



The weekly market on Front Street in New Westminster, circa 1910.

City of Vancouver Archives, AM54-S4-: Out P1067

# The Battle for the South Asian Right to the Vote

By Satwinder Kaur Bains and Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra

**W**hat does it mean to be franchised, to be disenfranchised, and to have the legal right to vote in British Columbia?

For forty years (from 1907–1947), South Asian Canadians were denied the basic right to vote in any political sphere in Canada. They were not alone in this discrimination: They were not alone in this discrimination: Chinese Canadians, Japanese Canadians, Indigenous peoples were also denied the right to federal, provincial, and municipal votes.

The first South Asian men who arrived at the shores of British Columbia in 1903 were an enterprising group of individuals. They had left colonial India in search of greater opportunity and decent wages to support themselves and their families back home. When they first arrived on British Columbia's West Coast, for the most

part they found their new home welcoming and inclusive of the rights afforded to them as British subjects in the Dominion of Canada.

Until 1906, South Asian immigrants received almost no notice by government or the press and there were no immigration laws or regulations that impeded their entry to Canada. However, many of the initial freedoms they enjoyed would be revoked as they came under scrutiny both by European settlers and the government.

It is interesting to note that from 1903 to the 1940s, 95 percent of all South Asian immigrants to Canada were of the Sikh faith, hailing from the Punjab region of India. Sikhs in particular have traditionally been extremely resourceful landowners. Many were independently wealthy and undaunted by the idea of taking risks to better their situations. These character traits, along



with a long history of British Raj army experience, made international migration to British Canada a natural choice. Most of the men were from an agrarian background. A long tradition of farming in the Punjab lent itself to adaptation to the Pacific Northwest's industry and working environment.

Almost all the men who arrived in British Columbia in the early 1900s worked as labourers in industries including forestry, fisheries, and the railway. Since the Canadian government was officially preoccupied with restricting Chinese and Japanese immigration at the time, South Asians were quite easily able to find employment. On average, these men earned a \$1 to \$1.25 a day, but discrimination was rife and they were paid less than workers of European descent.

Over the years as Indian migration into British Columbia increased, so did overt racial tensions. In 1906 when some 700 South Asians arrived, the Canadian government started to take notice of these men they erroneously referred to as Hindoos. Furthermore, because some employers preferred to hire Punjabis due to their work ethic even at lower pay, many European settlers resented their presence in Canada. A great deal of racial tension and strife ensued from 1906 onwards as South Asians were laid off from work,

barred from entering public facilities, evicted from their homes, physically abused by the police and individuals, and vilified in the press. The formation of racist and exclusionary groups such as the Asiatic Exclusion League resulted in discrimination towards, and mistreatment of, the South Asian, Chinese and Japanese communities. The 1907 race riots initiated by members of The League are demonstrative of the challenges these immigrant communities faced as their homes, businesses, and livelihoods were destroyed.

To hinder South Asian migration to Canada, the federal government implemented the infamous "continuous journey" regulation on January 8, 1908. This statute decreed that migrants had to arrive in a continuous journey at a Canadian port from their country of origin. Without naming a race, the government succeeded in creating a law that was racist in nature. At the same time, a significant regulation was adopted that demanded all immigrants from Asia have in their possession a sum of \$200—an inconceivably large amount of money at the time. In comparison, European migrants were required to carry only \$20.

While up to this time, South Asians could take part in civic elections, in March 1907 British Columbia



**Unloading fish at the Imperial Cannery, 1913.** Vancouver Public Library, image 2052, photographer F. Dundas Todd

Premier William Bowser introduced a bill to disenfranchise all natives of India who were not of Anglo-Saxon descent. In April 1907 South Asians were denied the vote in Vancouver by changes to the *Municipality Incorporation Act*. The federal vote was denied by default as one had to be on the provincial voter's list to vote federally.

And yet they persevered. By 1923 over a hundred South Asians owned logging camps, lumber companies, shake and shingle factories, grocery stores, wood



fuel dealerships, and farms. These business-owning South Asians as well as the many successful South Asian people who were labourers and workers of all kinds, considered themselves British Columbians in all aspects of citizenship, especially in terms of their contribution to building the nation. However, without the right to vote, they were seen as—and saw themselves as—second class citizens, even though they were British subjects and held British passports.

The *Canadian Dominion Franchise Bill* of 1920 denied the federal vote to anyone barred from the provincial vote on account of race. This bill was especially shocking to some in attendance at the 1921 Imperial Conference in England. During this Conference, a resolution was passed that specifically granted South Asians in the Dominions the right to vote. That Canada did not comply clearly indicated that Imperial directives did not transfer to its Dominions.

At the federal level, some politicians such as Ontario Liberal party Member of Parliament (MP) Samuel William Jacobs supported the right for South Asians to vote. Jacobs, who was for many years the only Jewish MP in Canada, fought against discrimination. Others such as Cariboo MP Thomas George McBride countered with aggressive Anti-Asian sentiment, declaring:

we in British Columbia want no more Hindus...



**School children in Paldi, BC, undated.**

Courtesy Mayo Family

We have on the coast of British Columbia Chinamen and Japs running our stores. They are running white people out. We have the Greeks running our hotels and we have the Jews running our second-hand stores, and now some people want to bring in the Hindus to run our mills.... If this country wants to cast British Columbia adrift let her cast it adrift before any Orientals come in. If they do, we white people out on the Pacific will prevent any more Orientals coming to British Columbia.<sup>1</sup>

In response, the British Columbia government re-affirmed its stand by maintaining racial restrictions in the *Provincial Elections Act* of 1924, which disenfranchised all Asians except Japanese persons who had fought in the First World War.

In 1933, it is noted that Sir Atul Chatterjee, Indian High Commissioner to England, began agitating and petitioning for positive change in discriminatory legislation at the federal level in Canada. Prime Minister R.B. Bennett responded that he had no basic objections to South Asians having the right to vote, but the attitude in British Columbia was the major obstacle.

In BC, the Liberals and the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) began to debate the issue of the franchise when a non-partisan provincial Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), Clive Planta from the Peace River area, attempted to put forward a motion in the BC legislature in 1935 reaffirming the disenfranchisement of all Asians in the province. This motion was attacked by British Columbia



**Five hundred South Asians met at the Orange Hall in Vancouver and passed resolutions of protest to be taken to the Imperial Conference.**

*Vancouver Daily Province*, April 17, 1911, 3



CCF leader Harold Winch and the motion was ruled out of order, but the Liberal party issued a revision of its *Election Act* that contained all the discriminatory clauses of the previous Act. Additionally, the outbreak of war in 1939 did not moderate government position on the vote. William Lyon Mackenzie King, long-serving Prime Minister of Canada, was yet unwilling to take the issue under consideration.

Starting in 1939, South Asian British Columbians enlisted the services of Dr. D.P. Pandia, an Indian lawyer and former secretary to Gandhi, by asking him to travel to Ottawa to petition for the plight of "illegal" South Asian immigrants living in British Columbia.

The federal government agreed not to deport any illegal South Asian immigrants who were willing to come forward and register. Through the efforts of Kapoor Singh Siddoo, Mayo Singh, and Kartar Singh Hundal, a long-time associate of Gandhi, Mr. H.S.L. Polak, was brought to Canada to continue to petition politicians at both the federal and provincial levels. Polak corresponded with Prime Minister Mackenzie King who agreed to an eventual change in federal legislation. However, in January 1942, Polak met with BC Premier John Hart who remained unwilling to consider the question of provincial franchise. In late 1942, Polak received word from Mackenzie King that he would not consider the vote in light

**WILL ARREST HINDU  
WHO IS ALLEGED  
TO HAVE VOTED**

Warrant Issued This Afternoon  
for Apprehension of Hous-  
sein Rahim.

Charge Is Perjury in Applica-  
tion to Be Placed on the  
Voters' List.

Man Is Alleged to Have Cast  
Ballot in Ward Four  
Yesterday.

Alleged to Have Taken Oath  
Before Commissioner Flum-  
erfelt, Prominent Liberal.

Because he is alleged to have cast a vote in Ward Four polling station yesterday, Houssein Rahim, a Hindu, is slated for arrest on a charge of perjury. A warrant for his apprehension was issued early this afternoon and will be executed, it is declared, just as soon as the police can lay their hands on the man.

Rahim is well known to the immigration authorities of Vancouver because of his successful resistance of efforts of the Dominion Government to deport him. Rahim landed in Vancouver about two years ago, and on several occasions has defended in the courts attempts on the part of the immigration officials to ship him out of the country on the ground that he was not legally entitled to admission.

**Pending arrest of Houssein Rahim for voting in direct violation of the Provincial Elections Act was front page news in 1912.**

*Vancouver Daily Province, March 29, 1912, 1*



**Dr. D.P. Pandia, undated.**

Courtesy Pandia Estate

of the imminent removal of Japanese Canadians from coastal BC.

In March 1943, a twelve-man delegation including Naginder Singh Gill of the Khalsa Diwan Society; Sir Robert Holland of Victoria; Harold Winch of the CCF; and Harold Pritchett, District President of the International Woodworkers of America, met with Premier John Hart to argue for the vote. This delegation also brought representation from First World War South Asian Canadian Army veterans Baboo Singh, Phagan Singh, and G.S. Badall. This delegation made a further point of demonstrating the commitments of South Asians to Canada in the form of several hundred thousand dollars in war bonds purchased by members of the South Asian Canadian community. Nonetheless, Premier Hart refused to act until the war was over.

Despite the lack of commitment by Premier Hart to take action, the community continued its fight by applying pressure at various levels of government and through its business networks. One particular means of bringing attention to the plight of the community was through its opposition to military conscription on the grounds that a country that did not allow its citizens to





**Naginder S. Gill speaking at the Sikh Temple on 2nd Avenue in Vancouver, circa 1946. Sitting, left to right: Gurdit Singh, Narnjan Singh and Mehan Singh. Standing: Jagit Singh, Sadhu Singh, and Arjan Singh.**

City of Vancouver Archives, AM54-54-1: Ch P87

vote, could not ask them to fight in the war: “No Vote—No War,” the community said.

In BC, the South Asian community found support for the “No vote—No War” policy through Elmore Philpott—a Canadian war veteran, politician, journalist and managing editor of the *Vancouver News-Herald*. However, rather than take action on the legislation restricting South Asians from voting, the federal government instead simply declared that South Asian Canadians were exempt from military service. The South Asian community began to work with the Chinese community to create a unified front in the struggle to gain the vote. During the war years, the Chinese community also adopted a “No vote—No war” stance.

Further contention arose in March 1944 at the provincial level when Labour Minister George Sharratt

Pearson proclaimed in a racist rant in the provincial legislature that

*The Hindu is not helping us to maintain the standard of living we have set up in the province. There is nobody in the province as unreliable, dishonest and deceitful as the Hindus. They break every regulation we have...we are justified in excluding them from the full rights of citizenship.<sup>2</sup>*

CCF MLA Grant MacNeil said that Pearson’s views were unverifiable and that Asian people were fellow British subjects. Pearson’s remarks sparked the Vancouver community to send a delegation from the Khalsa Diwan Society to demand an apology from him and from the provincial Attorney General. None was given.

By March 1945 a change in attitudes at the parlia-



mentary level was evident. Pearson introduced an amendment that extended the right to vote to all who had served in the First or Second World Wars including Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, and Indigenous people.<sup>3</sup> However, there was still resistance. A few days later, the CCF presented a resolution in support of provincial franchise that came within only two votes of passing in the legislature.<sup>4</sup> The Minister of Education, Harry Perry, in his bid to change the government's thinking, pointed out that other minorities, such as people of Syrian, Armenian, Turkish, and African origin, were not denied the vote.

At the same time, Mulk Raj Ahuja, India's trade commissioner to Canada protested the treatment of South Asians in Canada. Ahuja received support in his protest with P. Kodanda Rao, of the influential Servants of India Society, who travelled across Canada and spoke in direct opposition to the racial restrictions imposed on South Asians in British Columbia and across Canada. In the next year, Konanda Rao and Dr. D.P. Pandia visited the Director of Immigration while Kapoor Singh, Kartar Singh, Ishar Singh, Naginder Singh and Gurdit Singh met with the British Columbia Elections Act Committee in their continuous efforts to apply pressure towards granting the right to vote.

In February 1947, India's new Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru applied pressure in Ottawa and his work bolstered a positive vote towards reinstatement of the federal franchise. Provincially, the Elections Act Committee in BC had drafted recommendations that were embodied in Bill 85 which amended the *Elections Act* by deleting Chinese and South Asian people from the list of disqualified persons.

On April 2, 1947 the amended bill was passed unanimously and the provincial vote in British Columbia was won for people of South Asian descent. With the provincial vote automatically came the federal vote and the end of the accompanying legal restrictions on the political process of South Asians in Canada.

However, the municipal vote and the immigration ban remained outstanding issues for the community. In

In 2017, the Sikh Heritage Museum, at the National Historic Site and Gur Sikh Temple "commemorated" 150 years of Canadian confederation by curating an exhibit that shed light on a very important part of Canada's legal history. At the turn of the last century, many persons were denied the right to the vote and citizenship based on discriminatory opinions and the incorporation of racist and prejudicial laws. The focus of our work was to research the history of South Asians' disenfranchisement in British Columbia, with a keen awareness that communities like the Chinese and Japanese in BC also had shared similar experiences of racism and legal restrictions were also placed on them.

the fall of 1947, at the behest and lobbying of the South Asian community to several mayors, Mayor Percival Edward George of Victoria put forth a resolution to ask the legislature to change the *Municipal Elections Act* to allow South Asians the right to vote. The resolution was moved by Mayor Jack Loutet of North Vancouver and passed with only one dissenting vote (cast because the resolution was not extended to Indigenous people). Vancouver City Council was subject to the same lobby efforts and resulted in the *Vancouver Incorporation Act* being amended.

South Asian Canadians have been part of British Columbia for over a century; yet the legal right to the vote—nationally, provincially, and municipally—was a privilege not granted to them for a very long time. And yet South Asian communities persevered. They fought for this basic legal right, and today the community has created a strong presence on all fronts of the political arena. ■

## Endnotes

1. House of Commons Debates, 1923, 4648. [http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates\\_HOC1402\\_05/642?r=0&s=1](http://parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC1402_05/642?r=0&s=1)
2. "B.C. Hindus Flayed by Pearson as Unworthy of Receiving Vote", *Vancouver Sun*, March 9, 1944, 9.
3. "Vote for All Who Serve", *Vancouver Sun*, March 27, 1945, 2.
4. "Hindus Miss Vote on 20-18 Division", *Vancouver Sun*, March 28, 1945, 2.



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