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Indians in the Corridors of Canadian Power

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OTTAWA: Deepak Ohbhai is a rarity amongst the Indian diaspora around the world. While it is true that Indians generally comprise a highly successful subsection of the population in their adopted nations, they generally aren't involved in policy making at the highest echelons of power.

Ohbhai however is the exception to that rule. Born in Tanzania to an entrepreneurial family, he immigrated to Canada in 1977 because he didn't "want to live in a socialistic system anymore." A staunch capitalist, Ohbhai worked in the accounting department for the City of Calgary before becoming self-employed. He and his wife Neena became owners of a chain of dry-cleaning stores and also formed a company to explore joint venture opportunities in overseas markets.

In Canada, Deepak became heavily involved in his community, acting as President of the India – Canada Association, Monterey Community Association and the Hindu Society of Calgary. He was also Vice-President of the National Indo-Canadian Council.

"I've always been involved with community activities," said Ohbhai. "Constant interaction at the grassroots level was what built up my support base – which was going to be handy later on."

His instincts proved to be prophetic. In 1997, Deepak was first elected as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Calgary from the Reform Party. Subsequently he played key roles in the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance, the Progressive Conservative Party and in the making of the new Conservative Party of Canada, during which time he was a strong supporter of the present Prime Minister's Stephen Harper's leadership campaign. Harper at that time was not a national figure. Deepak was re-elected to Parliament in 2000, 2004 and 2006; successively receiving a larger percentage of the popular vote. In the most recent election held in October 2008, Deepak was re-elected with 66.5% of the votes.

"Many minority aspiring politicians, whether from they're from India or elsewhere don't know how to deal with the electoral process in India," he stated. "It's not like in India when a person can throw money to obtain a ticket to contest – here in Canada it requires years of developing your constituency and having constant person to person contact."

When the Conservative party took the reins of power in the Canadian government in January 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper appointed Ohbhai as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs - a monumental achievement for any politician.

"My job is to provide a key link between the Foreign Minister and the Parliament. In that sense we are both partners. I also have the job of answering questions during Question Period (A system of feedback originating in the United Kingdom where members of the parliament ask questions of government ministers which they are obliged to answer) when the minister is away," he explained.

He remains a member of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development and a member of the Special Committee on Afghanistan, a highly sensitive post when taking into account Canada's troop and financial contribution in the troubled county. He has in this capacity defended the government against recent allegations by a former Canadian diplomat that Canadian soldiers were complicit in the torture of prisoners by handing them over to Afghani authorities.

It could be argued that many of Ohbhai's activities also were part of a process that has led to a major resurgence in India – Canada relations. It should be remembered that relations between the two countries have been blighted since the 70s, when India used technology obtained from Canada to build and detonate its first atomic bomb. The Pokhran blasts of 1998 did not help matters, leading to a period of extended benign neglect.

However on No. 16 of this year, Prime Minister Harper made a highly publicized three day official visit to India – the longest foreign visit he's made. Political and economic cooperation has now been recharged, which reached a climax when the long awaited civil nuclear deal was signed between Manmohan Singh and Harper last weekend in Trinidad during the Commonwealth leaders' summit. The deal allows Canadian companies to resume sales of uranium and nuclear technology to India.

Obhrai was the founder president of the Canada-India Parliamentary Friendship Group, which today enjoys a large membership of MPs and Senators from across the board - including all political parties. Through this group, Deepak initiated many activities which have notably increased the visibility of the Indian community and culture in Canada. Notable amongst these is his annual Diwali party on Parliament which has become a major media event.

In January of this year, the Government of India recognized Deepak for his contribution in strengthening Canada-India relations by awarding him the prestigious Pravasi Bharatiya Samman award, which is the highest honour given to overseas Indians. In 2008, India Abroad newspaper named Deepak as one of 35 most influential Indo-Canadians in Canada.

When asked about his future prospects in a time in which the minority Conservative government may soon be facing another election next year, he remains supremely confident and upbeat, "I have been gaining more votes with ever subsequent election, and I see no need to worry now."
