

Traversing Seas to Evading Proscription: South Asians, Race, and (Im)mobility in Canada and the United States, 1882-1929 by Rishma Johal

Earmarking the whole Hindustanee nation from movement out of India and strangling their tours at the very points of departure, like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Karachi, is an imposition that must form a standing indictment of the methods of the Britishers with Hindustanees. —Husain Rahim¹

In the early twentieth century, white settler states² introduced policies that contemporaneously established strict control over the mobility of racialized peoples as they simultaneously monopolized travel as a right reserved exclusively for “white” Anglo-Saxons.³ Rahim’s criticism alludes to the intricate nexus between settler states and the British imperial power that implemented the infrastructure required to halt South Asian travelers.⁴ The Canadian settler state extended racialized proscriptions across seas through the widely spanning tentacles of British imperialism. British authorities constructed a continuously expanding apparatus that could monitor those leaving or entering its imperial domain with ports located in every colony.

The development of passports reflected the enhancement of technologies employed for surveillance and control. The circuit of information gathering among British colonies and

¹ Husain Rahim, “Canada as a Hindu Saw it,” *The Hindustanee* 1, no. 4 (2014), p. 10.

² Settler state is a shorthand for a settler colonial state such as Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand where authorities began implementing racial restrictions in this era. I differentiate settler colonialism from colonialism because they are two related but distinct forms of colonization. Settler colonialism entails the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous communities through settlement, whereas colonialism alone does not require the removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands. For more, see Lorenzo Veracini, “Introducing,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011), pp. 1–12; Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³ I have used the term “white” throughout the paper recognizing that not all “white” migrants received the same privileges. There was a racial hierarchy among European settlers as well in which Anglo-Saxons were regarded as the most desired migrants, while Eastern and Southern Europeans were unwanted migrants. However, as European migrants organized to exclude Asian migrants, particularly among labour unions on the Pacific coast, distinctions among Europeans became somewhat mutable under the construction of an overarching “white identity,” though prejudice against many remained. Canadian and American European migrants embraced the term “white” as well as political leaders such as William Lyon Mackenzie King and Woodrow Wilson. In the US, white supremacy also heightened at this time against African Americans with the introduction of Jim Crow laws that Wilson approved in 1913.

⁴ I use the term South Asian in this paper, although many of the migrants that arrived at this time would consider themselves Indians as it more accurately reflects the backgrounds of individuals migrating from the Indian subcontinent today. Many came from Punjab, which was partitioned between India and Pakistan in 1947, whereas others arrived from Bengal, including parts of current day Bangladesh.

dominions found a partner in the United States. The American government was limiting the travel of racialized individuals as well, entrenching Canada within their effort to curb “illegal” Chinese immigration across the Canada-US border after prohibiting Chinese migrants in 1882. Hence, racialized sentiments that hierarchically stratified the peoples of the world, while exalting white Anglo-Saxons, became ubiquitous among settler states between 1882 and 1929.⁵

The enhancement of technologies of surveillance; institutionalized barriers such as medical checks, monetary requirements, etc.; deportation; and the overall, criminalization and containment of racialized individuals were woven into the fabric of laws that impeded the mobility of racialized peoples. Thus, this paper will argue that in the early twentieth century intensifying racialized discourses and increasing levels of settler state control fundamentally sutured mobility with white privilege— a significant shift that can be read among many South Asian writings on travel to Canada and the United States. While not all South Asian travelers exhibited a preoccupation with changing laws, concern about mobility is evident among many accounts. Essentially, a heightened awareness and anxiety about restrictions persists among the many travel accounts (which are studied in this paper), though these sentiments extended far beyond travel accounts to fueling the movement for Indian independence in North America.⁶

Travel writings convey compelling changes in understandings of race as well as right to free mobility, yet they also depict a gendered division in perceptions of both settler states. This paper explores the attempts made by white settler nations to control movement, while examining

⁵ I have focused on this period because it covers an era of ossifying racialized conceptions, and the rise of white supremacy as well as a series of bans on racialized migration in Canada and the United States. The United States established one of the first racialized restrictions on mobility (excluding movements within the United States of African Americans and Indigenous peoples) in 1882 and imposed a much more extensive ban in 1924 that largely halted all Asian migration. I have extended the period to 1929 because this allows room for the apparatus of control and surveillance to have taken hold, and it accounts for any exceptions to these limitations, cutting off immediately before the Great Depression.

⁶ Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

the perspectives of those who increasingly sought to travel across seas and explore a world new to their community via the letters and accounts of South Asian travelers, including sojourners, students, migrants, and visitors. It specifically analyzes concerns over changes in policy. How were South Asian travelers responding to control over their mobility? This paper will first examine the writings of South Asian travelers who visited Canada and the United States in the late nineteenth century, followed by accounts from the early twentieth century when greater numbers of South Asians sailed to North America.

Traveling formed an imperative part of life in the Indian Ocean arena that predated European colonization. There is significant academic work on Europeans visiting South Asia as travelers, but less research conducted on South Asian travelers outside the subcontinent.⁷ Although, Eurocentric interpretations of the travel genre traditionally conceptualized this form of mobility and writing as the invention of Europeans, many scholars have successfully challenged such perceptions.⁸ I suggest that scholarly preoccupation with Western accounts of South Asia was a consequence of policies established in the twentieth century that marked mobility as whites-only. Nevertheless, substantial academic insights on Indian travel have emerged. On Indian travel accounts, Gupta states,

These works have variously emphasised that travel has been a consistent part of everyday life since ancient times; that detailed accounts of Indo-Persian travels were produced in Mughal India; that ‘travelogue’ as a systematic genre was intrinsically linked to colonial exposure and literary modernity; that Bengalis in particular produced a rich corpus of the genre; and that gender perspectives greatly enriched travel.⁹

⁷ Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem, Nation, Gender, Empire, and Cultures of Travel* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1996).

⁸ Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows of Colonialism: Indian Travelers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

⁹ Charu Gupta, “Masculine Vernacular Histories of Travel in Colonial India: The Writings of Satyadev ‘Parivrajak’” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 5 (2020), pp. 837-38.

The development of a rich literature on South Asian travelers has altered the perspective from colonizer to colonized unveiling a multitude of perspectives and experiences. Ghosh undergirds the importance of these narratives, “Their descriptions of alien landscapes, climate, politics and society offer us some interesting comparisons between the colonized gaze and the imperial one, or what we might like to call a peripheral vision.”¹⁰ Despite these forays in research, little is written about South Asian travelers in Canada and the United States or the West at large,¹¹ though much has been studied from the perspective of immigration and citizenship.¹² On the other hand, despite limitations in the research, there are travel accounts available with some acquiring a notable reputation as representative works, though this paper attempts to engage with alternative accounts as well. For instance, Pandita Ramabai and Lala Lajpat Rai’s reflections on their travels to the United States, form some of the most recognized works on South Asian perspectives of “the West.” Ramabai was an educated elite woman. Rai was an educated politician and one of the most influential anti-colonial activists of his time. Conversely, I have engaged with various types of sources that represent the views of laymen, spiritual leaders, and students to counter the significance generally attributed to elite accounts of travel, though these works can be considered representative and do not necessarily discuss every account available. I have supplemented elite accounts with some autobiographies as Lahiri argues that autobiographies are a form of travel

¹⁰ Devleena Ghosh, “Under the Radar of Empire: Unregulated Travel in the Indian Ocean,” *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 2 (2011), p. 475.

¹¹ Shompa Lahiri, *Indian Mobilities in the West, 1900-1947: Gender, Performance, Embodiment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 2.

¹² Amandeep Bal, “Pioneer Punjabis in North America: Racism, Empire, and Birth of Ghadar,” *Journal of Sikh and Punjab Studies* 26, no. 1 (2019), pp. 7-27; G. S. Basran and B. Singh Bolaria, *The Sikhs in Canada: Migration, Race, Class, and Gender* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003); Norman Buchignani, Doreen M. Indra, and Ram Srivastava, *Continuous Journey: A History of South Asians in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, 1985); Sangeeta Gupta, *Emerging Voices: South Asian American Women Redefine Self, Family, and Community* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999); Karen Leonard, “Historical Constructions of Ethnicity: Research on Punjabi Immigrants in California,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, no. 4 (1993), pp. 3-26; Hugh Johnston, “The Surveillance of Indian Nationalists in North America, 1908-1981,” *B.C. Studies*, 78 (1988), pp. 3-27; Johanna Ogden, “Ghadar, Historical Silences, and Notions of Belonging: Early 1900s Punjabis of the Columbia River,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 113, no. 2 (2012), pp. 180-92.

writing.¹³ I have also utilized poems written by early labourers that share their experiences of travel, letters sent to family and friends or published in newspapers, studies conducted by South Asian students on experiences of travel, and oral history interviews that impart travel experiences. Nevertheless, this paper is limited in terms of English translations of travel narratives, or accounts available within the Punjabi language that are written in Gurmukhi. Further research on works that may be written in Shahmukhi, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, or any number of South Asian languages may unravel a wealth of information, though Punjabi travelers accounted for the largest linguistic South Asian community that visited (and in some cases stayed) in North America in the early twentieth century. Overall, this paper's focus on South Asian travelers to Canada and the United States returns the gaze on exoticized colonial accounts of South Asia, while examining a critical juncture between British imperialism, white settler dominance, and intensifying anti-colonialism.

Late-Nineteenth Century Travel Accounts to North America

The records of the first South Asians who visited North America are inconclusive; nevertheless, a basic trajectory that marks the arrival of larger numbers of South Asians can be delineated. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the personal recommendations of early travelers enticed greater numbers of South Asians to make the journey to Canada and the United States after 1903, though smaller numbers of South Asian arrivals predated larger numbers of labour migrants. Preachers, peddlers, merchants, servants, and sailors had visited North America since the 1790s.¹⁴ In fact, the case of a Portuguese Indian merchant in Mexico can be dated as early as the 1640s.¹⁵ Muslims from Bengal began arriving in the 1880s as peddlers who

¹³ Lahiri, *Indian Mobilities in the West*, p. 34.

¹⁴ Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 19.

¹⁵ Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava, *Continuous Journey: A History of South Asians in Canada*, p. 5.

capitalised on the sensation of Indian and oriental goods within America selling silks and *exotic* materials.¹⁶ They passed their lives in relative anonymity intermingling among local racialized communities with some settling in the United States, while others traveled back after brief excursions. Additionally, with growing interest in South Asian spirituality in the late nineteenth century, a myriad of Indian spiritual leaders traveled through major cities such as New York, Montreal, Toronto, and Chicago. A small feature in the *Montreal Gazette* (1888) subtitled *Arrival of the Hindoo Missionaries from Toronto-Overflowing Meeting at the Temple* encapsulates the fascination that enveloped the Indian Christian missionary Major Musa Bhai. The editorial opined, “One of the most extraordinary missionary meetings ever held in Montreal took place in the Salvation Army temple last evening.” An analogous form of mystique-enthralled spectators praised Swami Vivekananda at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, noting his oratorical skills and spiritual knowledge.¹⁷ Some of these early South Asian travelers undoubtedly disseminated knowledge about the United States and Canada back home. Students also began arriving as temporary visitors who freely entered Canada and the United States in the late nineteenth century. The accounts of early visitors convey little concern about the containment of South Asian mobility, which became a much larger issue among travelers in the twentieth century. These rare glimpses into how those colonized by the British Raj viewed Americans and Canadians are integral because they demonstrate how those colonized, yet privileged, engaged with an increasingly racialized discourse that would eventually lead to restrictions on South Asian mobility.

Early Travel Accounts of South Asians and Race

¹⁶ Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 12.

¹⁷ Nico Slate, *Lord Cornwallis is Dead: The Struggle for Democracy in the United States and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 72.

In order to examine a variety of perspectives on race and mobility in depth, I selected four case studies from early travel accounts that represent an amalgam of views, including two women and two men: Anandabai Joshee, Pandita Ramabai, Gopalrao Joshee, and Swami Vivekananda. Nevertheless, there is one issue with this sample size, and it is the lack of travel narratives on Canada. I was unable to locate any narratives from this period in which South Asians discussed their visit to the Dominion, despite finding citations about several individuals visiting Vancouver, Montreal, or Toronto. Moreover, these accounts appear homogenous at first glance, but there are important distinctions between the conditions of the individuals writing these accounts. Notwithstanding the fact that the Joshees were well educated, they lived in precarious circumstances in the United States and their experiences add diversity to this pool of travel narratives as do Vivekananda's writings as a spiritual leader. Collectively, these narratives shed light on variegated understandings of race and mobility in the late nineteenth century.

Anandabai Joshee, the first Indian woman to complete a medical degree, attended the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1883. She wrote many letters to her husband describing her travels. Joshee enjoyed residing in the United States, and she shared interesting details about race. On her passage from India, she felt ostracized by other women on the ship; she indicated that they treated her like a "Native *Ayah*" (nanny), though this treatment improved over time.¹⁸ Intriguingly, while outlining her experience of racial discrimination, Joshee evokes sentiments of Brahmanical caste superiority. Her letters also reveal a considerable understanding of ideas that would have been considered phrenological and phenotypical racial science of the day—though this may be attributed to re-written accounts by her husband who published her

¹⁸ Meera Kosambi, *A Fragmented Feminism: The Life and Letters of Anandibai Joshee* Ed. Ram Ramaswamy, Madhavi Bhaskar Kolhatkar, and Aban Mukherji (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2019), p. 101.

letters and sought to engage Indian readers.¹⁹ One of Joshee's letters provided a racist, and derogatory description of Africans in Aden, which was published in the *Indian Mirror* and *Theosophist* in 1883. The publication asserted,

[It] was the first time that I saw Africans. The physiognomy of the Negro is so peculiar that it is impossible not to recognise it at the first glance. His thick, protruding lips, his low forehead, his projecting teeth which peep out between his lips...give him a peculiar look amongst all other human races. The bones of the skull and those of the body are thicker and harder than those of the other races.²⁰

This passage contains all the problematic prejudiced notions that imperial travelers shared when arriving in parts of Africa, but it also conveys forms of discriminatory understanding that circulated among white educated individuals (and anyone privileged to receive that education) as “racial knowledge,” since the 1830s. The letter's vocabulary bears a striking resemblance to the writings of leading European and American ethnologists, scientists, anthropologists, and travelers. Joshee's description of Egyptians and Arabs equivalently depicts racial understandings of the time that focussed on physical characteristics. However, as Kosambi suggests, it is likely that Joshee's husband modified her letters since few of her other accounts provide such detailed sketches or interest in racial science.²¹ These statements may then reveal the perspective of her husband, Gopalrao Joshee.

When Gopalrao visited the United States in 1885, his disposition on polygamy, polyandry, and gender roles caused upheaval. More notably, he hailed the superiority of Indian culture, while rejecting Western notions and scrutinizing missionary practices in India—embarrassing Anandabai on several occasions. Yet, Gopalrao presented a lecture at the Josephite Chapel, in which he appeared to reject ideas of racial difference. Gopalrao stated,

I look all around me in this hall and I find there is not one among you who is in any way different from me in form or action. I may be different from you in dress and language, but in other things I

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 108.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 102.

²¹ Ibid., p. 102.

am alike. If I be called a liar, I will call you by the same, as we are all a set of scoundrels in the sight of our creator when we acknowledge his one child to be our brother and deny the other as such.²²

These remarks convey a sense of equality that departs from ideas of racial difference; however, he shares these comments based on his personal disposition as an Indian, which may suggest that he is positioning Indians within the same category as white Americans. Some Indian and European scholars categorized Indians as Aryans linking them closely to white Europeans and Americans at this time.²³ Many also regarded race as permeable, so his seemingly distinct comments on race are not necessarily contradictory and may have coexisted.

It is difficult to define Gopalrao and Anandabai Joshee's ideas on race, but the acceptance of the caste system and their personal position may suggest an acceptance of racialized notions as well. In another letter, Anandabai presents Gopalrao with an entrepreneurial opportunity to import tea to the United States. She indicates that a new law prohibited people of Chinese origin from landing in New York who had, thus far, provided the main source of tea for Americans.²⁴ She makes no comment on the Chinese, or racial exclusion, rather she conveys a keen interest in business. This instance highlights an awareness of a racialized restriction on mobility, though no concern about this exclusion is evident, or the possibility of the American government extending such proscription to Indians. Nevertheless, Gopalrao and Anandabai Joshee's impressions convey the advancement of racial science and intensifying racial lines in the United States as well as across oceans—information that South Asians interacted with in a variety of ways.

In 1886, Anandabai Joshee's relative, Pandita Ramabai wrote a travelogue in the Marathi language *United Stateschi Lokastithi any Pravasvrutta* (the Peoples of the United States). She

²² *Salt Lake Tribune*, "Gopal Joshee—the Hindu Tiger Hunts his Christian Foe in Salt Lake City," July 6, 1885, p. 7.

²³ Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, p. 241.

²⁴ Kosambi, *A Fragmented Feminism*, p. 112.

wrote a formidable account that exalted the institutions of the United States. Ramabai acknowledges that as a traveler she desired to see the positive aspects of American society, and she has inevitably dwelled on those.²⁵ However, Ramabai's commendation must be situated within the context of the rising momentum for Indian freedom. Kosambi suggests that Ramabai admired Americans because they seceded from Britain. Furthermore, she believed that America's political structure could be adopted as a model for a future independent India.²⁶ Certainly Ramabai's account portrays anti-British sentiment, especially in its rendition of American history. She explicates that Americans overthrew British rule because they were being humiliated and suppressed.²⁷

Ramabai was not the only South Asian traveler to extol American institutions and excoriate British rule. In fact, the writings of South Asians who arrived decades later would echo Ramabai's stipulations as the movement for Indian independence strengthened. The majority of Ramabai's travelogue compares the American system's success, hailing equality and the elimination of class distinctions to the degradation of lower classes in India and the subjugation of women—contradictory to notions expressed by the Joshees. Ramabai's opinion, specifically contrasts Gopalrao Joshee's assertions about the eminence of Indian culture. Yet, despite providing a flattering account of the United States, Ramabai highlights the prevalence of racial discrimination in detail, particularly the segregation of African Americans, and subordination of Indigenous peoples.²⁸ She portrays a sharp awareness of racialized attitudes and problematizes these viewpoints referring to them as a consequence of America's British heritage. Nonetheless,

²⁵ Sarasvati Ramabai and Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai's American Encounter: The Peoples of the United States (1889)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 53 and 95.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

she conveys the complexities of the era by reinstating some racialized myths. In a few instances, she imparts racial understandings, while in others, she vehemently denies the credibility of racial stereotypes. In many ways, Ramabai thwarts the racial science of the day, though she remains a product of her time. Additionally, she references the prejudice against Chinese peoples, stating that unfair assumptions about this community led to significant violence against them as well as exclusion and harassment.²⁹ Thus, Ramabai's travelogue reveals a heightened awareness of intensifying racial exclusion in the United States, though it remains bereft of any significant information on South Asians and their treatment.

The writings of two nineteenth century Indian women travelers, Ramabai and Joshee, unravel an amalgam of conceptions about race, though both appeared relatively unconcerned about racialized constraints on mobility affecting them. They were aware of Chinese exclusion, but eluded any concern that such restrictions could be extended to Indians. Both held a high opinion of the United States and commented on the hospitality of Americans, which was undoubtedly connected to discrepancies between the manner in which women were treated in India in comparison to the United States. Joshee's decision to acquire a medical education caused an uproar in her home country, though she received support from many influential Indians, while Ramabai's life was dedicated to altering the subservient position of Indian women. Axiomatically, both praised how well women were treated in America. Thus, Ramabai's stipulations on the plight of Indian women furthered imperialist notions about saving women and played into Western racialized tropes about "the orient".³⁰ Overall, Ramabai and Joshee's comments illustrate that there was a gendered division in the accounts of early travelers.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

³⁰ Slate, *Lord Cornwallis is Dead*, p. 13.

South Asian men's accounts from this period counteract women's laudatory travel narratives and diverge significantly. For instance, Gopalrao Joshee's lectures defended Indian customs, and he refused to exalt American institutions. His interpretation resembled some of the comments that Swami Vivekananda made about the United States and West at large. In *The East and the West*, a work that is based on his travels around the world, Vivekananda assesses the practises of Indians and Westerners in reference to one another.³¹ He considers etiquette, manners, customs, food, dress, and civilization. While he categorizes Americans well in comparison to other nationalities, and notes the positive progress of the West, the underlying transcript extols Indian ideals.

Vivekananda's analysis also reflects prominent racialized notions about the inferiority of Germans and Russians depicting them as the most uncleanly and vulgar.³² Vivekananda shares racial perspectives throughout his analysis, describing Aryans as distinct, though his discussion suggests that he conceptualized race as permeable and not fixed in biological characteristics. The Swami concludes that Westerners are more concerned with personal success and gratification, rather than civilization or greater good. According to him, Indians are the only peoples who civilized "aborigines" in their nation, instead of exterminating Indigenous peoples as Westerners had done in the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa.³³ The idea of civilizing Indigenous peoples conveys racist assumptions and cultural ignorance, though it also depicts his understanding of race as unfixed. Consequently, Vivekananda and Gopalrao's views on America depart from Ramabai and Anandabai, portraying a gendered division of perspectives on travel. All of them held variegated understandings of race, though none discuss any constraint on Indian

³¹ Swami Vivekananda, *The East and the West (Prachya O Praschatya)* (EditionNext: Kolkatta, [1909] 2016), p. 8.

³² Ibid., pp. 23 and 45.

³³ Ibid., p. 58.

mobility. Intriguingly, early travel narratives would resemble later impressions of the United States and Canada that emerged after both restricted the mobility of racialized peoples. Consequently, early South Asian travelers witnessed the growing seedlings of racial stratification and held onto some of these notions that would exacerbate over time, entirely barring South Asians from travel.

South Asian Travelers in the Early Twentieth Century

The availability of sources in this second phase is heterogeneous given the diversity of individuals traveling to Canada and the United States as well as the sheer number of individuals who made the journey to these settler states in this period. The adventuresome spirit of Bengali peddlers was reciprocated by South Asians that superseded these visitors, precisely Punjabi soldiers whose travels initiated a pattern of more permanent labour migration. In regard to these soldiers, Rajani Kanta Das, a student in the United States who conducted a study on Indians in the Pacific Coast (1923), writes:

During the Boxer War [1899-1901] they came into contact with men of other nations and realized the importance of their service in the international struggle. Travelling abroad and crossing the ocean fostered in them a spirit of wanderlust and either at the time of their retirement from the service or while on leave of absence, some of them crossed the Pacific to Canada.³⁴

Jogesh Misrow who conducted a similar study in 1915 made an analogous observation:

During the Boxer Uprising in China, they [Punjabi policemen in Penang, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and other transpacific ports] as well as the soldiers came in contact with the soldiers both of the United States and of Canada...After the trouble was over a large number of them migrated to British North America and the United States of America, instead of going back to India. Life there seemed too unattractive now and opportunities too meagre for them.³⁵

Limited citations of Punjabis arriving in Canada and the United States can be found this early; thus, Das and Misrow's insights remain an anomaly in the literature on South Asian migration in North America. Their focus on the appeal of adventure introduces a disparate paradigm on South

³⁴ Rajani Kanta Das, *Hindustanee Workers on the Pacific Coast* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter and Co., 1923), p. 4.

³⁵ Jogesh C. Misrow, *East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1915), p. 2.

Asian mobility that has previously remained preoccupied with immigration and settlement. Shah's research on sexuality among South Asian sojourners is a more recent example in which the itinerant nature of these men's experiences is emphasized, alluding to the immense possibilities for exploration, particularly sexual ventures that such mobility permit.³⁶ Indeed, Das and Misrow's insights while appearing anachronistic, present imperative knowledge based on their periodization as they share ideas circulating at that time. More importantly, these individuals gathered firsthand accounts from former soldiers that traveled to North America. Both studies cite a reliance on personal interviews with subjects. Misrow also worked as the official Hindustani interpreter for the United States Bureau of Immigration. Thus, the spirit of adventure and exploration among South Asian travelers formed an integral aspect of South Asian mobility that is often overlooked.

The more widely discussed chronology of South Asian migration notes two salient moments that triggered a greater movement of South Asians, predominantly Punjabis to Canada and the United States. In 1897, a multiethnic Hong Kong regiment traveled through Canada on its way to Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in London with several South Asian soldiers on board. The same contingent then returned en route to Hong Kong via Canada. Das contends that some soldiers stayed in Canada on their way back, while other soldiers shared tales of their travel after returning home.³⁷ Some scholars believe that this explanation is erroneous and cite King Edward VII's coronation (1902) as the event that led soldiers to stay behind as the others returned and informed South Asians at home about these foreign lands.³⁸ Archival records indicate that there were a handful of Punjabis in Canada and the United States as early as 1899. Thus,

³⁶ Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, p. 15.

³⁷ Das, *Hindustanee Workers*, p. 4.

³⁸ Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava, *Continuous Journey*, p. 6.

previous estimates may have been more accurate. Intriguingly, Mitcham indicates that the King's Coronation was a segregated affair with very few contingents of colour present in comparison to the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. He explains that the Coronation exhibited a stringent display of colonial racial hierarchies.³⁹ Mitcham's analysis underlines the swiftly altering understandings of race that solidified over five years. He associated this shift with much larger representations of the self-governing colonies, in other words, white settler states.

As race became a greater concern in settler colonial and imperial affairs, the travels of South Asian soldiers sowed connections among distant lands, which were consequential for patterns of larger movement. Sadhu Singh Dhami, a South Asian migrant who lived and worked on the Pacific coast in the early twentieth century, and the first South Asian to complete a grade twelve education in Canada, echoed these sentiments. He commented on the adventurous spirit of Sikhs who traveled to distinct parts of the British Empire, inevitably carving a path to Canada and the United States.⁴⁰ Yet, South Asian soldiers maintained a proximity to their loved ones and their villages through letters, even though many were illiterate, engaging third parties to read or inscribe on their behalf.⁴¹ The increasing mobility of South Asians before, and after 1897, was a causal factor in enticing more South Asians to make the journey to Canada and the United States. More importantly, South Asians faced few constraints entering these two settler states before 1907; by the end of this year, approximately 2,570 arrived in Canada alone.

Essentially, South Asian soldiers' oral accounts of travel as well as written correspondence attracted numerous South Asian men to the shores of Canada and the United States. Letters about

³⁹ John C. Mitcham, *Race and Imperial Defence in the British World, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 106.

⁴⁰ Sadhu Singh Dhami, *The Sikhs and their Religion: A Struggle for Democracy* (Vancouver and Victoria: Khalsa Diwan Society, 1943), p. 24.

⁴¹ David Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters 1914-1918* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), p. 4; Sarjeet Singh Jagpal, *Becoming Canadians: Pioneers Sikhs in their Own Words* (Vancouver: Harbour Publishing, 1994), p. 103.

beautiful lands full of opportunities circulated in villages of Punjab alongside pamphlets sent by cheap labour recruiters touting economic prospects, which coincided with the possibility of adventure.⁴² Sohan Singh Josh, an Indian revolutionary, denotes the importance of travel accounts dispersed verbally: “They [South Asian soldiers in the 1897 contingent] saw this British dominion with vast opportunities of work and employment and on reaching home talked about the prairies which were just like the plains of the Punjab.”⁴³ Tara Singh Sidoo who arrived in Canada in 1906 stated, “My brother, Kapur Singh, was one of the first Sikhs to go to Canada. He soon wrote back to our village saying that work was available at RS. 7 a day—a princely sum in those days.”⁴⁴ Hence, travel narratives were shared among entire villages. Likewise, Harjap Singh, an Indian revolutionary who traveled to the United States in 1908 explained in his memoir that traveling to Canada and the United States became immensely popular in his village, which is why he thought of visiting America.⁴⁵ Similarly, in regard to Kapoor Singh, a prominent migrant who arrived in San Francisco in 1906, and eventually settled in Canada, Johnston states:

His immigration was part adventure, part political act, inspired by a nationalistic teacher who told his students, “Boys, if you ever get the chance, go to America and make lots of money, and come back and free India.” That exhortation was in the back of Kapoor’s mind when, as a young man, he took passage from Calcutta (Kolkata).”⁴⁶

Thus, a popular narrative about American independence had influenced Kapoor’s teacher as well as notions about the availability of economic opportunities, which were passed on to Kapoor who took the chance to travel abroad. In his memoir, Visakha Singh, a revolutionary and priest at the

⁴² Narindar Singh, *Canadian Sikhs: History, Religion, and Culture of Sikhs in North America* (Nepean: Canadian Sikhs’ Studies Institute, 1994), p. 32; Misrow, *East Indian Immigration on the Pacific Coast*, p. 6.

⁴³ Sohan Singh Josh, *Tragedy of Komagata Maru* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1975), p. 1.

⁴⁴ Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava, *Continuous Journey*, p. 14.

⁴⁵ Baba Harjap Singh, *Jail Diary ate Hor Likhtan* (Jalandhar: Saab Publications, 1998), p. 27.

⁴⁶ Hugh Johnston, *Jewels of the Qila: The Remarkable Story of an Indo-Canadian Family* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), p. 1.

Stockton Sikh temple indicated that he was able to easily travel to the United States in 1908.⁴⁷

Overall, these accounts exemplify the freedom of mobility that countless South Asians embraced for a brief period and the expanse of their travel narratives.

Racialized Restrictions on Mobility—Britain, Canada, and the United States

In regard to migration, Madokoro states, “Movement has often been proscribed by the modern nation-state and socioeconomic circumstances but in theory it has also existed as a possibility for all.”⁴⁸ Consequently, it is the gradual elimination of this possibility to move freely, whether temporary or permanent that had a negative impact on South Asians in this period. By 1907, white labourers in Canada and the United States became wary of the increasing South Asian presence in the Pacific Northwest; this understanding led to a rise in settler state control over the free mobility of South Asians. For South Asians, this was a new and unprecedented constraint, but it was only an extension of policies for both settler states that began restricting Asian mobility in the 1880s.

Chinese migration was banned in the United States in 1882, while in Canada, the federal government implemented a head tax to deter Chinese migration in 1885, which was increased in 1900, and then again, in 1903. Furthermore, white settlers expressed discontent with the rising numbers of South Asians, though the population remained well below the Chinese and Japanese. Consequently, South Asian presence quickly sounded the alarm for bigoted white Canadians and Americans. In September of 1907, white Americans attacked South Asian workers in Bellingham, Washington. A few days later, white settlers in Vancouver, British Columbia rioted against Chinese, Japanese, and South Asians. The Anti-Asian Exclusion League established a cross-

⁴⁷ Malwinder Jit Singh, *Atham Katha: Santh Baba Visakha Singh* (Amritsar: Dharam Parchar Committee, 2001), p. 48.

⁴⁸ Laura Madokoro, “On Future Research Directions: Temporality and Permanency in the Study of Migration and Settler Colonialism in Canada,” *History Compass* 17 (1): p. 1.

border movement along the Pacific Coast that instigated the simultaneous outbreak of violence in both nations with Americans participating in the Vancouver riots as well.⁴⁹ The momentum among the white settler population to ban Asians from entering Canada and the United States emboldened both states to introduce policies deterring migrants of colour. The United States formulated a Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan in 1907, and Canada in 1908, in which the Japanese government agreed to limit the number of people leaving their borders for both nations. Hence, restrictions now extended beyond state lines creating a liminal space that prohibited largescale movement.

A similar surge of hostility targeted African Americans as numbers fleeing the Jim Crow South rose in 1907. Canadian authorities moved swiftly to contain this movement. They sent agents to the American South to discourage African Americans from emigrating, offered incentives to officials working at the border who denied them entry, and pressed railway companies to bar the passage of African Americans.⁵⁰ Americans may have utilized similar methods in India. When Harjap Singh was boarding a train to Calcutta en route to the United States, sixty to seventy Punjabis that had left for America returned because they were told in Calcutta that the US banned the entry of labourers. It was not until Singh arrived in Hong Kong (after residing in Calcutta and Singapore) that he learned there was no proscription on traveling to the United States.⁵¹ Whereas ill-informed individuals may have dispersed such rumours, they certainly replicate tactics that settler states used at the time to discourage the movement of racialized peoples. In another instance, the Canadian federal government invented a deportation

⁴⁹ Kornel Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the US—Canadian Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 108.

⁵⁰ John Douglas Belshaw, *Canadian History: Post-Confederation* (Victoria: BCampus, 2016), p. 239, <https://opentextbc.ca/postconfederation/>.

⁵¹ Singh, *Jail Diary ate Hor Likhtan*, p. 27.

plan for South Asians termed the Honduras Scheme (1908). Officials suggested that the climate of Honduras was more suitable for South Asians where they had better employment opportunities, ironically, as indentured labourers. Indenture tied South Asians to an employer, and it was a closely monitored form of movement that countered the free mobility that South Asians departing for Canada and the United States enjoyed. Canadian officials sent two South Asian representatives to Honduras to obtain the community's approval. However, they rejected the proposal and ended the purportedly benevolent plan.⁵² Subsequently, the Canadian government adopted a new policy to decrease South Asian presence by targeting mobility en masse.

In 1908, the Canadian government introduced the continuous journey regulation, an amendment to the Immigration Act, which prohibited South Asians from entry without exclusively naming them. The British government pressured Canadians to refrain from outright limiting Indian immigration, especially as Europe appeared on the brink of war. The British had many reasons to deter exclusion that cited Indians. One, Indians were British subjects, and theoretically equal, holding the same rights and privileges as white British subjects according to the Queen's Proclamation. Two, India was a crucial colony as was evident from the extensive number of South Asian soldiers that formed an integral component of the imperial army. For this reason, British apprehension extended beyond losing control over India, but along with it, the colonies that Indian soldiers and policemen protected from East Africa to Ceylon. Three, as the Indian independence movement strengthened, any discontent in British colonies could exacerbate revolutionary sentiments in India. Therefore, the ordinance sought a compromise between the British and Canadian governments as it halted Indian migration, while ostensibly maintaining anonymity. The continuous journey provision stipulated, "Immigrants shall be prohibited landing,

⁵² Singh, *Canadian Sikhs*, p. 42.

unless they come from [their] country of birth or citizenship by continuous journey, and on through tickets purchased before starting.”⁵³ There were no through tickets from India to Canada, so direct passage was impossible. The ordinance also added that individuals must pay \$200 upon landing. Therefore, the desire to constrain the mobility of racialized peoples moved past defining state borders to controlling movements across seas. Imperial service once provided a platform for soldiers acting as travelers, migrants, and sojourners to become acquainted with foreign lands, but new restrictions ensured that they could no longer travel freely. Nevertheless, there were inconsistencies with this ordinance and South Asians would use such ambiguities to challenge “white” control over mobility, denoting the right to travel across oceans as fundamental.

While British and Canadian authorities thought that they circumvented criticism of discrimination, South Asians regarded the continuous journey provision as whites establishing exclusive control over the seas. Unlike previous travel accounts in which South Asians sent letters home about new lands full of opportunity, they focused on injustice that a British colony invoked against fellow subjects. Dr. Sunder Singh, a South Asian spokesperson who moved to Vancouver in 1909, informed the Empire Club: “To others you advance money to come here, and yet to us, British subjects, you refuse to let down the bars. All we are asking of you is justice and fair play.”⁵⁴ South Asians continued to travel to Canada, and they were successful at challenging the regulation on select occasions such as the arrival of the *Panama Maru*.⁵⁵ However, the fate of the *Komagata Maru*, which arrived in 1914, diverged. Gurdit Singh Sarhali chartered the Japanese ship, *Komagata Maru*, to overturn the continuous journey regulation and contest the immobility of

⁵³ Radhika Vyas Mongia, “Race, Nationality, Mobility: A History of the Passport,” *Public Culture* 11, no. 3, p. 540.

⁵⁴ Sunder Singh, “The Sikhs in Canada” *The Empire Club of Canada Addresses*, Jan. 25, 1912, <https://speeches.empireclub.org/details.asp?ID=62324>.

⁵⁵ The *Panama Maru* arrived in Victoria in 1913 with 39 South Asians on board. Immigration authorities detained the passengers and ordered them to be deported. However, citing an inconsistency with the continuous journey provision, they were eventually allowed to stay.

South Asians. The ship had 376 passengers on board, out of which immigration authorities only allowed 20 to enter Canada. Arguably the Komagata Maru incident was cataclysmic in establishing ‘white’ control over mobility. There is much written about the affair, so it is unnecessary to recount details here, but after a two-month long struggle, test case in court, and violent stand-off, authorities forced the ship to return to India.⁵⁶ Upon landing in Budge Budge, British officers sought to restrict the movement of passengers again. British authorities expected the passengers to return to Punjab and forced them to board a train. However, many refused, desiring to find work in Kolkata, which led to a skirmish. Some passengers died in the outbreak of violence, and British officers arrested most passengers, though some managed to flee.⁵⁷ Officers tried to arrest Gurdit Singh as well who successfully escaped, although a few years later he surrendered following the advice of Mahatma Gandhi.⁵⁸ The Komagata Maru affair garnered attention among South Asians at home and abroad with meetings occurring from every major city in the diaspora to small villages in Punjab.

South Asian Travel Writing on Racial Restrictions

Concerns over mobility became evident in the writings of many South Asian travelers after the introduction of the continuous journey provision. In 1918, Gurdit Singh wrote the *Voyage of Komagata Maru or India's Slavery Abroad* discussing his journey overseas. Nayar reads this account as a travelogue, though it can also be regarded as the antithesis because Singh criticizes the policies and control over movement that hindered his ability to enter Canada.⁵⁹ Regardless,

⁵⁶ See Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014); Renisa Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Anjali Gera Roy, *Imperialism and Sikh Migration: The Komagata Maru Incident* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁵⁷ Roy, *Imperialism and Sikh Migration*, p. 104.

⁵⁸ Darshan Singh Tatla, “Introduction” in *Voyage of the Komagata Maru or India's Slavery Abroad* (Chandigarh: Unistar Books, 2007), p. 16.

⁵⁹ Pramod K. Nayar, “Dissident Mobilities: The Komagata Maru and Indian Travellers in the Empire,” *South Asian Diaspora* 8, no. 2 (2016), p. 99.

Singh conveys that the Komagata Maru's voyage was about more than South Asian migration and settlement; it was a struggle over the right to travel across seas as people had done time immemorial. When Gurdit Singh chartered the Komagata Maru, he planned to introduce a permanent steamer for South Asians as an entrepreneur; South Asian newspapers widely circulated this information. Essentially, Singh sought to establish a regular avenue for South Asian mobility.⁶⁰ More importantly, in his book, Singh associated slavery, indenture, and immigration restrictions with one another as racialized policies that enacted greater control over the mobility of Indian peoples and all racialized individuals. In his most popular passage, Singh notes, "The visions of men are widened by travel, and contact with the citizens of a free country will infuse a spirit of independence and foster yearning for freedom in the minds of the emasculated subjects of alien rule."⁶¹ This quote points to the phenomena that struck fear in the hearts of British officials as South Asian mobility furthered ideas about Indian independence. Intriguingly, Mawani frames the Komagata Maru incident as a contest over oceans and mobility of racialized peoples:

By the early twentieth century, the free sea became a site of increased surveillance and regulation, not only by Britain but also by Canada and the United States. It was precisely this maritime imperial and racial order that the continuous journey provision sought to protect and that Husain Rahim and Gurdit Singh aspired to challenge through their respective legal struggles over transoceanic Indian mobility.⁶²

Husain Rahim, who was quoted in the introduction was a leading member of the Shore Committee that fought on behalf of the Komagata Maru passengers. He made imperative claims about the significance of transoceanic travel before the ship had even entered Canadian waters. His rendition

⁶⁰ Husain Rahim, "Hindustanee Charter: A Steamer for Vancouver," *The Hindustanee* 1, no. 4 (1914), p. 5.

⁶¹ Baba Gurdit Singh, *Voyage of Komagata Maru or India's Slavery Abroad* (Chandigarh: Unistar Books, [1918] 2014), p. 76.

⁶² Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law*, p. 50.

of South Asian containment demonstrates that South Asians understood restrictions as “white policy.”⁶³ Rahim states,

The reason is that under the conspiracy or complicity with home authorities and colonial government, the government of India has checked all tours and travels of the Hindustanee, outward from India to Europe, Australia, Canada South Africa, and America, which cynically claim to be white men’s countries, by direct insinuations or instructions surreptitiously given to the offices of steamship companies in India not to book them except under certain most exceptional conditions, when sanctioned by Indian authorities...A system of heinous and abject espionage is levied in India, putting the whole Hindustanee nation, who want to go out of India on a tour, practically under surveillance, if not keeping them almost captives in their own land.⁶⁴

Rahim’s expressions vividly recount the anger that many South Asians felt towards the British as well as settler states that marked mobility as the exclusive right of white travelers. South Asians living in the United States also endured the brunt of this policy that was used as a smokescreen to deter travel to Canada entirely. In 1911, South Asians in the US petitioned British authorities after being refused entry into Canada as temporary visitors, despite having evidence that they would return. Their frustration moved British authorities. In a dispatch to Canadians, British representatives noted that Canadians had failed to adequately reply when they asked if the restriction was being used to limit tourists and temporary visitors. British officials admonished the Canadian policy of refusing permits to such individuals and indicated that they cannot halt tourists who are arriving from the United States.⁶⁵ Overall, the fact that South Asian tourists and temporary visitors were directly targeted demonstrates how tightly racialized restrictions were implemented and South Asian mobility constrained in this era.

⁶³ Lake and Reynolds use the term “white policy” to define racial exclusion. A Chinese diplomat at the Universal Races Congress (1911), Dr. Wu Ting-Fang, first labelled the institutionalization of the colour line in white settler states as “White Policy.” Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*, 10; Marilyn Lake, “Chinese Colonists Assert Their ‘Common Human Rights’: Cosmopolitanism as Subject and Method of History,” *Journal of World History* 21, no. 3 (2010), p. 387.

⁶⁴ Husain Rahim, “Canada as a Hindu Saw it,” *The Hindustanee* 1, no. 4 (2014), p. 10.

⁶⁵ SFU Archives, Hugh Johnston Collection, MSC 183 Series 4, Borden Papers, Government of India Department of Trade and Commerce. Enclosure in No. 101 NO. 44 of 1911.

A similar understanding of anti-racist solidarity can be deciphered in Lala Lajpat Rai's travelogue, the renowned Indian freedom fighter who lived in exile in the United States from 1914-1919. In 1916, he published "The United States of America: A Hindu's Impressions and a Study." His work presents an in-depth analysis of racial issues within the United States, particularly the history of slavery, and continuous subjugation of African Americans. However, throughout this denunciation of racialization, he reflects on the importance of Indian independence. Rai's analysis measures comparably well to Ramabai's earlier reflections on race. Rai asserts that racial issues are an integral problem facing the United States. He classifies immigration as a significant aspect of this issue touching on the problem of racialized immobility. Rai states:

Next to the Labor problem, the most vital and interesting problem that faces the United States is its immigration problem. Since the beginning an endless stream of immigrants has flowed to its shores. At first they came from Northern Europe. Of late years' they have started to come from Southern and Eastern Europe, and also from China and Japan, and even India. To this latter immigration tremendous opposition has been developing, ending in the exclusion of the Chinese and the Hindoos from the soil. Their competition in the labor market is not desired. In the South the Negroes form about half the population. The South needs the labor of the Negro, but both the South and the North object to Asiatic immigration. Altogether the country is facing a race problem more serious than any other nation in the world, and no solution has been found as yet.⁶⁶

In this passage, Rai appears to suggest that Asians are discriminated against more than African Americans because their labour is less desired. Nevertheless, his analysis predominantly conveys that the racialization of African Americans was problematic, depicting the significance of racial equality. Thus, this passage could also be read as Rai using an exaggerated portrayal to demonstrate the extent of discrimination that South Asians faced, specifically based on constrictions to their mobility by comparing this example to the negative treatment of African

⁶⁶ Lala Lajpat Rai, *The United States of America: A Hindu's Impressions and a Study* (Calcutta: R. Chatterjee, 1916), p. 53.

Americans. Overall, Rai correlates the racialization of distinct peoples in one account that has emanated from his activism for Indian independence. Therefore, his personal analysis of the United States conveys understandings of race that parallel Ramabai's travelogue, though concerns about racialized restrictions on mobility are more pronounced in Rai's book, and remain closely tied to the movement for a free India.

Facing racism and exclusion within Canada and the United States, many South Asians felt drawn towards the movement for Indian independence. In 1913, South Asian revolutionaries from Canada and the United States established the *Ghadar* (revolution) movement in Astoria, Oregon. They found sympathizers from British Columbia and California to Mexico, Argentina, and the Philippines. Jawala Singh (a successful farmer known as the "Potato King" of California and a revolutionary) explicated that Indians felt the winds of freedom in America yet faced extensive racism. They attributed this secondary treatment to India's status as a colony.⁶⁷ The once timid South Asian students arriving at the universities of Berkeley and Oregon soon became involved in the transnational movement to free India.⁶⁸

In their memoirs, Jawala Singh and Visakha Singh, elucidate that revolutionaries in California purposely facilitated the mobility of South Asian students by offering five scholarships to engage them in the cause for Indian freedom.⁶⁹ Similarly, Taraknath Das, the brains of the Ghadar movement, issued a statement requesting funds to recruit South Asian students in the Vancouver Indian newspaper *The Hindustanee*. Das wrote, "Let us all rejoice that even the Hindusthanee girls are willing to cross the ocean to acquire scientific education so that they will

⁶⁷ Charanji Lal Kangniwal, *Gadri Baba Jawala Singh Thathian Jiwan ate Hath Likhtan* (Jalandhar: Desh Bhagat Yaadgar Committee, 2014), pp. 21 and 73.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 25; Singh, *Atham Katha*, p. 54.

be able to serve our country's cause most effectively.”⁷⁰ Whereas that cause may be open to interpretation, Das' revolutionary background suggests that he is very likely referring to Indian independence. The recruitment of South Asian students by offering awards depict how South Asians found innovative ways to challenge constraints on mobility by enabling temporary movement. Subsequently, sentiments about restrictions became enveloped in the movement for a free India. A poem inscribed in a book by Sohan Singh Josh, portrays the emulsion of such emotions,

*Des pain dhakke; pardes dhoi nan,
Sade pardesian da des koi nan.
We are buffeted about in our country;
We have no refuge in foreign lands;
We foreigners have no country of our own.*⁷¹

Henceforth, limiting the movement of South Asians even for brief excursions became integral for British authorities as contact with South Asians who experienced racism and faced exclusion from Canada and the United States formed an imminent threat to British rule in the Indian subcontinent. On the other hand, most revolutionaries returned to India at the outbreak of World War I to stimulate the movement for independence, and British authorities immediately arrested them, so this threat did not last long.

The Passport System and South Asian Accounts of Immobility

In 1915, the British government introduced the Defence of India Passport Act—eight years after Prime Minister of Canada, Wilfred Laurier, suggested that they implement a passport system. Laurier presented three reasons for the adoption of the passport: “(1) prohibit Hindoos [*sic*] from going to Canada without passports, (2) to limit the number of passports issued to a number agreed upon by the Governments of Canada and India, and (3) to request Government of

⁷⁰ Taraknath Das, “A Suggestion for Constructive Work,” *The Hindustanee* 1, no. 4 (2014), p. 7.

⁷¹ Josh, *Tragedy of Komagata Maru*, p. 3.

Canada to deport all Hindoos [*sic*] arriving at Canadian ports without passports.”⁷² At that time, the British refused, stipulating that they could not halt the emigration of “free” Indians. They recognized the freedom of movement as integral and they were aware that the passport system could induce discord. However, the Komagata Maru incident showed that South Asians leaving the Indian subcontinent would continue to oppose travel restrictions. More so, the Komagata Maru incident strengthened the cause of Indian independence and exacerbated dissent precisely at the outbreak of World War I. Thus, the British relented, establishing a passport requirement for travel throughout their colonies. The continuous journey clause limited travel to Canada, but the passport system significantly reduced the ability of South Asians to leave India.⁷³ British authorities now controlled how many individuals left the region, where they planned to visit, and which individuals sought to leave. With the passport system, they could better monitor the movements of revolutionaries as well. Analogously, in 1917, the United States restricted the immigration of labourers from Asia.⁷⁴ More importantly, the US introduced passports in 1918, and visas in 1924. Consequently, British, Canadian, and American racialized requirements and policies intersected, effectively circumventing the movement of South Asian travelers.

The writings on travel to Canada and the United States that discuss mobility reveal how stringently the implementation of passports restricted South Asian movements. Satyadev Parivrajak, a religious Indian tourist who wrote several travelogues commented on how the passport limited his travels. Gupta comments on Parivrajak,

Desirous of an unfettered mobility, he longingly remembered his first journey to America when a passport was not needed. Lamenting passport restrictions, he regretted that within Europe too, travel was no longer free-flowing and permission letters were needed for different countries.⁷⁵

⁷² Mongia, *Race, Nationality, Mobility*, p. 536.

⁷³ Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, p. 194.

⁷⁴ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 18.

⁷⁵ Gupta, *Masculine Vernacular Histories*, p. 848.

Another religious traveler, Paramahansa Yogananda, conveyed similar discord with such restrictions. He wrote,

I left India in August, 1920, on *The City of Sparta*, the first passenger boat sailing for America after the close of the World War. I had been able to book passage only after the removal, in ways fairly miraculous, of many red-tape difficulties concerned with the granting of my passport.”⁷⁶

In his memoir, Yogananda’s high opinion of the United States replicated early travelers such as Ramabai, but his frustration with restrictions on mobility is evident. Both statements convey a general shift within travel accounts from previous assertions that mentioned no difficulty obtaining passage tickets or permission for entry (though there were complaints about racism) that emerge as a grievance in travel narratives after 1915. Harjap Singh’s comments on the mobility of South Asians before the British introduced passports highlights this important distinction:

It was a time when 300 or 400 Punjabi travellers on average, always would be waiting in transit...If anyone needed to travel abroad, one would only buy a ticket from a shipping company and would go ahead. Passport system was introduced in the middle of the 1914-1918 war.⁷⁷

Singh’s statement conveys that mobility was once a major aspect of life in Punjab. Moreover, he exhibits how passports altered that dynamic. Singh provides a glimpse into an old world that predated the requirement of passports. In addition, Lakshman Singh Thandi whose father came to Canada in 1906, had his journey significantly delayed, despite the fact that his father legally sponsored him. About Thandi’s journey, Sharma states:

At that time there it was hard to get a passport in India. He came along with three other people during World War I. The medical examination for his entry to Canada was conducted in Hong Kong. One of the most common reasons for being rejected was trachoma [an infectious eye disease]. Thandi was found to have trachoma, so he stayed a month in Hong Kong while it was being treated.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, p. 348.

⁷⁷ Singh, *Jail Diary ate Hor Likhtan*, p. 26.

⁷⁸ Hari Sharma, “Lakshman Singh Thandi,” *Indo-Canadian Oral History Collection*, July 5, 1984, <https://digital.lib.sfu.ca/icohc-16/lakshman-singh-sandhan>.

Overall, passports furthered the system of restriction that had grown since 1907, ensuring that only the odd (generally elite) traveler could leave South Asia.⁷⁹

On the other hand, Sarojini Naidu, an Indian poet and prominent figure in the Indian independence movement utilized her ability to travel as an elite to chart alternate cartographies for South Asian women. She consciously returned the gaze on colonizers and their collaborators as she traveled through Canada and the United States between 1928 and 1929. Reflecting on her journey, she stated,

It was as a woman of this ancient race [India] with its millennia of experience that in my travels last year, I looked at the lives of those child countries of Europe and those kindergarten countries of America. They expected me to fit into their notion of what an Indian woman should be, a timid woman, a modest woman, a jump-on-to-a-chair-at-a-mouse woman who had come to learn from them. But Sarojini had come to them as a free woman.⁸⁰

Naidu relied on her mobility to portray her freedom thwarting racialized notions about subjugated Indian women. She also counteracted imperialist notions about the colonies as children of Britain by reverting the analogy and juxtaposing it to India's ancient civilization.⁸¹

Naidu was critical of racial discrimination as well, commenting on the subordination of Indigenous communities and African Americans akin to Ramabai.⁸² She analogously shares a complex understanding of race, in which she seeks to appease Americans and Canadians, enticing them towards the cause of Indian independence, yet continues to critique racism. Unlike Yogananda and Parivarajak, Naidu's writings reveal little about constraints on her mobility,

⁷⁹ There was one important exception to the prohibition, and it came after World War I. Canada allowed the migration of the wives and children of the few hundred South Asian men residing in Canada, at the behest of the British, in return for the significant role that South Asians played in the conflict. Approximately, 1.3 million South Asian soldiers participated in the Great War.

⁸⁰ Hasi Banerjee, *Sarojini Naidu: The Traditional Feminist* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1998), p. 54.

⁸¹ Anupama Arora, "The Nightingale's Wonderings: Sarojini Naidu in North America," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 44, no. 3 (2009), p. 88.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

rather she comments on her warm welcome.⁸³ In a letter to Mahatma Gandhi, she writes, “A preliminary greeting from this far-off, beautiful, snowbound land of Canada where my visit has been more like a homecoming to our own people than the visit of a wandering minstrel. The heart of Canadians is as warm as the climate is cold.”⁸⁴ As this underlines her positive experience in Canada, it also suggests that her visit to the United States may not have been as wonderful as she described earlier. More importantly, her ease of movement can be attributed to her high status and connections with influential diplomats. Nevertheless, she mentions the plight of South Asians on the Pacific Coast who faced the eradication of their rights. One of her speeches also revealed an understanding of how the colonial government used passports to limit South Asian mobility. She describes an incident in 1918:

His Excellency the Viceroy, sympathetic in heart, had promised to facilitate the passage of this embassy of the nation to England. These ambassadors of the nation, facing the perils of death, set out, or were on the very threshold of departure; and then in one great devastating moment came that unstatesmanlike, unchivalrous, unmanly, and arrogant denial of passports to our chosen spokesmen before the British public.⁸⁵

Naidu’s reference to the denial of passports as “unstatesmanlike, unchivalrous...” depicts the importance that she attached to the delegation, and it also conveys her anger towards the act of limiting mobility. Overall, Naidu’s writings share significant insights on how a South Asian woman who traveled to North America, employed her mobility to make a case for Indian independence and challenge gendered and racialized conceptions about Indians, contrasting the travel accounts of many men.

South Asian Travelers Beyond 1929

⁸³ E.S. Reddy Gandhi and Mrinalini Sarabhai, *The Mahatma and the Poetess: Being a Selection of Letters Exchanged between Gandhiji and Sarojini Naidu* (Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1998), p. 95.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁸⁵ Sarojini Naidu, *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu* (Madras: GA. Nateson & Co., 1979), p. 179.

Intriguingly, imperial and settler colonial powers' use of passports to contain mobility would remain an integral tactic to halt subversive ideas until India and Pakistan achieved independence (and beyond). In 1944, approximately 3 years before India attained freedom from British rule, imperial authorities considered refusing Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit a passport because they feared her revolutionary capacity to influence Americans.⁸⁶ If Pandit's visit convinced Americans that Indian independence was necessary, then the British could face substantial pressure to relinquish control over India.⁸⁷ Imperial officials eventually relented, but the deliberation and time that it took to grant Pandit a passport reveals the ways in which the imperial machinery worked to halt South Asian mobility, precisely when they deemed this mobility dangerous.⁸⁸

In another instance, authorities in England revoked author Chaman Lal's passport because he had written the book, *Vanishing Empire*, which discussed the British Empire's demise in 1937. Lal failed to procure his passport from the British to conduct research for his new book *Hindu America*. He had to acquire a passport from the Mexican government and travel "illegally" to complete his research.⁸⁹ These instances demonstrate that imperial authorities intricately sutured control over mobility with passports, extending an apparatus of surveillance to prevent the movement of racialized peoples as well as the circulation of dissident ideas. After several shipping companies refused to sell Lal a ticket for passage to India as he did not have a passport, he eventually succeeded because the NYK Shipping Line was willing to take a risk on his behalf—conveying how South Asians continued to find ways to evade proscription.

⁸⁶ Pandit was the sister of India's future Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and herself a prominent leader. She later became a diplomat representing India, member of parliament, and president of the United Nations General Assembly, which were just a few of the titles she held.

⁸⁷ Rosalind Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere: Indian Nationalist Women and the Global Public Sphere* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh: 2018), p. 145.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 145.

⁸⁹ Chaman Lal, *Hindu America* (Bombay: New Book Co., 1940), p. 5.

Nevertheless, Britain and most settler states utilized the passport system to exclude South Asians and halt the spread of pro-Indian propaganda until 1947. Such methods of control would leave a permanent legacy, radically altering the ways that not only South Asians, but racialized peoples throughout the world experienced mobility.

Conclusion

Traveling was a facet of life for peoples around the globe, long before the British, Spanish, or Dutch set sail for the Indies. Yet, British colonialism presented new opportunities for South Asians to explore lands far and wide. Various forms of mobility characterized the journeys of South Asians from working on British ships to traveling as religious preachers, students, soldiers, diplomats, migrants, and settlers to Canada and the United States. Early travelers such as Major Musa Bhai, Pandita Ramabai, Swami Vivekananda, and the Sikhs that arrived in San Francisco (1899), or Vancouver (1902), encountered settlers eager to catch a glimpse of them.⁹⁰ However, hardening ideas about racial difference and the growth of a white settler identity in the early twentieth century coincided with the rising presence of South Asians in Canada and the United States. Settler colonial governments began collaborating with the British to limit South Asian mobility, marking it as a right for whites-only. An array of policies sought to increasingly restrict the movement of South Asians, extending beyond migrants and settlers to temporary visitors and travelers. The control and surveillance of a population accustomed to free movement, especially Punjabis, led to the dispersion of subversive ideas refuting British control over the Indian subcontinent. However, the British, Canadian, and American governments could now monitor the spread of ideas deemed dangerous, particularly when they were associated with a traveler. The passport system connected a network that tracked individuals leaving a nation,

⁹⁰ *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Sikhs Allowed to Land in San Francisco," April 6, 1899, 10; Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava, *Continuous Journey*, p. 6.

boarding a ship, stopping at a port, and landing in a new nation as well as crossing land borders. Therefore, the intersection of the colonial and settler colonial apparatus could regulate the movements of people beyond borders, extending across oceans.

The restriction of movement from a nation of entry to the nation of origin became an obstruction that concluded South Asian mass movement, after many had challenged restrictions introduced in 1908. Nonetheless, some South Asian travelers still successfully circumvented policies that limited their mobility. In travel narratives, they expressed discontent with such policies, highlighting them as problematic aspects of British imperialism and the racism of settler states. Gurdit Singh's book on the rejection of the Komagata Maru and Sarojini Naidu's re-statement of Indian mobility in her travel writings are some of the most effective, yet disparate examples of South Asians charting their own cartographies across oceans. They also shared their experiences of travel from a personal viewpoint, as Indians, restating their identity as more than colonized subjects—they returned the gaze on a genre laden with colonization and racialization. Understanding that the freedom to travel was now the exclusive right of white travelers, many South Asians sought ways to counteract these barriers. Despite countless South Asian objections against the passport's capacity to restrict mobility, it became a predominant technology employed by settler states as well as the newly independent nations of India and Pakistan. The saga that began with the travels of a few thousand South Asians to Canada and the United States transformed into a global system that would trace the movements of individuals from every part of the world for the foreseeable future.

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