

EXODUS FROM INDIA: IMMIGRATION

By Del McKay

Immigration from India to Canada has been one of the most controversial aspects of Indo-Canadian bilateral relations over the first century.

After the first wave of 4000-5000 Indians, largely Sikhs, entered British Columbia between 1904-1907, the government of the day responded with restrictive laws that virtually made it impossible for Asians to migrate legally to Canada. In 1914, a shipload of mainly Indians challenged the law by arriving in Vancouver and seeking admission. The ship, the Komagata Maru, was cordoned off and eventually forced to leave with virtually its entire passenger load still intact. From then until the post World War II period there was only a trickle of Indian migrants to Canada.

India's Independence in 1947 changed the relationship substantially and Canada agreed to an annual quota of first 100 and then 150 migrants. What had been a virtually all male Indian community through the 20's, 30's and 40's, was allowed for the first time to reunite with wives and children.

The major breakthrough in Indian immigration came in the mid-sixties when the government adopted a universal, non-discriminatory policy based in large part on technical and educational qualifications. Throughout the late sixties and early seventies Indian immigration grew almost exponentially. Many of those given visas were highly skilled professionals who laid a strong community base for those to come later.

The passage of the 1976 Immigration Act and the recession of the early 80's swung the immigration policy's emphasis strongly towards family reunification.

Today, India is Canada's second largest source of immigrants after Hong Kong. In 1988, close to 10,000 immigrant visas were issued, a 100 per cent jump on 1985. Approximately 90% of these immigrants are in the Family Class (ie. close relatives) with a further 5% being Afghan and Iranian refugees. 70% of the migrants come from one state in India, the Punjab. Another 15% are from the Bombay-Gujerate area.

Processing of immigrant applications is lengthy due to the sheer volume, and is further complicated by the lack of a comprehensive and compulsory vital statistics system in India. Often, births, marriages and deaths have never been registered, and proof of relationship must be determined through secondary documents and long interviews. These gaps in the official records provide ideal conditions for unscrupulous persons to claim to be someone they are not, and, combined with petty corruption among low-level bureaucrats, they create an environment where it is difficult to accept documents at face value.

The attraction of Canada, and the continuing strife in Punjab, along with high youth unemployment, drive many people, unfortunately, to seek visas even if it requires fraudulent means. There is, therefore, a plethora of immigration scams going on, involving false documents, marriages and adoptions of convenience, and the claiming of nieces or nephews as one's natural children. The influx of approximately 125,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees into Tamil Nadu province of India, coinciding with the breakdown in Canada's refugee determination system, has given rise to a flourishing racket in counterfeit travel documents in the Madras area. Canadian passports and refugee travel documents are particular favorites of these racketeers.

As well as immigrants, Delhi in 1988 was Canada's third largest visitor visa port, issuing close to 30,000 visitor visas. To handle this workload, the Delhi visa section, which also issues visas on area trips to Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, has 16 Canada-based officers, three local program officers and 44 local staff, making it larger than most of our smaller and medium sized missions.