-49), and it was subsequently deployed to the North-West Frontier. Over time, it became known as the Punjab Frontier Force, popularly referred to as the “Piffers.” (Singh, 1999 (First Published in 1966), p. 111)

Punjab was annexed by the British in March 1849, after which a Board of Administration was established with Henry Lawrence as its president. The Punjab Irregulars, tasked with guarding a five-hundred-mile frontier, developed into one of the finest groups of sepoys in the British Indian Army (Gibbon, 1908, p. 161).

Racism against Migrants:

“We hold ourselves bound to the Natives of our Indian territories by the same obligations of duty which bind us to our other entire Subject.” Queen Victoria’s this statement is the punchline of 1912. (The Aryan, May 1912, p.1) But unfortunately, the history records the incidents which are not in accordance with this punchline.

For these new immigrants, separation from their homeland did not lead to the anticipated sense of welcome, stability, or belonging. From the early stages of their migration around 1904, Sikh settlers encountered intense racial discrimination from earlier European-origin communities, who were determined to maintain Canada as a predominantly White society one defined by “White” standards of living and morality (Vancouver Sun, 1913, p.6).

Canada, though viewed as a daughter colony and a foreign land, soon revealed its challenging realities. Difficult politics, limited access to culturally familiar foods, biases against traditional clothing and dietary practices, and overt legal racial discrimination all contributed to reinforcing, among other things, the immigrants’ own cultural conservatism. (Bains et al., 2022)

In the article ‘Color Prejudice debars families of Sikh settlers’, the immigration agent was advised to deport Mrs. Bhag Singh and Mrs. Balwant Singh and their little children. Mr. A.M. Harper appeared in Supreme Court alleged that the order-in-council for this deportation was invalid as it exceeded the jurisdiction allowed as the wives were also carrying domicile along with husbands. He further claimed that the order to allow entrance only to those Hindus who came by direct passage was aimed at the exclusion of the labouring classes and not the exclusion of commercial classes of Hindus. (The Aryan, May 1912, p.1)

H.H. Stevens, member of Dominion House of Commons for Vancouver stated that Hindus are the British subjects not the British citizens. Never in India, up to the present time have the exercised the privileges of British Citizens in India. Why then, should they be entitled to British citizenship here. (The Aryan, May 1912, p.2)

The Komagata Maru incident is presented here as a theatrical interpretation of a historical event, shaped by the perspective of the stage and the imagination of the playwright. While it draws on documented facts, it is not intended as a strictly factual account. To capture the essence of the story, elements of time and place are sometimes condensed, and a degree of dramatic license is used. (Pollock, 227)

We were humble Indians trying to enter Canada in search of a livelihood, believing we had every right to do so, since both India and Canada were part of the British Empire. If even the poorest resident of London could travel freely to these lands, why were we denied the same freedom? Instead, we faced insult, humiliation, and disgrace across the world largely because we lacked a government willing to defend us against such injustices. (Josh, 1983, 109)

Komagatamaru and Ghadar Movement:

The Ghadar Movement began among Indian immigrants on the west coast of America with the objective of freeing India from British rule through armed struggle. On April 13, 1913, the revolutionaries established the Hindustan Association of the Pacific Coast in the United States, set up their headquarters at Yugantar Ashram, and started publishing Ghadar, a weekly newspaper in multiple languages, including Urdu, Gurmukhi, Hindi, and Gujarati. Its main aim was to raise awareness about British misrule in India. (Puri, 1983, pp. 53-57)

Lala Hardayal shaped and guided the thinking of immigrants against British rule in India, emphasizing that they would never be treated as equals in America until India gained its freedom. (Singh (ed.), 1975, pp. 1-27)

The Komagata Maru, a Japanese ship chartered by Gurdit Singh of Sarhali in March 1914 through a German agent, was intended to transport Indians seeking to migrate to Canada. It departed from Hong Kong on April 4, 1914, and reached Vancouver on May 22 with 376 passengers 12 Hindus, 24 Muslims, and 340 Sikhs. (Kumar, 2015, p. 144)

However, Canadian authorities refused to allow them to disembark. The passengers endured severe hardship, facing humiliation, and shortages of food, water, and basic amenities. They were even denied contact with fellow Indians in Vancouver. (Josh, 1977, pp. 131-32).

The incident was closely followed by leaders of the Ghadar Party in America, and Hindustan Ghadar reported extensively on it. The Komagata Maru episode intensified the Ghadarites' hostility toward British imperialism. They admired the passengers' resistance in Vancouver, and the event deeply stirred their emotions, strengthening their resolve to sacrifice their lives for India's freedom. (Josh, 1977, pp 62-63)

A few days after the Komagata Maru departed from Vancouver, the First World War broke out. The Ghadar Party chose to use the incident to ignite anti-British sentiment both within India and abroad. On its return journey, Ghadar activists provided the ship with copies of Ghadar, Ghadar-di-Gunj, and Ghadar Sandesh, along with arms (Josh, 1970, p. 40).

On September 29, 1914, the ship arrived at Budge Budge, about 17 miles from Calcutta, where the Bengal Government made arrangements to receive it. A clash soon erupted, and the police opened fire on the passengers. According to the official report, 303 bullets were discharged, resulting in the deaths of 16 passengers and injuries to six others. One policeman also lost his life in the incident. (Home Department, 1914, File Nos. 97-177).

As noted by Malwinder Singh Waraich, the incident resulted in the deaths of twenty passengers, while sixty-two were transported to Punjab by train. Although most passengers were arrested, a few, including Bhai Gurdit Singh, succeeded in escaping. (Waraich & Sidhu, 2014, p. 294)

Michael O'Dwyer also observed that the treatment of the Komagata Maru provided a strong impetus to the Ghadar movement. (Dwyer, 1925, p. 194)

In assessing the episode's impact, the Sedition Committee Report of 1918 noted that it reinforced the efforts of Ghadar revolutionaries, who were urging Indians to return home and participate in a "mutiny" during the war. Many emigrants responded to these calls, returning to India from Canada, the United States, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and China. (Sedition Committee Report, 1918, pp. 148-49)

Critical Analysis of Film "Guru Nanak Jahaz"

The film narrative is around two heroes Gurdit Singh Sarhali, Mewa Singh Lopoke and a villain Hawkins. Gurdit Singh, a prosperous businessman based in Hong Kong, was driven both by a strong sense of injustice against the Canadian government's "continuous journey" regulation designed to prevent what was seen as a "Brown invasion" and by the commercial potential of opening a migration route to Canada. With these motivations, he chartered a Japanese ship to carry Indian passengers seeking to immigrate there.

Mewa Singh Lopoke, Sikh Migrant in Canada and an active member of Ghadar party in Vancouver branch. He joined three Ghadaris Bhag Singh, Balwant Singh and Harnam Singh to cross the border at Sumas, Washington to meet the Bengali activist Taraknath Das to bring weapons for the passengers of Komagata Maru. He also murdered W.C. Hopkinson, Canadian immigration inspector and was executed by government of Canada.

W.C. Hopkinson used to work in Punjab and Kolkata Police in India. He knew Hindi and Bengali but could not learn Punjabi language He was son of a British father and Bengali mother but always denied this identity. Later he was appointed as immigration inspector by government of Canada in 1907. (Johnston, 2016, p.54)

Just two days before the planned departure, Gurdit Singh was arrested by the Hong Kong police for selling tickets for what was deemed an illegal voyage, and the ship was placed under strict surveillance. However, on March 24, 1914, the governor of Hong Kong who was acquainted with Gurdit Singh from his time in Malaysia ordered his release and granted permission for the ship to sail to Canada on April 4. Gurdit Singh was driven by a clear purpose: to challenge the discriminatory immigration policies imposed by the Canadian government against Asians.

That same day, the ship set sail with around 150 Sikh passengers on board. It halted at Shanghai, Moji, and Yokohama, where additional passengers joined the journey. When the Komagata Maru reached Shanghai, a German cable company reported to the press that the vessel had departed for Vancouver on April 14 carrying approximately 400 Indian passengers.

The report was soon taken up by the British press, and news of the ship's departure quickly reached authorities in British Columbia. Their immediate response was firm: "Hindus would never be allowed to land in Canada." Meanwhile, the Indian community already settled in Canada began preparing for the ship's arrival. Meetings were organized in gurdwaras to decide on a course of action, and people came together to gather supplies for the passengers.

In a strong display of unity, the community mobilized to support those aboard and resist the opposition. On May 23, 1914, the Komagata Maru finally arrived in Vancouver, anchoring near Burrard Inlet. (Khalsa Diwan Society, Abbotsford) The Sikhs were sent back in humiliation and disgrace, yet we still clung to the hope that once we reached India and the true facts were presented before the government, justice would be done. But at Budge Budge, a far harsher fate awaited us. Unaware of what lay ahead, we were treated like hunted animals pursued and shot on our own soil, with no one to stand up for us. The Enquiry Committee that followed seemed intent on shielding the actions of the Canadian authorities and the officials at Budge Budge, recording accounts that bore little resemblance to the truth. (Josh, 1983, 123)



The opening shot of the film is where the Migratory birds alas Parvasi Panchi are flying. One bird is shot dead by gun firing. The bird is lying injured, bleeding and dead, at the seashore. The shot of Koma gatamaru ship, at the borderline of the sea and land is superimposed at the bird. These migratory birds symbolize the migrants from Punjab to Canada, the narrative begins after this shot.



The shots represent the passengers helpless, deprived of their basic human rights as food, fresh air and water. But they are still united and hoping for their arrival for the better life of them and their children.



Mewa Singh, along with other Gadarians visited native Canadians to help the passengers of ship to provide food and water.



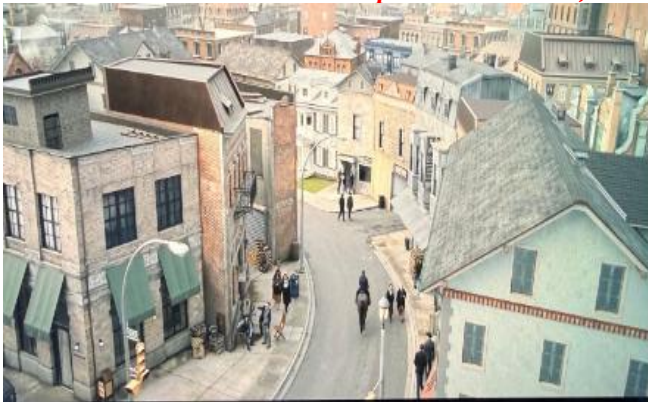


The closeup shots of guns, firing on Indians, cold expressions of cops, represent the film as not only a digital documentation, a news story but also as an expression of power and pain, oppression and victims.



In these shots, unlike other gun shots in film, Mewa Singh Lopoke, the Sikh migrant is firing on a British Canadian officer, W.C. Hopkinson. Here there are expressions of revenge on the face of Mewa Singh and fear on Hopkinson's.





There are tense situations on streets of Vancouver. There are plans and cops, security arrangements by the Canadian authorities and the victims, the Sikhs are frightened, aware and trying to find ways to escape their plans for their survival.



The protest by Canadian citizens to ban arrival of the ship, the game playing on table by Britishers Mid Shot and bird eye view. It seems that they are enjoying while making the racist decisions by marginalising the Indians and suppressing their rights.



These shots are important to be shown as the holy Book of Sikhs, Guru Granth Sahib Ji was brought in the steamship as a source of their power, as per their religious beliefs. It is significant to mention that when the ship returns, the Sikhs denied going back through train from Bhuj-Bhuj Ghat as they did not want to disrespect the holy book. But the britishers started firing on them.



The concluding shots of the film, where Mewa Singh is presented in Court and hanged till death.

Conclusion:

The story weaves the Sikh narratives of martyrdom. The fighters are converted into the heroes, the narrative recollects the facts, documents and incidents to reestablish the characters and to relive history. This is not only the digital documentation but a live expression, a realistic storytelling of the victims. Canada is still a popular nation for Indians especially Punjabis and the youngsters dream to settle down there. This film enlightening about the past also pave the way to rethink about the concept of nationality, new nationality, migration, multiculturalism and diaspora. The historical scenes are being recreated through visuals as well. The Visual effects, the costume and makeup are realistic. As the passengers and Ghadar party leaders belong from different regions of Punjab, the local dialect and sub-languages are also reflected through their dialogues.

Over the years, the transactional shift of Canada as a racist nation to a multicultural nation took place. So, the incidents are being blurred from the people's memory. Despite of it, it is crucial to weave the plots around the important episodes of war and history so that the coming generations could experience the pain, the sufferings, the sacrifices made by their ancestors, the freedom fighters. Some names are highlighted in history, and some always remain hidden. This is a fact that the communities do not die in war, but they die if they forget the warriors of war.

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