



## Canadians of Indian Origin and Elections in Canada

*Dr Stuti Banerjee\**

### Abstract

*Canada is scheduled to hold its federal elections in October 2019. Canada's three major political parties are all on the record as being in favour of economic immigration. The Indian diaspora in Canada is much sought after as a support base as they tend to be high income professionals and educated. As a group, the people of Indian origin, especially the Sikh diaspora in Canada have become a powerful group and a prominent voice in domestic political space. In the 2015 elections in Canada, Indian Canadians won a record nineteen seats in the Parliament.*

### Introduction

Canada is scheduled to hold its federal elections in October 2019. The major political parties in these elections are: the Liberal party, led by Prime Minister Justine Trudeau, which hopes to retain power. The two main opposition parties are the Conservative party under the leadership of Mr. Andrew Scheer and New Democratic Party (NDP) under Mr. Jagmeet Singh. A third political party, the Green Party is predicted to increase its presence in the Parliament under the leadership of Ms. Elizabeth May. Political opinion in Canada predicts a competitive election, as Prime Minister Trudeau faces charges of applying undue pressure on his cabinet members investigating a private entity and the Liberal government faces criticism over its deficit budget along with slow progress of social reforms.

Some of the key issues that are being discussed in these elections are the state of the Canadian economy. There are concerns about the impact of the economy on social welfare schemes announced by the government. The 'new NAFTA' or the United States-Canada-Mexico trade deal (USCAM) has not yet been ratified by the three countries. Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland has stated that government would be placing the agreement before the Canadian

parliament soon. This step has been taken after the United States removed tariffs on aluminium and steel, a precondition demanded by Prime Minister Trudeau for ratification. However, it is not clear when the government would table the bill as parliament will close in June ahead of the October elections.

The other issue that has become part of the campaign trail is climate change. The new national carbon pricing plan is being opposed by some states and they have taken the federal government to court. The common man is concerned that it would increase the price of petroleum and heating bills. A third major issue for the people of Canada is immigration. Unlike the United States, Canadians are not opposed to immigrants but the huge number of asylum seekers has strained the resources of the government and local bodies. There is a growing feeling that Prime Minister Trudeau has been unable to handle the border crossings crisis.

Canada's three major political parties are all on the record as being in favour of economic immigration. The government under the Liberal party has adopted policies of increased immigration targets that would see Canada welcome more than one million new permanent residents by the end of 2021 and push the country's immigration rate to nearly one per cent of its population. The Conservatives have called for a system that would emphasise both an immigrant's ability to become self-sufficient and Canada's labour market needs. The NDP has yet to detail its approach to immigration policy, but the party's views on immigration typically emphasize compassion for immigrants and favourable positions on issues like family reunification. The Green party's 16 policy priorities on immigration are predicated on the idea that Canada is "a just, fair, and open country" and the belief that new Canadians "are a source of incredible skills and potential for our country."<sup>1</sup>

### **Visible Minorities in Canada**

Increased political representation of visible minorities in Canada makes it virtually impossible for any major political party to take explicit anti-immigration positions. The federal election of October 19, 2015 established a high water mark in the representation of racial diversity in Parliament with the election of 45 MPs of visible minority origins. Their relative presence jumped over four percentage points compared to the 2011 general election. Together and individually, the three main national parties nominated a record number of visible minority candidates and as well the largest percentage ever of visible minorities among their new contestants.<sup>2</sup> This trend is likely to continue for the 2019 elections as well.

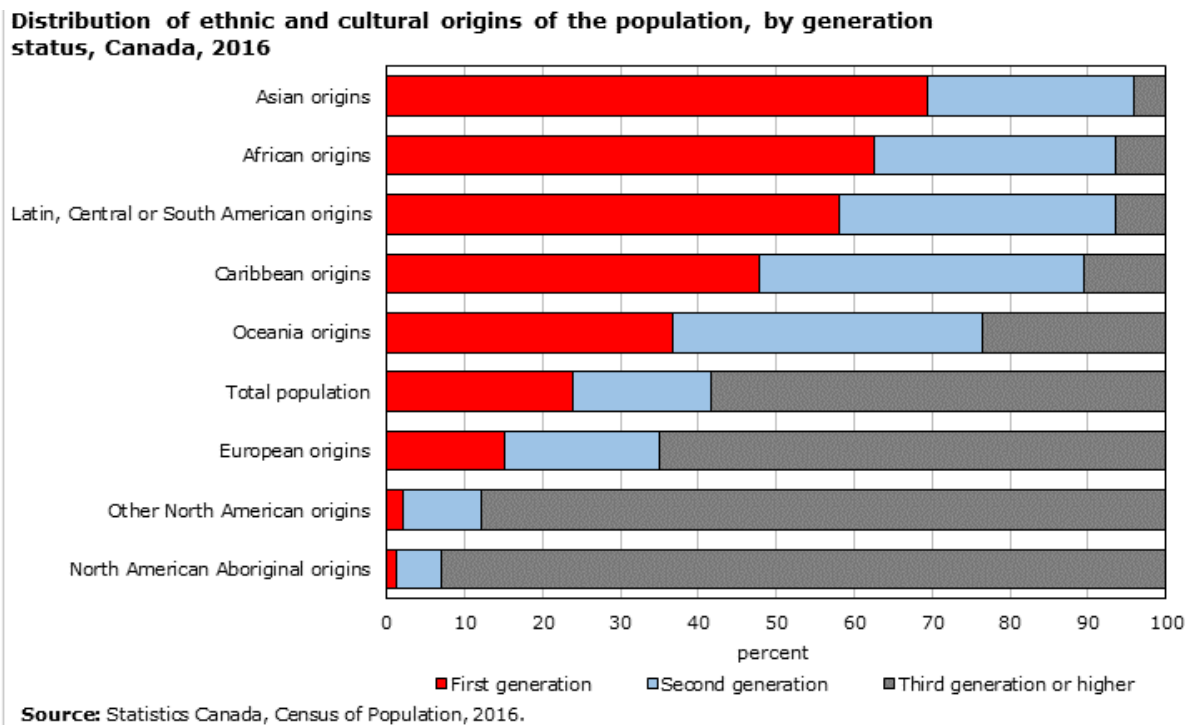
The three largest visible minority groups in Canada according to the 2011 census are South Asians, Chinese and people of African origin. They account for 61.3% of the visible minority population. A total of 1,567,400 individuals identified themselves as South Asian, the largest group. They accounted for one-quarter (25.0%) of the total visible minority population and 4.8%

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Smith And Noah Turner, "Canada's 2019 federal election: How could it affect immigration and Express Entry?," <https://www.cicnews.com/2019/05/canadas-2019-federal-election-how-could-it-affect-immigration-and-express-entry-0512307.html#gs.dqx564>, Accessed on 23 May 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome H. Black, "The 2015 Federal Election: More Visible Minority Candidates and MPs," [http://www.revparl.ca/40/1/40n1e\\_17\\_Black.pdf](http://www.revparl.ca/40/1/40n1e_17_Black.pdf), Accessed on 23 May 2019, pp 21

of Canada's total population. South Asians were also the largest visible minority group recorded in the 2006 Census. Two-thirds of South Asians reported East Indian ethnic ancestry, 9.3% reported Pakistani, 8.5% reported Sri Lankan and 4.7% reported Punjabi origins. These origins were reported by South Asians either alone or with other origins.<sup>3</sup>

According to areas of residency in 2011, majority (94.8%) of Canada's foreign-born population lived in four provinces: Ontario, British Columbia, Quebec and Alberta. The two provinces with the largest shares of people born outside the country were Ontario, where around 3,611,400 immigrants or 53.3% lived, and British Columbia, where about 1,191,900 immigrants or 17.6% lived. Overall, their share of immigrant population was higher than their share of Canadian population. In comparison, these provinces accounted for 83.7% of individuals who were born in Canada. Immigrants have also been found to be more likely to be living in urban centres than people born in Canada. Overall, Canada's three largest Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs)<sup>4</sup> – Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal – accounted for 63.4% of the country's immigrant population and 62.5% of recent arrivals (under the 2011 Census).<sup>5</sup>



Source: Statistics Canada

<sup>3</sup>Statistic Canada, Census Programme, “Ethnic and cultural origins of Canadians: Portrait of a rich heritage,” <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016016/98-200-x2016016-eng.cfm> Accessed on 08 March 2019.

<sup>4</sup>Area consisting of one or more neighbouring municipalities situated around a core. A census metropolitan area must have a total population of at least 100,000 of which 50,000 or more live in the core. A census agglomeration must have a core population of at least 10,000.

<sup>5</sup>Statistic Canada, Census Programme, “Ethnic and cultural origins of Canadians: Portrait of a rich heritage,” <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016016/98-200-x2016016-eng.cfm> Accessed on 08 March 2019.

## Canadians of Indian Origin and Elections in Canada

The Indian diaspora in Canada is much sought after as a support base as they tend to be high income professionals and educated. As a group, the people of Indian origin, especially the Sikh diaspora in Canada have become a powerful group and prominent voice in domestic political space. The first documented immigrants from the Indian subcontinent were of the Sikh denomination. They arrived in Vancouver in 1904. Today, approximately 30,000 Indian citizens become new permanent residents of Canada each year. Tens of thousands come to the country to visit, work, or study.<sup>6</sup> Ontario and British Colombia, followed by Alberta have a higher percentage of people of Indian origin with Toronto and Vancouver being the two most preferred cities for them to live in. They are also equally represented in the current Parliament. Though Canadians of Indian origin are a large minority group in Canada, Indo-Canadians of Sikh heritage have been able to gain considerable representation in Canadian government and public life. For example, Alberta has three Indian origin members of Parliament out of thirty four for the province, British Colombia has five out of forty one with prominent Sikh leaders such as Jagmeet Singh and Harjit Sajjan. Apart from this there are a number of political leaders of Indian origin who are currently not members of Parliament.

In the 2015 elections in Canada, Indian Canadians won a record nineteen seats in the Parliament. This was double the number of seats that they had held in the previous government. Of the nineteen members of parliament, eighteen members trace their origins to the state of Punjab in India. Most of these members belong to the province of Ontario, which as stated above has a high concentration of foreign born population.

Some of the prominent Indian origin members of parliament as well as the cabinet are MP Harjit Sajjan, the Minister of National Defence and MP Amarjeet Sohi Minister of Infrastructure and Communities, MP Navdeep Bains, Minister for Innovation, Science and Economic Development and MP Bardish Chagger, was sworn in as minister of Small Business and Tourism.



MP Harjit Sajjan,

MP Amarjeet Sohi

<sup>6</sup> Canada Immigration Newsletter, "The Story of Indian Immigration to Canada," <https://www.cicnews.com/2014/04/story-indian-immigration-canada-043365.html#gs.7mku6j>, Accessed on 24 August 2019.



MP Bardish Chagger



MP Navdeep Bains

MP Anju Dhillon (Liberal Party) is also not only the first Sikh but South Asian to ever be elected to any of the three levels of government in the province of Québec. She defeated the incumbent Ms. Isabelle Morin of New Democratic Party (NDP), which is led by a Sikh Canadian.



MP Anju Dhillon

In 2018, Mr. Jagmeet Singh became the first Sikh leader to lead the New Democratic Party (NDP), one of the three prominent parties of Canada. He is the son of Indian immigrants and a practicing Sikh and if his party wins the federal elections in October 2019, he would be the first Sikh Prime Minister of Canada. The NDP has not won enough seats to form the federal government, nonetheless, they play a prominent role in the provinces. It is currently in power in British Columbia and Alberta.



Mr. Jagmeet Singh, Leader of the New Democratic Party

There is a feeling that the NDP leader could provide a challenge to Prime Minister Trudeau, especially for votes from the Indian diaspora. As a young charismatic politician who wants to bring change while working with all communities and genders in Canada, Mr. Singh has the same advantages that Prime Minister Trudeau had in 2015. Mr. Singh's political platform is focused on social democratic policies, aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. His campaign for the 2019 elections is on the theme of 'Build a Canada with Love and Courage, Together.' He is taking forward his campaign agenda of addressing issues such as climate change, reconciliation and electoral reform, and working to ensure that no one in Canada is stopped by police because of the colour of their skin.<sup>7</sup> These are issues that have been part of the liberal party's agenda but are now facing questions. As part of the opposition he has been critical of the government's track record on economic issues. In his most recent debates, he has called for an inquiry and resignation of Prime Minister Trudeau, over allegations that the latter put improper pressure on his Minister of Justice and Attorney General to decide against prosecuting SNC-Lavalin, a Quebec-based construction firm, on charges of bribing officials in Libya. Instead, the government asked that the firm be given an agreement whereby it would pay a fine for its wrongdoing. With respect to India, Mr. Singh has also voiced his concerns about the rise of violence against minorities in India. As a lawyer, he has worked to defend pro-Khalistan supporters and stated he supported the right to 'self-determination'.

To continue to enjoy his support among the India and especially Sikh diaspora, Prime Minister Trudeau formally apologised in the House of Commons in 2016 for the Komagata Maru incident, when a ship carrying Indian immigrants was turned back from Vancouver in 1914. His visit to India in February 2018 has been criticised in Canada as pre-poll effort to influence Sikh votes in Canada. His government faces the same charge when they changed the language of the Public Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada. The report first released in December 2018 made mention of Khalistan/Sikh terrorism threats to Canada. The report goes on to name and list Sikh groups Babbar Khalsa International and the International Sikh Youth Federation as associated with terrorism. The report explicitly refers to Canadian-based "financing" for such

---

<sup>7</sup>Peter Zimonjic, "Jagmeet Singh wins leadership of federal NDP on first ballot," Accessed on 01 November 2017.

organizations.<sup>8</sup> They are also listed as terrorist entities under Canada's Criminal Code. However, facing opposition from Sikh groups, in April 2019, the language was altered. In its review, the government clarified, "The Government will carefully select terminology that focuses on the intent or ideology. For example, as a first step, the Government will use the term: Extremists who support violent means to establish an independent state within India; rather than terminology that unintentionally impugns an entire religion."<sup>9</sup> The change in language has been protested by Chief Minister of Punjab, Captain Amarinder Singh as dangerous to Indian and global security. He stated that such an act amounted to an endorsement of the terror activities and de facto promotion of extremism.<sup>10</sup> The change in the language of the report was reminiscent of a similar episode last year, in which a proposed parliamentary motion denouncing "Khalistani extremism and the glorification of any individuals who have committed acts of violence to advance the cause of an independent Khalistani state in India" had to be dropped after certain Sikh activists complained.<sup>11</sup> India has been able to contain and marginalise the Khalistan movement in Punjab; nonetheless, remains an issue of concern. The support to the movement by some members of the Canadian Sikh diaspora, abets the radical elements to continue their hostility toward the Indian state.

The Conservative Party of Canada has also been trying to gather support of the Indian diaspora. Mr. Andrew Scheer, the leader of the Conservative Party of Canada visited India in October 2018. The visit included a meeting with Punjab CM Captain Amarinder Singh and a visit to the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple). During his visit he stated that the Conservative party does not support violence and it will not engage with groups or individuals that choose violence to achieve their political goals. He clarified that his party and the people of Canada stand for a united India and he admired the Sikhs in Canada for the valuable contribution they have made to Canadian society. The purpose of his visit was to strengthen ties with India and to expand the strategic relationship, if they came to power in October 2019. The conservatives have criticised the Trudeau government for its inability to stand up to the pressures of the Sikh 'separatist lobby', however, some of its MPs in an effort to ensure support from the community have spoken about the need to peacefully advocate for the cause of Punjab independence.

Though Canadians of Indian heritage are estimated to comprise close to four percent of the Canadian population, Indo-Sikh community, which comprises half of this population plays an important role in Canadian public life. They are by far, the most prominent and politically active

---

<sup>8</sup> J.J. McCullough, "Fringe Sikh interests have outsized influence in Canada. Why is no one pushing back?," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/06/fringe-sikh-interests-have-outsized-influence-canada-why-is-no-one-pushing-back/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.c8524f78ca0b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/06/fringe-sikh-interests-have-outsized-influence-canada-why-is-no-one-pushing-back/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c8524f78ca0b), Accessed on 27 May 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Government of Canada, "2018 Public Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada: April 12 Update," <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/pblc-rprt-trrrsm-thrt-cnd-2018/index-en.aspx>, Accessed on 24 April 2019

<sup>10</sup> Harpreet Bajwa, "Amarinder Singh flays Canada for removing Khalistani references from its threat report," <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2019/apr/14/amarinder-singh-flays-canada-for-removing-khalistani-references-from-its-threat-report-1964247.html>, Accessed on 09 May 2019.

<sup>11</sup> J.J. McCullough, "Fringe Sikh interests have outsized influence in Canada. Why is no one pushing back?," [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/06/fringe-sikh-interests-have-outsized-influence-canada-why-is-no-one-pushing-back/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.c8524f78ca0b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/06/fringe-sikh-interests-have-outsized-influence-canada-why-is-no-one-pushing-back/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c8524f78ca0b), Accessed on 27 May 2019.

community within the Indian origin community in Canada. The main reason for this is financial support they extend to the political parties in Canada. The community leaders are able to provide support to candidates by funds raised through the gurudwaras. They also have considerable influence in swinging the community's vote in favour of a candidate. This is evident from the fact that prominent national leaders including Prime Minister Trudeau have participated in baisakhi celebrations and khalsa day which have glorified terrorists and their actions. These celebrations provide Canadian political leaders with platforms to address an electorally powerful ethnic group. The Sikh vote is often viewed as a deciding factor in ridings (constituency) in which the race is competitive. The Sikh community showed its power and ability to inflict damage when it did not appoint the fathers of two liberal MPs to the board of Ontario Khalsa Darbar, an influential gurudwara in an apparent show of displeasure in the wording of the above mentioned Public Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada.

Another reason for the prominent role of the Sikh community is Canadian political parties, generate funds through a "pay-to-play" basis, in which any voter who wishes to help nominate a politician for office must first sign a form and pay a membership fee. This has allowed large group such as corporations to make sizable public donations with the hope of securing favourable policy outcomes. It also allows religious congregations and immigrant or visible minority groups to also play a prominent role by pledging loyalty and votes. As the Sikh diaspora becomes more prominent and politically active it will continue to be overrepresented in Canadian politics and will continue to have inflated influence.

### **India and Canada**

With increasing interconnectedness through trade and commerce, investment and development projects, growing importance of diaspora, local issues in one country do effect politico-economic decisions in another country.

India's relations with Canada have gone through phases of close cooperation and estrangement. This was particularly true of the Cold War years, especially in the field of nuclear technology. Relationship did not see much growth in the post-Cold War decade. India's nuclear tests (1998) were condemned by Canada and sanctions were applied on India. Nonetheless, in recent years, India's relations with Canada have witnessed growth. Bilateral relations are being strengthened through high-level visits, trade agreements, defence cooperation, clean energy collaborations, nuclear cooperation and growing people-to-people contacts. India and Canada also share a common view on several important international issues such as free trade, climate change, terrorism etc. For India, the relationship has been important for its economic development and to deepen relations with the economically stable and politically active Indian diaspora in Canada. Prime Minister Trudeau and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as heads of government were able to meet four times: during the visit of Prime Minister Trudeau to India (February 2018), the East Asia Summit in Manila, the Philippines (November 2017); the G20 in Hamburg, Germany; (July 2017) and at the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington (in April 2016). Prime Minister Trudeau had also met him in his capacity as Leader of the Liberal Party in Toronto in April 2015 during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Canada.



The main irritant in the relations have been pro-Khalistan activism in Canada and the destabilising effects that it can have in India. The lack of action taken by successive Canadian government against these organisations that openly support the movement and provide finance will continue to slow the progress in the relations. India grants its citizens the right to freedom of speech and expression and appreciates the same as provided by Canada to its citizens, however, it would like Canada's security and political leadership to take steps to ensure that these rights are not misused to incite violence and secessionism in or/and against India and/or provide financial support to organisations and individuals to conducts activities that impinges on India's territorial integrity. It would also like Canada to take steps such that processions to not glorify terrorists and their actions against India. For the relations to strengthen further, Canada needs to understand the depth of India's concerns on these issues and address them. While the economic ties between the two nations continues to progress, the political and security aspects of the relationship need to be deepened to ensure that the two nations can overcome divergences to build strong ties.

\*\*\*

*\*Dr Stuti Banerjee, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi..*

*Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*