



# Migration from Punjab to Canada in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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**Abstract:** *This paper deals with the history of the migration from Punjab to Canada. Migration from Punjab to Canada started in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Migrating to Canada in search of better employment opportunities and higher wages is not a new phenomenon among Punjabi migrants. Nowadays, migration from Punjab to Canada occurs at a higher scale than ever before. This study examines the phases of migration to Canada from Punjab in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and also highlights the discriminatory policies adopted by Canadian society and the Canadian government against them. This study is based on both primary and secondary sources, including various censuses conducted by the government of Canada. The perspective of the main finding of the study shows the phases of migration from Punjab to Canada and the discrimination faced by Punjabi migrants in order to establish themselves in Canada.*

**Key Words:** Migration, Punjab, Canada, Discrimination, Continuous Journey Act.

## 1. Introduction

Migrating abroad is a trending phenomenon among Punjabi youths in the present scenario. Thousands of Punjabi youths are migrating to various foreign countries every year in search of better employment opportunities. Among these foreign countries, Canada is their prime destination. In the last decade, migration to Canada from Punjab occurred at a very high scale due to the flexible immigration policies of Canada. Most of these migrants who arrived in Canada are students who came to Canada to pursue higher education. Besides study visas, tourist visas and spouse visas are some other visa policies to reach Canada. However, Canada is not a new destination for Punjabi migrants. Migration from Punjab to Canada started in the last decade of the 19th century. In 1897, a group of Punjabi soldiers under the leadership of Major Kadar Khan travelled through various Canadian cities, including Ottawa, Montreal, and Vancouver, on their way back to India after participating in the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria held in London. Most of these soldiers were from Punjab and related to agricultural occupations. During this visit, they were fascinated by the vast plains of Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. When they returned to Hong Kong, they narrated tales of these vast stretches of land and the great employment opportunities available in Canada to their fellows. The Punjabi soldiers of Hong Kong regiments of the Indian British army again visited Canada when they were on their way to England to participate in Edward VII's coronation ceremony in 1902 (Kazimi, 2011). Some of these soldiers, who

visited Canada in 1897 and 1902, decided to migrate to Canada permanently after their retirement. Thereafter, migration from Punjab to Canada commenced.

## **2. Data Sources and Methodology**

For assessing the different phases of migration from Punjab to Canada, the yearbooks of Canada were analysed, which disclosed the number of Indian migrants who reached Canada in a certain year. The Canadian government's censuses from 1911, 1921, 1931, and 1951 were examined to find out how many Indians were living in Canada at different times. These censuses were also helpful in getting the exact data on gender-based Indian migrants in Canada. In addition, some government reports were examined, which were useful in this study. Further, secondary sources were also consulted for this study as per requirement.

## **3. Causes of commencement of migration from Punjab to Canada**

There has always been the notion that push and pull factors are what drive migration. There were various push and pull factors prevalent at that time that were responsible for the commencement of migration to Canada. The major push factor was the agrarian crisis in Punjab (Ward, 2001). Various scholars underline the role of land pressure in the central districts and famines to the commencement of migration from Punjab to Canada. On the other hand, the major pull factors were the availability of employment opportunities and higher wages in Canada. Besides this, Hugh Johnston highlights the significant role played by the recruitment of Sikhs in the British Empire's East Asian colonies, which afterwards encouraged their migration to Canada and the United States. Harish K. Puri attributed the migration of migrants from rural central Punjab to North America to the Punjabi's daredevil characteristics. Additional factors contributing to this phenomenon encompass unpleasant experiences as indentured labourers in colonies as well as the immigration restrictions imposed by the Australian government. The Canadian government also appointed a Royal Commission under the direction of W. L. McKenzie, Deputy Minister of Labour, to discover the reasons for migration from India to Canada. In its report presented in 1907–08, the commission identified several reasons for Indian migration to Canada. The major reasons among them were the distribution of pamphlets in rural areas of India by the industrialists of British Columbia and the activities of steamship agents who wanted to make a profit by selling tickets to Canada (Royal Commission report, 1908). Apart from these reasons, another reason was the imposition of the head tax on Chinese migrants. Migration from China was badly affected after the imposition of the head tax. So, in the absence of Chinese migrants, industrialists in British Columbia promoted migration from India in order to hire and get cheap labour. Ultimately, the primary factors fueling migration to Canada were economic prosperity, extensive prospects for success, and the availability of an abundant wealth of natural resources available there.

## **4. Phases of Migration to Canada**

We can broadly divide migration from Punjab to Canada into two phases. In the first phase, there was unrestricted migration. But in 1908, after opposition from political parties in British Columbia and local labour unions, the Canadian government passed the Continuous Journey Act. In the aftermath of this act, a phase of restricted migration started, which continued until 1947.

In the first phase, there was no restriction on migrants coming from India. The migrants entered Canada without any restrictions or conditions. However, at the same time, there were many restrictions imposed on other South Asian

countries, including China and Japan. Migration from China and Japan started in the second half of the 19th century. The labour unions of British Columbia see these Chinese and Japanese migrants as a threat to their own employment. They pressed the Canadian government to pass a law to prohibit the entry of these migrants. Therefore, in 1885, the Canadian government introduced the first ever anti-Chinese bill, known as the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885. Under this legislation, a head tax of \$50 was imposed on Chinese migrants seeking entry into Canada. This head tax was subsequently raised to \$100 in 1900 and \$500 in 1903. On the other hand, the Canadian government signed a pact with the Japanese government in which only 400 Japanese migrants per year were allowed to enter Canada. This pact was known as the Gentlemen's Agreement. However, Indians were allowed to freely migrate to Canada in this phase, following which migration from India to Canada started. Although migration to Canada commenced in the last decade of the 19th century, there was no data available for the number of people who migrated to Canada between 1897 and 1904 due to the absence of any record-keeping agency. The Canadian government established the Dominion immigration office in 1904 (Fang, 1931). This department was assigned the task of recording the number of migrants who entered Canada. This office records the data of any person coming from India under the title of East Indians. The data from this office tells us that there were only 45 Indians who migrated to Canada in 1904, but this number rose to 387 in 1905, 2124 in 1906, and 2623 in 1907. So, there were 5179 Indians who reached Canada by the end of 1907. Migration to Canada until 1907 was known as the first phase of migration to Canada.

This first wave of migration from India had two special features. The first feature is that, of these 5179 migrants, almost all of them belonged to Punjab, and 95% of them were Sikhs, while the rest were Hindus and Muslims (Basran et al., 2003). The second special feature of this first wave of migration was that this was a purely male-dominated migration, with only 15 females migrating to Canada until 1907 against 5164 males. So, this was a purely male-dominated migration. In the initial phase, most of the migrants from India were ex-soldiers, policemen, and watchmen who had earlier worked in the British Far Eastern colonies of Shanghai and Hong Kong (Dhillon, 1981). They wrote back to their family and friends residing in India about the wonderful job opportunities available in Canada, which led to migration from India to Canada on a larger scale than before. Therefore, the established social network, which acts as a pool of information flow, became the basis for induced migration in the second stage. However, after facing opposition from local labour unions, the Canadian government made the decision to put an end to further immigration from India in response to the influence exerted by local labour and trade unions.

The Canadian authorities not only prohibited new migrants from entering Canada but also made a plan to transfer existing migrants to British Honduras (Ward, 2001). In 1908, this proposal was made to the Punjabi community. The Punjabi community chose two members, Nagar Singh and Sham Singh, to visit Honduras along with Canadian authorities. They visited Honduras and presented a report to the Punjabi community about the poor living conditions and economic conditions that were present there. Therefore, the proposal was unanimously rejected by the Punjabi community, which firmly expressed their determination to remain in Canada.

The second phase of Indian migration started in 1908, when the Canadian government passed the Continuous Journey Act. In this phase, migration from India is strongly restricted. Initially, there were no restrictions imposed on Indian migrants seeking entry into Canada. But when they started reaching Canada in large numbers, especially after the anti-Asian riots in Vancouver in 1907, the Canadian government decided to curtail further migration from India (Buchignani, et al., 1985). As a result, the Canadian government passed the Continuous Journey Act in 1908. This act

was specifically designed to curtail migration from India. The act contained the condition that all individuals seeking migration to Canada must have a continuous journey along with tickets originating from their place of birth or nationality. The aforementioned legislation also stipulated that people of Asian descent would only be allowed entry into Canada if they possessed a minimum of \$200 in their personal possession, unless they were native to an Asian country with which the Canadian government signed specific statutory regulations or treaties. At that time, there was no shipment agency that provided continuous service from Kolkata to Vancouver. Also, it was difficult, if not impossible, to have \$200 in cash at the time of landing in Canada. Subsequently, after this act, migration from India completely stopped. This can be gauged from the fact that in 1907, the number of newly arrived Indian migrants amounted to 2623. However, this figure experienced a significant decline in the subsequent year of 1908, with only 6 migrants recorded. The subsequent years, specifically 1909, 1910, 1911, and 1912, observed additional declines in the number of migrants, with figures of ten, five, three, and five migrants, respectively. In a noteworthy development, it is worth mentioning that while migration from India experienced a significant decline following the implementation of this legislation, Chinese and Japanese migrants continued to arrive in substantial numbers without interruption. They were not affected by this act. On the contrary, already existing Indians were not allowed to invite their families with them. In the initial phase, Indian migrants reached Canada with the sole idea of earning money as much as possible for five to ten years and then returning to their homes (Bolaria et al., 1988). However, after some time, many of them changed their minds and decided to stay permanently in Canada. Although the majority of individuals were unmarried, a significant proportion possessed spouses and offspring in India. Now, when they decide to stay permanently here, they want to bring their families with them. However, after the enactment of the Continuous Journey Act, they were unable to do so. In this act, no special provisions were made for the families of Indian migrants residing in Canada. So, they made a decision to initiate a political movement in response to the prevailing discriminatory practices. On December 13, 1911, a group of Indian representatives convened in Ottawa and presented a memorandum to government authorities. Nevertheless, this visit did not yield any fruitful outcomes. Another mission was dispatched to both Delhi and London. However, the status quo persisted until 1918, when a resolution was enacted during the Imperial War Conference in London in response to persistent appeals by Indians. This resolution granted permission for Indians who were already residing in British territories to be accompanied by their families.

In October 1913, a group of 56 migrants hailing predominantly from the Punjab region of India made a valiant attempt to gain entry into the nation of Canada. They reached Victoria on a ship named S.S. Panama Maru. Only 17 of these 56 passengers were permitted entry into Canada, while the remaining passengers were issued deportation orders. The deported passengers submitted two applications for the issue of writs of habeas corpus in the British Columbia High Court. Subsequently, the British Columbia High Court ordered the immediate release of passengers on the basis of some technical grounds that were raised by the passenger's counsel. Therefore, the passengers of Panama Maru were freed and allowed to enter Canada (Fang, 1931).

Although these passengers were allowed to enter Canada on some technical grounds, news of their entry greatly propelled the Punjabis who wanted to migrate to Canada. At this time, many Punjabis were stranded in various Far Eastern colonies, looking for a ship to migrate to Canada. However, no steamship company is ready to transport them after getting a warning from the Canadian government. They all encouraged Baba Gurdit Singh, a Punjabi businessman, to charter a ship directly to Canada to fulfil the demand for continuous journey. He agreed and chartered a ship named

*Komagata Maru*. The *Komagata Maru* sailed to Canada on April 4, 1914. The ship reached Vancouver port on May 23, 1914, after boarding a total of 376 passengers from the ports of Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Moji (Japan). The news of the arrival of the *Komagata Maru* in Canada reached Canada before the ship itself. The Canadian government had already decided not to allow the *Komagata Maru* passengers to disembark. They also ironed out the kinks in the Continuous Journey Act, which paved the way for the passengers of the *Panama Maru* ship to make their way into Canada. So as a pre-plan, the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* were not allowed to land in Canada and were forced to return to India. Upon their return to Kolkata, a scuffle took place between the angry passengers and police officials, which led to heavy casualties to the passengers (Johnston, 1989).

In the aftermath of this drastic incident, migration from India to Canada completely stopped for the next few years. On the other hand, Indians who had already arrived in Canada did not experience entirely favourable circumstances. After facing an economic recession and racial discrimination in British Columbia, many of them decided to move to the United States in search of better opportunities. The census of 1911 in British Columbia shows only 2342 East Indians in the province against the 5179 migrants reached in Canada until 1907 (GOC, 1911). Following the onset of the First World War, the aforementioned figure experienced a further decrease to 1100 people in 1915, as a considerable number of them repatriated to India in order to participate in a revolt against British colonial rule. There was only one person who migrated to Canada in the next five years, from 1915 to 1919. Thereafter, migration commenced on a small scale only after Indian migrants were allowed to bring their families with them in 1918. Despite being granted permission to transport their families to Canada, only a small number of Indians chose to extend invitations to their families. The number of Indians in Canada until 1921 was 1016 (GOC, 1921). After the migration of families, this number slightly rose to 1400 in the 1931 census (GOC, 1931). In the 1951 census, the number of Indians living in Canada reached 2148 (GOC, 1951). Male migrants predominate in the initial stage of Indian migration. However, after restrictions imposed by the Canadian government, only a small-scale migration dominated by females and children continued until 1947. This fact is proven by the table given below.

**Migration from India to Canada (1904-1950)**

Year	Male	Female	Children	Total	Year	Male	Female	Children	Total
1904	36	4	5	45	1928	3	25	24	52
1905	377	8	2	387	1929	2	21	35	58
1906	2120	2	2	2124	1930	6	28	46	80
1907	2620	0	3	2623	1931	4	9	34	47
1908	5	1	0	6	1932	6	8	48	62
1909	9	1	0	10	1933	6	9	18	33
1910	4	0	1	5	1934	2	12	19	33
1911	2	1	0	3	1935	0	4	16	20
1912	0	2	3	5	1936	0	4	9	13
1913	78	2	8	88	1937	0	6	8	14
1914	0	0	0	0	1938	0	6	8	14
1915	1	0	0	1	1939	2	4	5	11
1916	0	0	0	0	1940	0	4	2	6
1917	0	0	0	0	1941	0	0	3	3

1918	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	1942	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
1919	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	1943	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
1920	7	2	1	<b>10</b>	1944	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
1921	5	4	4	<b>13</b>	1945	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
1922	12	5	4	<b>21</b>	1946	1	3	3	<b>7</b>
1923	25	11	4	<b>40</b>	1947	111	10	9	<b>130</b>
1924	21	14	11	<b>46</b>	1948	17	27	19	<b>63</b>
1925	6	18	38	<b>62</b>	1949	13	24	15	<b>52</b>
1926	6	19	37	<b>62</b>	1950	36	34	23	<b>93</b>
1927	2	25	29	<b>56</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>5545</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>496</b>	<b>6399</b>

Source: Data of 1904-1936 derived from Canada Yearbook, 1936. Data of 1936-1950 derived from Chadney, 1984.

The year 1947 marked a significant turning point for both Indians residing in India and Canada. In India, this year witnessed the attainment of independence from British colonial rule, while in Canada, it brought about the long-awaited achievement of voting rights after a strenuous struggle spanning four decades. Additionally, the Canadian government took a momentous step in 1947 by repealing the contentious Continuous Journey Act of 1908 and subsequently introducing the annual immigration quota in 1951. This new policy permitted the entry of 150 migrants from India into Canada each year. Consequently, this development heralded the commencement of a regulated migration era from Punjab to Canada.

## 5. Discrimination

The epicentre of Oriental migration is the British Columbia province of Canada. From a geographical standpoint, this province was situated at the furthest distance from Europe of all the provinces in Canada. So, this province was always the last choice for European migrants. European migrants always preferred to migrate to Eastern Canada. Also, at that time, British Columbia was not very developed and was known for its harsh working conditions. The owners of newly established industries in British Columbia needed a large number of workers to run their industries. They did not get this needed manpower from the local labour market, so they always welcomed migrant workers. But when Oriental migrants came here in large numbers, the local labour organisations started opposing them by saying that these Oriental workers could steal their jobs. The political parties in British Columbia also supported them in order to get political mileage from them. The continuous pressure from labour unions and politicians resulted in the imposition of a head tax on Chinese migrants seeking entry into Canada, which was raised from time to time (Backhouse, 2019). The Japanese were the second South Asian community to migrate to Canada. They were also subjected to the same treatment as the Chinese community. But because they got continuous support from their home country, they always objected strongly to any sort of discrimination. As a result, the Canadian government was forced to compensate the Japanese community after the 1907 anti-Asian riots. In addition, the Canadian government signed an agreement with the Japanese government in which they agreed to accept a quota of 400 Japanese migrants per year to Canada.

The Indian community is the third South Asian community to migrate to Canada. Despite their status as British subjects, they encountered similar forms of discrimination as other South Asian communities. In the initial phase, they were going unnoticed when they were in small numbers, but as soon as they started reaching Canada in large numbers, they were opposed by the local labour unions and trade unions. Nevertheless, the industrialists of British Columbia

warmly embraced them due to several factors, such as their compliant demeanour and willingness to accept employment under unfavourable circumstances, sometimes at meagre remuneration. Although some of the early Punjabi immigrants were retired soldiers, the majority of them came from agricultural backgrounds. In the beginning, they were primarily employed in lumber mills, as this work was considered to be of lower prestige for white labourers. Furthermore, a considerable portion of them were hired by cement factories and in the forestry industry. They were subjected to various sorts of discrimination at workplaces, including harsh working conditions and less pay than white workers. In addition, they were never promoted to the posts of managers, foremen, electricians, and technicians in these mills because white labourers strongly objected to working under any Indian foreman or manager. In addition to this, they encountered instances of discrimination in their social lives. Their entry was prohibited at many hotels and theatres. Although some of the hotels allowed entry, they were confined to using a certain portion of them. Besides facing discrimination in their public lives, they were also subjected to housing discrimination. They were barred from owning property in white residential colonies. Due to housing discrimination, they were forced to live in deplorable conditions. They faced discrimination in some other areas too. White barbers refused to service Sikhs who wanted to trim their hair or shave their beards. These services were instead only provided in barbershops owned and operated by Chinese and Japanese people.

As far as political discrimination is concerned, early Punjabi migrants had the right to vote in civic elections until 1907 because of having a British subject status. However, in March 1907, British Columbia's premier, William Bowser, introduced a bill to disenfranchise Punjabi migrants. As a result, the Vancouver Municipality Incorporation Act was amended in April 1907, and Punjabi migrants were denied voting rights. The federal vote was deemed invalid due to the prerequisite of being listed on a provincial voter registry in order to exercise the right to vote at the federal level. Now, after disenfranchisement, they were unable to enter certain professions like law and pharmacy because one of the conditions to enter these professions was having a name on the provincial voter list. Throughout the 1920s and until the 1930s, many delegations of the Punjabi community pursued voting rights. They were unsuccessful until the conclusion of World War II, when North America became more sensitive to claims of racial discrimination. In 1947, the Punjabi community was granted the right to vote in Canada. These voting rights were the collective efforts of the Khalsa Diwan Society Vancouver and many individuals, such as Dr. D.P. Pandia, Naginder Singh Gill, Ishar Singh, and Kartar Singh (Singh, 2001).

The white Canadian society of that era employed many strategies in its attempts to expel them from Canada. However, through their diligent efforts and steadfast determination, they managed to navigate these adversities and ultimately succeeded in establishing themselves in Canada.

## **6. Conclusion**

Among the Indian diaspora, the Punjabi community is one of the largest ethnic groups. Today, the Punjabi community is settled in almost every country in the world. Migration from Punjab to abroad started in the colonial period. Canada is their prime destination among various foreign countries. A group of soldiers from the British Indian army was credited with initiating the process of migration from Punjab to Canada. Almost 5200 Punjabi migrants (primarily males) reached Canada until 1908, when the Canadian government decided to curtail further migration from India after being pressured by the local labour and trade unions. Among these 5200 migrants, almost all of them were from Punjab and 95% of them were Sikhs. Although having British subject status enabled Indians to travel anywhere throughout

the British Empire, the Canadian government enforced indirect measures to prohibit the entry of Indians to Canada. The Canadian government passed the Continuous Journey Act in 1908, which included the conditions of a continuous journey to Canada from the country of birth and having \$200 in cash at the time of landing in Canada. After the enactment of this legislation, migration from India experienced a great downfall in the following years. In 1914, Baba Gurdit Singh tried to enter Canada by fulfilling the conditions of the Continuous Journey Act, but he failed. Migration to Canada began on a small scale following a resolution passed at the Imperial War Conference that allowed families of migrants to join them in British colonies. Thereafter, migration to Canada continued on a small scale, dominated by females and children. In 1947, the Canadian government repealed the controversial Continuous Journey Act and subsequently introduced an annual immigration quota of 150 Indian migrants each year to Canada.

The Punjabi migrants faced harsh discrimination in Canada like their other South Asian counterparts, the Japanese and Chinese. This discrimination spreads from their daily lives to their workplaces. This discrimination included lower pay than white workers, harsh working conditions, being denied entry into hotels and theatres, and refusing service from white barbers. The Punjabi community struggled for many years with this discrimination, but with their determination and hard work, they ultimately succeeded in establishing themselves in Canada.

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