

People

THE ECONOMIC TIMES ON SUNDAY
MUMBAI 4 JULY 2010 | 9

The Ruby Way

Indian-Canadian Ruby Dhalla, the youngest woman to be serving Canada's House of Commons, is fighting for the rights of the elderly

Dr Manmohan Singh's ideas made an impact on leaders of the world's top 20 economies at the recently concluded G20 summit in Toronto. It also energised the Indo-Canadian community.

This was a G20 meet that allowed other nations to discover if they are on the radar screen of India and what it will take to attract the attention of a nation no one can afford to ignore—that's how Ruby Dhalla likes to put it. The 35-year-old Canadian Liberal Party MP has represented the riding of Brampton-Springdale, near Toronto, since 2004 and her meeting with the Indian Prime Minister during the G20 summit grabbed a great deal of attention.

"The highlight of the meeting was the sincerity of Dr Singh in trying to understand the challenges and needs of the Indian diaspora in Canada and his desire to support them," she said. For people of Indian origin who play an important role in Canadian public life, the summit was an opportunity to connect with their roots and celebrate the fact that India's time had come.

"With a population of over 1 billion, a middle class that is already larger than the entire US population and 65% of the population less than 35 years old, India is poised to become one of the world's largest economies by 2020. By virtue of statistics combined with progress, innovation, creativity and productivity, India has already become centre stage on the global front. India's arrival at the G20 allowed an opportunity for India to continue as a shining light on the radar of almost every trading nation on the planet especially of the G20 countries which account for almost 80% of the world's economy," Dhalla told SundayET from Toronto.

She's one of the first women of Indian origin elected in Canada to federal parliament and is currently serving as the youngest woman parliamentarian in Canada. She's also one of the first women of Indian origin to hold an important elected government office in the Western world. And for her, each one of the 1.5 million Canadians of Indian origin has an opportunity and responsibility to play a role in championing India.

"I am passionate about highlighting the unlimited potential and opportunities that India has to offer, especially in the areas of education, healthcare, and energy. The Indian diaspora is a natural partner for the Canadian government's quest to forge relationships and partnerships with India. There is an ability to share, to exchange, and to partner with Indians to ensure that roads are built, that sources of energy are developed and that every young girl and boy receives an education. Every person of Indian origin living anywhere in the world is a natural ambassador for the nation. There's an opportunity for India to leverage the networks and knowledge of global Indians," she said.

Dhalla has always been a champion of issues related to the Indian diaspora at various forums such as the annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. And the high-profile discussions with Prime Minister Singh too saw her raising diverse topics such as foreign credential recognition for professionals who were moving back to India, the nuclear partnership agreement, foreign investment protection act and issues impacting the young generation and women.

"I have continuously discussed issues regarding property rights, fraudulent immigration consultants and the issue of fraud marriages in meetings with ministers and officials from India and spoken about them at the annual Pravasi Bhartiya Divas



conference. Another issue I have been championing in Canada's Parliament is a request for India to sign a reciprocal agreement with Canada which would allow immigrant seniors coming from India to Canada to receive their pensions sooner than the current ten-year period," she told SundayET.

She has also requested Dr Singh for his support for her initiative in having a state holiday declared in India for the celebration and recognition of the achievements of women.

Dhalla, a medical professional turned politician, perhaps best represents the highly successful Indian diaspora in Canada, where Punjabi has become the fourth most common spoken language in Parliament. "The Indo-Canadian community has made significant contributions and participated in Canada's social, political, and economic fabric. The Indian diaspora is making a difference," she proudly states.

But it's not just the Indian community—her constituency is equally important for her. On Canada Day on July 1, she joined seniors from the Brampton community at a Seniors Day celebration. It gave her an opportunity to speak about her private member's Bill C-428, that she has introduced in Canada's Parliament, to help ensure all seniors, regardless of country of origin, receive their old age security benefits after three years of residency.

"Seniors form the foundation of our country and deserve to be treated with equality, fairness and respect so that they may age with dignity," she said.

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Ms Dhalla at a graduation in her constituency of Brampton-Springdale