

March 14, 2004

Mona Darling's Dinner Party

Greetings from Tronto, Kanay-da, which is Punglish -- Punjabi English, for the uninitiated -- for Toronto, Canada. When you think of desi enclaves around the world you might recall New York's Jackson Heights (aka Jaikishan Heights), London's Southall, or Los Angeles' Artesia. But there is no place like Tronto, or for that matter Kanay-da, for desi émigrés, with Wankover (Vancouver) being the western flank of Canada's Indian act, and Kaal-gree (Calgary) somewhere in the middle.

Canada has about a million people of Indian origin in a population of 30 million (around 3 per cent), compared to approximately two million of 280 million in the United States (less than one per cent.) That makes them the largest minority in the country after the Chinese, who are only marginally greater in numbers now. Some half a million people of Indian-origin live in the Greater Toronto area, making it arguably the most 'desi' city outside India, with the possible exception of London. Vancouver has about 300,000 and Calgary has 100,000 people of Indian-origin.

The numbers are still growing with around 50,000 – 25 per cent of all immigration into Canada – coming in each year. By 2020, Toronto alone is expected to have a million people of Indian origin. The only direct, non-stop polar flight to India from this part of the world is from Toronto, not any US city.

Just how 'desified' Toronto has become is evident from the South Asian Heritage Festival, the second edition of which kicks off in May. It is a *month*-long festival, something not even London can boast of, let alone New York, which is said to have a quarter million desis. The Festival events are hosted not in some crummy community halls, like it happens in Washington, Chicago, San Francisco and other cities in U.S, but in some of Toronto's top venues such as the Royal Ontario Museum, Metro Hall and Dundas Square. It has a million dollar budget, and is backed by some of Canada's biggest names.

One reason for this is that Canada's Indian community is not 'desi' in the traditional sense. Indians have migrated here from all over the world – from England, Caribbean, East and South Africa, U.S – and not just India. Many Indians came here early in the last century, and the country is now home to second and third gen Indians. "It is a very diverse mix," says Shairal Chandra, who puts together the Heritage Festival. "In a way, that has made it very mainstream, because many of them feel more Canadian than Indian."

Because Canada's immigration policies encourage skilled worker migration, Indo-Canadians also have a good economic profile in the community. According to Chandra, in the Toronto region, 67 per cent of them have college degrees. They have a disposable income of \$ 8.4 billion annually, more than the Chinese, Italians or the Portuguese, the other significant immigrant communities.

The unique mix of Indians of different immigration shades lends a special flavor to the Heritage festival. So the performers include not just maestros invited from India (Zakir Hussain and Shiv Kumar Sharma), but also desi exports from America – Karsh Kale, Midival Punditz, DJ Chebbi Saba. Canadians responded with gusto to last year's festival.

But you can't really take away the Indian core or influence. So on May 1, the Festival will begin at the Royal Ontario Museum with "Mona Darling's Dinner Party," a suspenseful event where India's legendary -- and generic -- vamp will make her debut abroad. As good old Ajit might have drawled: *Hamaare aadmi chaaro oar phaile huwe hain* (our folks are spread out everywhere).
