



Ministry of Culture
Government of India



An Interdisciplinary International Conference
on
Memorializing a Forgotten Chapter: The Komagata Maru Episode
Sponsored by the Ministry of Culture & Indian Council of Social Science Research
February 15-17 2015
Department of Humanities & Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, India

Almost a hundred years ago, a Japanese ship called Komagata Maru chartered by Gurdit Singh, a prosperous Sikh businessman from Malaya, which was carrying 376 passengers from Punjab was not permitted to land in Vancouver on grounds of a stipulation about a continuous journey from the port of departure and forced to return to Budge Budge near Kolkata where the passengers were fired at, imprisoned or kept under surveillance for years. While the Komagata Maru incident is repeatedly invoked in Canada to interrogate the limits of Canada's celebrated multiculturalism, it appeared to have been completely erased from Indian national memory. The decision of the Government of India to celebrate the centenary of the Komagata Maru during 2014-15 through a number of programmes, including conferences, lectures, performances, films, archival research, memorials and so on is a welcome step in this direction.

Recent attempts made by the Indian state to commemorate the Komagata Maru episode beginning with West Bengal's renaming of the Budge Budge station as Budge Budge Komagata Maru station in October 2013 signals a long overdue recognition of the significant contribution of the ship's passengers and their leader to the nationalist struggle against imperial rule. Similarly, it calls attention to non-elite movements from the subcontinent during the British Empire that have remained undocumented in migration histories in contrast to colonial sojourns of intellectual or political elites and postcolonial professional migrations. However, this symbolic gesture on the state's part, which supports the well-intentioned attempts of the Sikh community for recognizing the just cause of the victims of the tragedy, disengages the voyage and the struggles of the passengers for justice from the Sikh narratives of *kurbani* [sacrifice] and *shaheedi* [martyrdom] to regional and national agendas. The claim made by the nation to the heroic battle of the Sikh passengers against the imperial state appears to be an attempt by the state to assimilate the Sikh subject alienated from the Indian nation after certain actions by the state. Similarly, the recognition of colonial movements of ordinary people appears to genuflect to the rising global power of older diasporas such as the girmityas, Sikhs and Gujaratis who have hitherto been relegated to the background in diaspora studies.

Memorialization of a forgotten event by the Indian state may, therefore, be viewed as symbolic act that attempts to redress the gaps and suppressions in national histories through its recognition of particular groups and movements. Which narratives are integrated in the production of the master narrative of the nation and which are elided? Why and when does the state choose to remember? What is at stake in memorialization and why is it important? These are some of the questions that the Conference hopes to raise with respect to the memorialization of an indelible episode in Sikh memory as a key chapter in Indian nationalist resistance and diasporic movements and to examine the broader implications of this symbolic gesture to the idea of the Indian nation, belonging and subjecthood.

Papers are invited that engage with but are not limited to any of the following themes:

- the significance of the Komagata Maru episode to imperial, national and post-imperial histories
- foreground the selective amnesias of the nation through investigating the process of remembering and forgetting
- address contemporary discourse on nationalism, regionalism and transnationalism, neo-imperialism and resistance, nation, diaspora and citizenship

The subthemes of the Conference include:

- Production of Marital Races
- Sikh Narratives of Mobility
- Socio-economic Roots of Extremism in India
- Social-Psychology of Exclusion and Marginalization
- Legalities of Migration in the imperial, post-imperial and neo-imperial period
- Politics of Remembering and Forgetting
- Silences and Gaps in historical narratives
- Changing Nature of Global Hegemonic Structures

Please note the deadlines for 2014-15:

- November 30:** Submission of abstracts and confirmation of your participation
- January 31 :** Submission of conference papers
- February 1:** Distribution of conference papers to discussants
- February 15 to 17:** Conference days
- April 30 :** Submission of revised papers to be considered for publication

For more information, please contact:

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