

‘Ache Din’ in Canada?

Anuradha Kumar

The victory of the Liberal Party on the crest of a wave for ‘real change’ has undoubtedly been helped by its growing support among the Indo-Canadian community. Will it be able to fulfill the aspirations of the New Canadians?

In a surprise result, the Liberal Party won Canada’s recent Parliament elections on October 19. No one had really expected the result to be this decisive. Opinion polls had been hesitant but at 184 seats (called ridings), representing 39.5 per cent of the popular vote, the party has a government of its own, led by Justin Trudeau.

In 2011 elections, Stephen Harper’s Conservative Party had 159 seats, the New Democratic Party (NDP) 95, and the Liberal Party, only 36: the party was then at its lowest ebb. Today despite a complete reversal of electoral fortunes, the Conservatives still remain the second largest party (99 seats, 31.9 per cent). Among the other important markers of this election is the presence of 19 MPs of Indian (Indo-Canadian) origin – its largest presence yet and significantly more than the eight seats won in 2011.

Campaigning on the platform of ‘real change’, the Liberal Party held out a promise of hope to a changing Canada, where there was widespread dismay over certain policy measures introduced by the Conservative Party. A changing Canada, the party spoke for, epitomised partly by the figure of the ‘New Canadian’, a term much in use in these elections. The ‘New Canadians’ represented those more aspirational and modern, and included the educated young, the hopeful immigrant, and even those who believed in the Canada of old, that was a haven for emigrants and promised, even more than its southern neighbour, the hope of equality and fairness.

Among these New Canadians, the category that makes up Indo-Canadians is a varied and also growing one – younger, with a higher average income and educational level than other groups, and then, numbering also among the many immigrants to Canada in the last two decades. Justin Trudeau reached out to this community in large measure, and the party’s candidates reflected the ethos of the New Indo-Canadians as well.

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Who are the 'Indo-Canadians'?

Some of them have descended from immigrant tradition-bound families like Bardish Chagger, a third generation Punjabi Sikh Canadian who won from Waterloo, a riding (constituency) in Ontario. Then there are those like Chandra Arya, the Liberal legislator from Nepean, Ontario, who immigrated to Canada 12 years ago. A business executive and community activist, Arya's campaign highlighted the need for better, well-paying jobs for the aspiring younger Canadians.

In Canada's census, Indo-Canadians include immigrants and their descendants from the subcontinent, but also those who originated from this region (South Asia) and came to Canada from East Africa and the West Indies. Most Indo-Canadians, numbering around 1.3 million in all, (3.6 per cent of the country's population) are mainly concentrated in Ontario and British Columbia.

There were 37 Indo-Canadians who contested this time, across parties. This also followed a federal redistribution exercise in 2012, when the number of ridings was raised to 338, from the earlier 308. The exercise reflected population shifts, from growth and immigration in the last two decades, mainly in Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario. These are again provinces that traditionally have had more Indo-Canadians (and South Asians) and seen more immigration.

Most of the nominated Indo-Canadians were from the Liberal Party - 22; almost all contesting for the first time and 15 of them won. In the last elections of 2011, all five sitting Liberal Party MPs had lost. For their part, the Conservative Party fielded 11 Indo-Canadian candidates (six incumbent) of whom only three won, and the NDP, the largest opposition party, had four, with two MPs seeking re-election (one won). The NDP secured only 44 ridings, and became once again the third party in Canada's elections.

Indo-Canadians were nominated from most of these 30 new ridings created, and mainly from Ontario. Poll experts had surmised that votes in Ontario, a province with a diverse population that sends the most delegates to Parliament, and especially its Greater Toronto Area (GTA), would make a difference this election. South Asians/Indo-Canadians make up the largest 'visible minority' in the GTA and Indians in turn make up a large number of recent immigrants here. Though the Liberal Party lost its federal seats in elections between the years 2000-11, it won provincial elections in a big way in 2011 and 2014; and the party capitalised on this to win power at the federal level this time. Most of its 15 MPs in this present Parliament are now from Ontario. Indeed, most Indo-Canadian MPs across parties are from Ontario.

Three Conservative MPs won, with two incumbent MPs regaining their ridings. Deepak Obhrai from Calgary Forest Lawn, Alberta who claims to be the longest serving Asian legislator in the Canadian parliament and Tim Uppal, who was a minister in the last government.

Initially, at least seven Indo-Canadians were expected to be elected, as they were pitted against each other in seven ridings. The contest in Mississauga-Malton – a new riding created in Ontario – became piquantly one-sided (and the Liberals won) as the Conservative nominee Jagdish Grewal, also the editor of a prominent Punjabi daily, recently lost his party's support after writing a controversial editorial in early October that advocated therapy for gays. It was an obvious sign that his thinking was out of line and even out of touch with reality that most accepted, even those in his party. As this happened late in campaign stage, his name continued to be on the ballot.

Bardish Chagger won for the Liberal Party, Waterloo in Ontario. Awarded for her community leadership, and also active earlier in several volunteer associations, Chagger was among the younger candidates in the electoral fray this time. Chandra Arya, another first time Liberal Candidate and Chagger reflect a generation that believes in a different, fairer Canada; one that wants change, but also a country long seen as tolerant and fair. It's a generation vocal in its criticism of the present Conservative government's amended citizenship laws and its new terror bill – legislation that belies the traditional image of Canada as a nation, welcoming for immigrants and refugees alike.

Among the other Liberal winners were Yasmin Rattansi (Tanzanian born), who in 2004 became the first Muslim woman to be elected to Canada's House of Commons. In 2004, she had campaigned against immigrant unemployment and for better health care. Anju Dhaliwal a lawyer, and longtime Liberal Party volunteer, was the only Indo-Canadian winning from Quebec, and Arif Virani (from a riding in Ontario), who is of South Asian-Ugandan origin, and who has worked in the area of human rights;

The Conservative Party has had traditional Indo-Canadian support. For long-time Indo-Canadians, memories of the Kanishka Air India tragedy in 1985 remain particularly strong. Most of the dead were Indo-Canadians, but the trial only commenced after several years, securing in the end only one conviction. It took 25 years for the Canadian government to apologise – as Stephen Harper did in 2010 - and pay compensation to its own citizens.

The party had been voted to power in 2011 promising a strong economy (in the wake of the fiscal crisis). But Canada has, in recent years, seen 'weak growth'. Moreover, while the government's healthcare cuts and plans to raise retirement age and pension cuts were unpopular, it was more direct and divisive issues such as the 'niqab' or the veil issue that proved contentious during election run-up. The then PM and Conservative Party leader's Stephen Harper's statement in the run-up to elections that his government would appeal to the Supreme Court against a lower court's ruling that unveiling (as required in public ceremonies such as citizenship formalities) infringed on freedom of religion –played out in divisive ways in some ridings, such as those in South Ontario which has traditionally had a large conservative Canadian Muslim population.

The issue came in conjunction with Conservative-enacted legislation such as the terror bill (C51) and the new citizenship law, the C-24. The latter raised citizenship application fees but also gave increased power to the immigration minister to rescind citizenship in certain cases: a real possibility, as some pointed out, if those with dual citizenship and/or those not born in Canada but have secured citizenship later – like immigrants, had their cases reviewed. The Terrorism Legislation gave more powers to the Canadian intelligence forces (CSIS) and was criticised on the count that it would clearly target vulnerable groups such as genuine refugees and asylum seekers.

More than the Conservative or the NDP parties, the Liberal Party in nominating a new generation of Indo-Canadian candidates was aware of this resentment against the present government as well as the need for change. Besides its opposition to the new citizenship rules, the Liberals promised a massive infrastructure investment especially in public transit systems and a scheme to create more jobs for over 120,000 young Canadians. It did appear that its electoral message of ‘real change’ proved an effective contrast to the Conservative one that promised a ‘safe Canada’ and ‘a strong economy’. The party now has the next four years to work on delivering its promises, admittedly a much tougher task than winning elections.