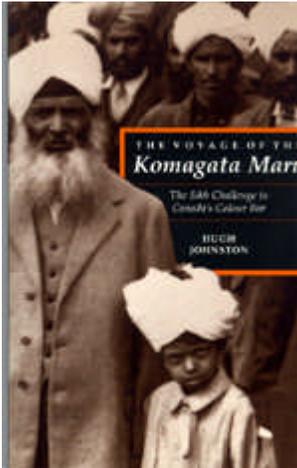


The Voyage of the Komagatu Maru; The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Color Bar:
Hugh Johnston (1979)[162P] ISBN:0-7748-0340-1

Book Review: Kavneet Singh



Hugh Johnston has written more than one book to his credit in reference to the Sikhs. Namely “Four Quarters of the Night; The Life Story of an Emigrant Sikh” and a upcoming book about “Kapoor Singh, Pioneer and Philanthropist”. A retired professor emeritus of History at Simon Fraser University, Canada. Also served on the board of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute from 1992-2001 and again in 1995-96 in India. HJ is keenly aware of the Sikhs, their Faith, Culture and History.

HJ has by and large written a unbiased balanced book depicting the real life saga of Gurdit Singh and the vast majority of his fellow Sikh passengers sailing on the Komagatu Maru trying to gain entry into another commonwealth country namely Canada in 1914 when the barriers against non-whites were very high.

William Charles Hopkinson a British secret service agent, working for the Canadian and the US governments, a key player in this book embodies the true slimy character of the British in their duplicity and wiliness when dealing with anyone other than their own. The overt racism by the officials went against all logic and reason even when it came to the law. Every unethical and immoral trick was used to circumvent the law simply to frustrate the entry of the Sikhs into Canada.

Another very intriguing character is Dr.Raghunath Singh. This man has not been once mentioned as a Hindu by HJ except as a Punjabi which leaves the reader wondering is he a Hindu or a Sikh. The harsh reality was that Raghunath was not a Singh or a Sikh but a Hindu traitor [one of 12 Hindus on board] who decided to blow the whistle on his co-passengers, who were all primarily Sikh that they were ‘Ghadar’ sympathizers therefore unfit to land. In return Dr.Raghunath and his family were given exemption from the provisions of the laws of “continuous journey” and let ashore, thereby entering Canada.

Gurdit Singh exemplifies the character and some qualities of a Sikh; namely, hardworking, enterprising, resourceful, forthright, able to lead and to be peaceful with

All the “*italics*” are by the Author

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such odds stacked against them. Gurdit Singh chose to take a stand on a basic right of a resident of the commonwealth all within the realm of the law. With the monetary and human resources at his disposal he could have easily found many other ways to land and enter the Canada but chose to do it in an honorable way. The sad, yet amazing journey of the Sikhs and their indomitable spirit is awe-inspiring. The vile and guile of the White Canadians on the other hand is sickening.

In Chapter 11;

Sikhs purists were demanding control of the shrines which for generations were kept by priests of the Sehajdhari or slow adopters tradition: unbearded priests, indistinguishable from Hindu, priests who had not been baptized into the militant order of the last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, who served as a bridge between Hindu and Sikh, who tolerated Hindu idols in Sikh shrines, and who enjoyed almost proprietary rights over those shrines. The cause against these priests had been maturing ever since the Singh Sabha movement – encouraged by the British – had begun the work of de-Hinduizing Sikhism in the later part of the nineteenth century.

HJ has made a loaded and patently erroneous statement here. The British rulers by design had not only enacted special laws for the Sikhs exclusively so that all their primary places of worship were under their direct control and supervision but the Hindu 'mahants' priests were purposely allowed to operate in a manner inimical to the basic postulates of the Sikh Faith with impunity. The British actually are the ones who wanted to discourage the full propagation of the Sikh Faith as it could possibly cause problems from a former enemy they had defeated not too long ago, also keenly aware that the Sikh strength lay in their Faith. The word 'baptized' is completely wrong as Sikhs are "formally initiated" into the Faith. Furthermore HJ uses the word 'militant' in a wrong and a condescending manner. HJ forgets that the process of the Sikh Gurus who spent 239 years to mould a people into a living Faith versus Christianity where Jesus preached barely for 2.5 years. Additionally the word 'Sehajdhari' is redundant as far as a Sikh is concerned. From 1850-1920 the direct control and indirect chicanery to dilute and erode the spiritual strength of the Sikhs was a diabolical design of the British government. Since soldiers were employed by the British for their own gain, Sikhs were allowed to be "formally initiated" when joining but they were not allowed the 'kirpan', an article of faith, and it was prohibited for any Sikh civilian to be "formally initiated". The degradation of the Sikh Faith had multiple causes but one of the primary reasons, the British themselves. Instead, the common myth being propagated by various western scholars has always been that the British were pro-Sikh in reference to their Faith and it is they who saved the Sikhs and their Faith. Nothing could be further from the truth!

The book has some patently inaccurate information on the Sikh Faith and History, but is a historical record of a real life event of a determined group of Sikhs challenging the flagrant racism by the government of Canada and that record, has been summarized in a pretty cogent manner for posterity.