

By **TERENCE TOH**
star2@thestar.com.my

IT was one of the darkest moments in the history of immigration in the world. In 1914, a wealthy Punjabi contractor named Gurdit Singh chartered a Japanese steamship, the Komagata Maru, to transport 376 passengers, mostly of Punjabi origin, who wanted to immigrate to Canada.

The others on board were Muslim and Hindu passengers – all looking for a new start in a new country.

The sea-faring journey from Hong Kong was a long and arduous one. And there were risks ahead on land, too.

The Komagata Maru's passage, in many ways, was also a direct challenge to Canada's immigration rules, which had become increasingly strict – and anti-Asian in sentiment – at the turn of the century.

The ship arrived in Vancouver on May 23, 1914. Due to racial discrimination and fear of economic competition, the conservative Canadian Government refused to let its passengers off the ship.

The passengers, as history remembers, were denied entry to Canada and forced to return to an uncertain and ultimately violent fate in India.

After over two months of being stuck in Vancouver's Coal Harbour, the ship was forced to sail back to Budge Budge, West Bengal in India.

Upon arrival, the passengers refused to board a train back to Punjab. This stand-off led to a series of protests. The British Indian police and troops then opened fire and 19 passengers were killed.

This massacre was a

A passage for equality

Ranjit Singh Malhi's new book sheds new light on the tragic Komagata Maru incident, a dark piece of Canadian history.

major catalyst for the Ghadar Movement, where many diasporic Indians, enraged by the incident, returned home to expel the British from their homeland. This incident certainly changed the course of history.

However, not everyone remembers it today, which is something that local author and historian Dr Ranjit Singh Malhi wants to change. His latest book *The Komagata Maru Affair* lays out the story behind this gruesome tragedy.

"The Komagata Maru incident proved beyond doubt that Indians were treated as stepchildren of the British Empire in the white dominions. They did not have equal status with white citizens," says Ranjit, 64, during a recent interview in KL.

"The important lesson we can learn from the Komagata Maru incident is that we should always uphold racial equality, fair play and justice. None of us should be discriminated because of the colour of our skin, race or religious belief," he adds.

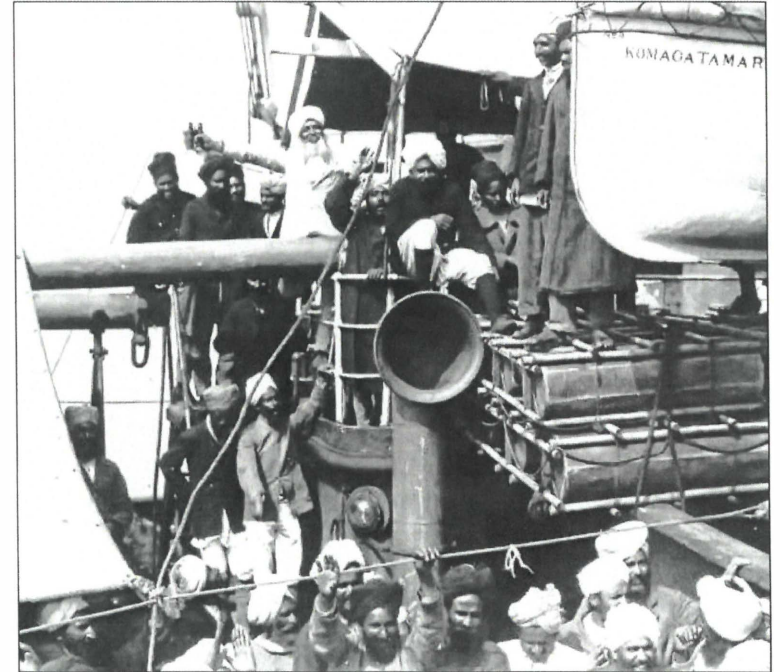
Ranjit's book, divided into nine chapters, examines the experiences of the

Komagata Maru passengers in the wider context of British imperialism, global white supremacy agenda, diasporic revolutionary movements, and India's independence struggles.

The Komagata Maru Affair, published by Ranjit's company TQM Consultants Sdn Bhd, also contains the author's own interpretation and analysis of the incident, as well as comparisons to present day immigration issues. He examines, for example, how Canada's immigration policy has discarded its past discriminatory practices towards Indian immigrants and adopted progressive policies over time.

Ranjit, a prolific author, has written more than 20 books on history, management and personal development. He has a degree in History from Universiti Malaya (1977) and a PhD in History from KL's Asia e University (2015).

He first heard about the Komagata Maru incident and the plight of the South Asian immigrants back in 1976, while doing research in Universiti Malaya under historian Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim. During his university days in the mid-1970s, he also interviewed



What happened on that crowded ship Komagata Maru in 1914 has become, for many scholars, emblematic of an entire period of Canadian history characterised by xenophobia, racism and exclusionary immigration policies.

some elderly Sikh individuals, some of whom personally knew Gurdit, who informed him about the incident. Ranjit then wrote a short paper on the Komagata Maru affair. In 2015, he devoted an entire chapter in his PhD thesis to it.

Ranjit points to how the Komagata Maru incident came back into the spotlight in 2016 when Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau issued a formal full apology for the massacre. He also learnt that the Indian Government is planning to build a memorial for the Komagata Maru victims in Budge Budge, and there are plans for a Bollywood movie on the story. These were signs, the author says, that his book needed to be released.

Ranjit spent nine months on the book, working every day. He travelled to the national archives in India and Singapore for research,

and managed to gain access to Canadian newspapers (of the period) through archivist Melanie Hardbattle from Simon Fraser University in Canada.

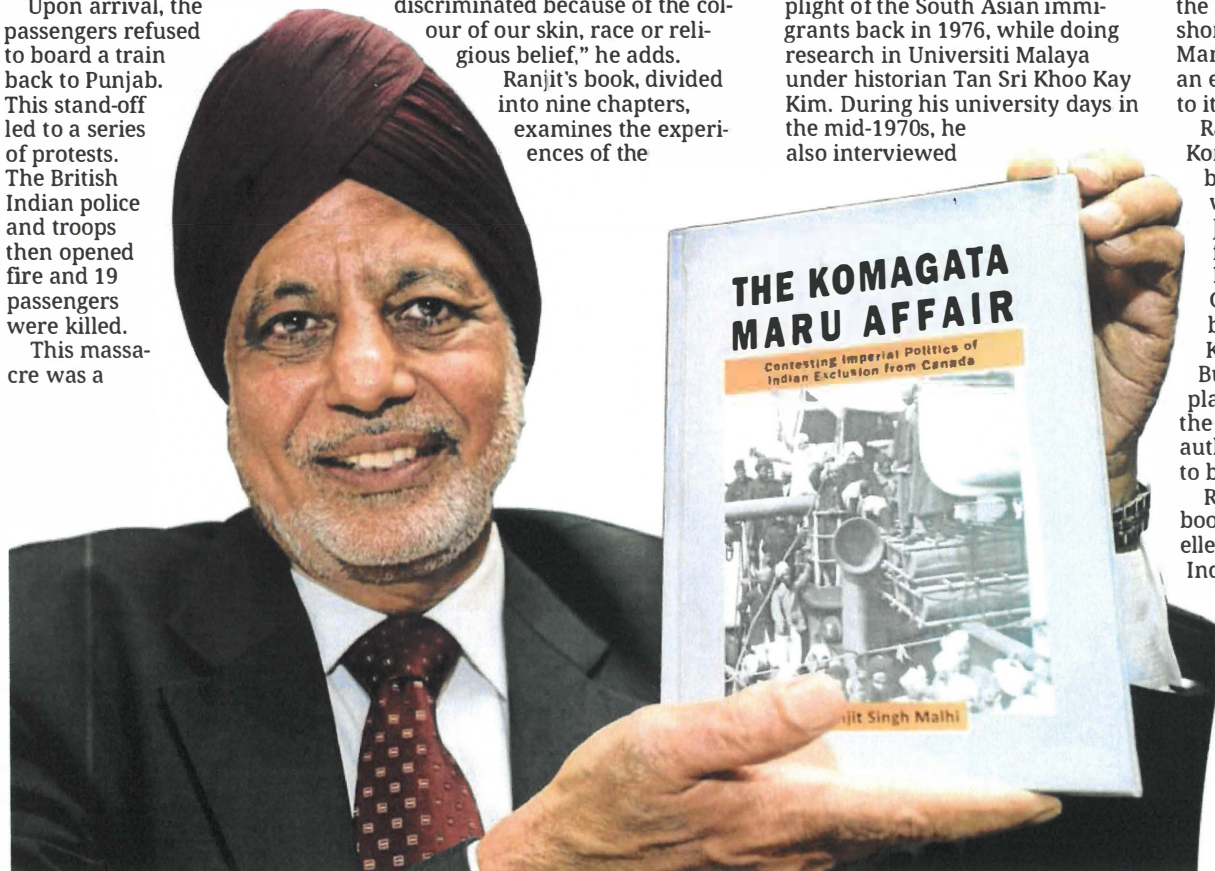
He managed to pick out about 20 factual errors commonly found in current narratives on the Komagata Maru incident and the Ghadar movement.

"For instance, Gurdit Singh, the charterer of the Komagata Maru, was a wealthy contractor and a long-time resident of Serendah (Selangor) during the British Malaya days and not that of Singapore or Hong Kong as incorrectly stated or implied by several leading historians," says Ranjit.

"Gurdit is an admirable figure whose deeds should always be commemorated."

The Komagata Maru Affair was launched at the Royal Selangor Club in KL on July 24 by High Commissioner of India to Malaysia Shri Mridul Kumar, with Sikh organisation Khalsa Diwan Malaysia president Santokh Singh Randhawa and Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim in attendance.

The Komagata Maru Affair is available at RM50 (softcover) and RM80 (hardcover). Contact: 012-335 0555 or ranjit@tqm.com.my. The book will soon be available online.



"The important lesson we can learn from the Komagata Maru incident is that we should always uphold racial equality, fair play and justice," said author Ranjit. — SIA HONG KIAU/The Star