SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRATION TO CANADA

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As a nation, Canada is a relatively new immigrant country, first occupied by French and British settlers although the Aboriginal populations have a long history. The country was built by immigrants who have come during different periods from all continents. Racist immigration policies kept non-white immigrants out during the large immigration movements at the beginning of the 20th century and especially discriminated against Chinese and Indian immigrants, even though the latter were part of the British Empire. Ironically, people from South Asia are now the largest source of immigrants to Canada. According to the 2011 census data, out of a total population of 33,476,688, nearly five per cent (1,615,145) of Canadians are of South Asian origin, making them the largest visible minority group in Canada (Statistics Canada 2011).

With the growth in their population, the contribution and influence of the South Asian community has also grown considerably in recent years. Presently, 19 South Asian Canadians represent different constituents in the Parliament of Canada, and four are cabinet ministers in the Justin Trudeau government. The South Asian community has been active both in federal and provincial politics. They have made their mark as writers and artists, scientists, university professors and teachers, law enforcement professionals, lawyers, engineers and doctors, as well as social workers, philanthropists and community organizers. They have won distinctions in a broad range of fields, including the arts (e.g. Booker Award), sciences (e.g. Killam Award) and business (several CEOs), as well as recognition of outstanding achievement with the country's highest civilian honour, the Order of Canada.

The term South Asian denotes a geographical identity rather than a homogenous group. Originating in the sub-continent of India, they include people from

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Nepal. They are very heterogeneous in terms of culture, ethnicity, language, religion, and caste and class differences. They have settled largely in the provinces of Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta, but are concentrated in metropolitan Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, Montréal and Edmonton.

IMMIGRATION

Attracting immigrants to Canada was a priority of the government after Confederation in 1867, and although the policy was technically "open," the preferred category of people was of European origin. Non-white people were not explicitly barred from entering Canada, but several measures were used to keep them away, an important one being the excuse that people from warmer climes were "unsuitable for Canada's climate."

Although there is not much information on the early history of South Asians in Canada, it is known that a handful of Sikhs first came to Vancouver in the early 20th century. Between 1907 and 1908, about 5,000 South Asians entered Canada (Jain 1971), and most of these immigrants found jobs in railway construction, the lumber industry and on farms (Ramcharan, 1982). During this era several Canadian provinces had laws restricting the civil rights of Indians, preventing them from voting or holding public office. They were given jobs that were socially and culturally lower than whites in status and prestige. Since then, the immigration pattern of South Asians has shown major variation according to changes in immigration policies.

Anti-Asiatic feelings in the white population and racist immigration policies at the federal level impeded the entry of South Asians to Canada, so that only 760 migrated between 1920 and 1943, and there were only 6,111 people from the sub-continent in 1942 (Jain, 1971).

The earliest attempt by the government to restrict immigration of people from India was the Continuous Journey regulation in 1908. Not allowing ships to stop between the country of origin and Canada was an indirect way to prevent Indians from arriving here as the Canadian government could not explicitly have a law preventing immigration of persons who came from elsewhere in the British Empire.

Notwithstanding the "continuous journey" requirement, in May 1814 some Indians hired a Japanese vessel called the *Komagata Maru* and arrived in Vancouver harbour from Hong Kong without stopping en route. The 376 passengers (Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims) were not allowed to land on shore. After several of them had died on the ship due to lack of food and unsanitary conditions, it returned to India, where 20 more people died in a clash with the colonial police. These exclusionary policies were aimed at Asians at a time of massive immigration from Europe.

Discriminatory feeling towards people of colour failed to see their complexity and heterogeneity, and despite their diversity, they were all lumped together under the umbrella of "Hindu race" — although the majority of early South Asians belonged to the Sikh religion. More recently referred to as South Asians, they are given a geographical identity and defined as belonging to a "visible minority" by the federal government. The "visibility" of South Asians references their darker skin colour, although the range

of skin colour may vary from very light to very dark, and racial classifications include Caucasoid and Mongoloid categories.

With the end of British rule in India in 1947 and the birth of East (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan, South Asians were eligible to apply for Canadian citizenship, given the right to vote and the right to hold government office. In the post-1945 era, immigration was considered an important means of economic growth. Economic incentives guided the removal of discriminatory clauses in immigration regulations progressively in 1952, 1962 and 1967, at which time the Immigration Act ended racial criteria for the selection of immigrants. It introduced the point system focusing on personal, social and occupational characteristics such as health, education and professional skills qualifications, with an emphasis on well-educated and highly skilled immigrants. Highly skilled South Asians benefitted from the point system, and some brought over their parents and other family members under the family unification clause. Over 100,000 South Asian immigrants, mostly professionals, entered Canada between 1967 and 1975. However, during the 1970s, many people of South Asian origin also came to Canada from countries such as Uganda, the Caribbean islands and Fiji. In the 1980s, the South Asian population started coming in larger numbers directly from the sub-continent. Tamils from Sri Lanka made up the fifth largest group of immigrants to Canada in that decade, making Canada home to the largest Tamil population (140,000) in the Western world. A number of people of South Asian origin sought refuge under the refugee class, especially after refugee reforms in 2010.

Traditionally, immigrants from South Asia are closer to the Anglophone rather than the Francophone community due to their British colonial experience and knowledge of English. While there were pockets of French colonial settlements in India, most South Asians do not know French, although they tend to be multilingual because they speak several South Asian languages. Learning a new language as adults is simply adding an extra struggle to their already difficult experience of uprooting themselves from a country of origin to a Western culture rather different from their own. It is not surprising that they tended to go to English-speaking provinces where they did not feel the need to learn French, as they could get by with knowledge of English.

QUÉBEC

In Québec, the assertion of nationalism and majority status of the Francophone community in the 1960s had a significant impact on South Asians. Several policy measures were adopted, such as language legislation that made French the official language and mandatory for education and employment; Québec's role in the selection of "independent immigrants," which gives preference to French speakers; Québec's intercultural policy, which allowed diversity within a Francophone framework while Canada's *M*ulticulturalism Act aims at providing equal opportunity to all Canadians (although *de facto* English is the norm). Additionally, Québec's focus on secularism has affected social attitudes towards South Asians of different faiths.

SOUTH ASIANS TODAY

Generally, in Canada, despite the fact that some South Asians occupy positions of prestige in vari-

ous walks of life, as visible minorities South Asians face problems in employment. The population has higher levels of education, but lower levels of employment than majority white groups. South Asian women in particular face greater problems than men and are often underemployed even with high levels of education.

Immigrants from South Asia today can no longer be classified along ethnic and cultural lines. Their complexities cross-cut and overlap several characteristics. For example, Hindus could be from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or Nepal; Muslims are mostly from India, Pakistan or Bangladesh; Catholics are mainly from India or Sri Lanka; Sikhs originate in India, although they may have come to Québec via East Africa and other areas.

Globalization and technology make the experiences of today's immigrants very different from that of early immigrants. The multi-directional movement of various types of peoples (e.g. migrants, refugees, asylum seekers); the rapid flows of technology (e.g. Skype and social media); easy access to information through the digital world (e.g. e-magazines, newspapers); financial transactions in the globalized market (Ghosh, McAndrew & Babei, in review) make today's diasporic communities exist in a world of 'in-betweenness' (Srinivasan and Pyati 2007: 1735) that enables them to negotiate cultural forms and identities. Most South Asian immigrants are highly dependent on technology, not only to keep in touch with their families but also to participate in the cultural life and social networks of their countries of origin so that traditional hierarchies of ethnicity and class are now possible to maintain in Canada.

Once barred from coming to Canada, South Asians find that its openness to people of all cultures, its compassion in taking in refugees and its strong democratic values make Canada perhaps the most attractive country for them to immigrate to in today's chaotic world.

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