

Nand Tandan & Prabir Neogi

# A History Of Indo-Canadians In Ottawa

...A Journey Across Generations



An Indo-Canadian Community Centre Project

“A History of Indo-  
Canadians in Ottawa...  
*A Journey Across Generations*”

Summary Book

Indo-Canadian Community  
Centre

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# **A History of Indo-Canadians in Ottawa: *A Journey across Generations***

Nand Tandan  
Prabir Neogi

**September 4, 2017 (v2)**

***Sponsored by***

**Indo-Canadian Community Centre  
Ottawa, Ontario**

# **A History of Indo-Canadians in Ottawa**

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## About the Authors



The project “A History of Indo-Canadians in Ottawa” was initiated and led, and this book co-authored, by Nand Tandan and Prabir Neogi, who have lived in Ottawa for over 45 years and fit the profile of early Indo-Canadians.



**Nand Tandan** pursued graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, after obtaining a Master’s degree from Delhi School of Economics in India. In 1968, Nand was invited to join the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (now Statistics Canada) by the Chief Statistician and an eminent Canadian social scientist Dr. Sylvia Ostry. He worked as a senior researcher and project manager in various Federal Government departments, including Statistics Canada, Employment and Immigration, and Human Resources Development Canada. An active blogger on the Internet, Nand has discussed immigrant issues and challenges. He is an active member of several Indo-Canadian organizations.

**Dr Prabir Neogi** is an engineer and completed his Ph.D. at Imperial College, London. He came to Canada in 1967 and has lived in Ottawa since 1971. Prabir joined the Government of Canada in 1977, and worked as a researcher, senior policy analyst and project leader for the Department of Communications and then Industry Canada, retiring in 2012. An active member of the Indo-Canadian community of Ottawa, he has served on the executive committees of India Canada Association (ICA), Indo-Canadian Community Centre (ICCC), and Deshantari, where he chairs the Seniors Program committee. Over the last 40 years, he has participated in and contributed to several initiatives to foster the heritage of Indo-Canadians.

# Acknowledgements

In November 2013, the authors Nand Tandan and Prabir Neogi, with support from the Indo-Canadian Community Centre (ICCC), the India Canada Association, Deshantari (The Bengali Multi-Cultural Association of Ottawa-Carleton) and other Indo-Canadian organizations, applied for a grant to the City of Ottawa Cultural Grants Program for this project to trace the history of Indo-Canadians in Ottawa. The grant of \$5,000 was awarded in February 2014, and the funds were made available for the fiscal year 2014-15. The project team is thankful to the City of Ottawa and its Cultural Grants Program officer, Ms Anik Després, for the support of this community project. The project culminated in this book, “A History of Indo-Canadians in Ottawa: A Journey Across Generations.” The authors acknowledge the help of the grant in the successful completion of the project and are grateful to Mr Jim Watson, Mayor of Ottawa, for writing a Foreword for the book.

We thank His Excellency Mr Vikas Swarup, the High Commissioner of India to Canada, for the thoughtful and supportive message that he has provided for the book. We also thank Mr Chandra Arya, Member of Parliament for Nepean, for his message of support.

We are greatly indebted to Dr Indu Gambhir, the third member of the original project team, for the key role she played in the project. As the ICCC President, she was instrumental in launching the project and in conducting some of the interviews with different people and Focus Groups.

We also acknowledge the active and coordinating role played by Mr Anil Agrawal, who has now joined as a member of the project team. He has substantiated the report that was submitted to the City of Ottawa with a wider vision and shaped it into the present expanded and online version. He has also created the graphic representations of the demographic and socio-economic data in Appendix 1. These have been used for the visual displays in outreach materials such as posters, handouts and PowerPoint presentations.

We wish to thank all the Indo-Canadian community members who agreed to be interviewed, contributing their valuable time and sharing their candid experiences. We also thank all those, particularly the second-generation Indo-Canadians, who participated in the various Focus Groups. These are detailed further in Appendix 4. Special thanks go to Professor Jagmohan Humar, who provided a detailed account of the contributions of the Indo-Canadian academics at Carleton University.

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Finally, we wish to thank the Indo-Canadian Community Centre for undertaking to create awareness about the book on the ICCC website, the Indo-Canadian community virtual hub, and to make an electronic version available to all.

The authors take responsibility for any errors or inadvertent omissions. Any views and opinions expressed herein are those of the authors alone, and not of the Indo-Canadian Community Centre.

For those who might be interested in learning about the Indo-Canadian community in Ottawa, the contents in this book will be a valuable knowledge base for anyone who is a student of Canadian history, particularly the story of its immigrants and their heritage. This book can be downloaded in PDF format from the ICCC web site [www.icccottawa.org](http://www.icccottawa.org).





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## Foreword by Mayor of Ottawa

As Mayor, I welcome this book project, which was assisted by a grant from the City of Ottawa, and trust that it will serve as an inspirational model for other cultural communities to document and share their history of arrival, resettlement and integration into Canadian society.

Ottawans of Indo-Canadian ancestry can take pride in their important contributions to the social, economic and cultural fabric of our nation's capital. They have distinguished themselves as a dynamic, innovative and diverse community, consisting of several sub-regional and linguistic divisions with their own distinct culture and heritage, which reflect the multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious character of their ancestral home.

This fascinating book offers a unique and in-depth study of the collective history and achievements of the Indo-Canadian community in Ottawa. It meticulously documents the significant growth and prosperity of the community, spanning more than 60 years, from its early beginnings to the present, with its second and even third generations continuing to succeed in the public and private spheres.

It also constitutes a valuable compilation of the legacies of the trailblazers of the Ottawa Indo-Canadian community for the benefit of future generations and supports initiatives to keep alive the memory of their trials, tribulations and accomplishments. In addition, this historical summary assists to raise greater awareness of the role of Indo-Canadians in the development of our city's rich cultural mosaic, and their remarkable success in community building. I am delighted that the book will also be used as a pedagogic resource through an outreach program to educational institutions, libraries and other institutions.

On behalf of Ottawa City Council, I offer my best wishes to the project team members for a most successful release of their new book.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Watson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jim Watson  
Mayor  
City of Ottawa



## xvi

Ottawa are successful civil servants, educationists and entrepreneurs and have made generous contributions to charitable causes of the community at large. They have enriched the multicultural society of Canada's National Capital Region with their culture and cuisine.

The Indo-Canadian community in Ottawa is, in a sense, a microcosm of India's diversity, reflecting the many faiths, cultures and languages of India. Indo-Canadians have been successful in building institutions to meet their diverse needs and to pass on their legacy to future generations.

Ever since its inception in 1947, the High Commission of India has had a very close relationship with the Indo-Canadian community. One of the very first Indo-Canadians portrayed in the book, Ranjit Hall, worked for the High Commission when he first arrived in Ottawa. The High Commission is proud to have served as a bridge between the community's old and new homelands.

This book makes a superb addition to the growing literature on the Indian Diaspora and would be invaluable to anyone who is interested in the past, present and future of India-Canada ties.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Vikas Swarup', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

(Vikas Swarup)  
High Commissioner of India  
August 15, 2017

# Message from Mr Chandra Arya, MP



**Chandra Arya**

Member of Parliament / Député  
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August 21, 2017

Indo-Canadians are an important and dynamic segment of the multi-cultural society of our National Capital Region. They are also a growing part of the Nepean riding, which I have the honour to represent in the Parliament of Canada.

Indo-Canadians were a very small minority until the 1960s, but their numbers grew rapidly following the introduction of the merit-based system of choosing immigrants to Canada. Not much is known about the history of their early migration to Ottawa and the subsequent growth of the community. I applaud the Indo-Canadian Community Centre for sponsoring a study to fill this gap. It is important for a community to remember and honour its pioneers, document their trials and tribulations,

obstacles overcome and the institutions they built to pass on their legacy to the next generations.

Nand Tandan and Prabir Neogi have conducted this study over a period of more than two years. They have used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques, such as Interviews, Focus Groups, assessing publicly available information from various sources and analysis of available statistical data. They have documented in some detail the history of Indo-Canadians in Ottawa, tracing the growth of the community from the arrival of the first Indo-Canadian in 1948 to its present state.

As an active member of the Indo-Canadian community in the National Capital Region, I am pleased to see this project come to fruition and hope that its results will receive wide circulation, both within and outside Ottawa. It could also serve as a model to be used by other ethno-cultural communities of Ottawa to document their histories.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chandra Arya', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Chandra Arya  
Member of Parliament, Nepean

# Abstract

Indo-Canadians are one of the most successful immigrant communities of Ottawa and the National Capital Region. Dynamic, with significant contributions to the social, economic and cultural fabric of the multi-cultural capital of the country, the Indo-Canadians of Ottawa have played an important role. They form a diverse group, consisting of several sub-regional and linguistic divisions with their own distinct culture and heritage. They truly reflect the multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious character of their home country.

The authors are not aware of any documented study of the Indo-Canadian community in Ottawa. The present project aims at filling this gap by documenting how this community has grown over 60 years. It was in 1948 that a couple of pioneers came to Ottawa. This book follows their path, narrates how these pioneers, followed by other immigrants and the second and even third generation Indo-Canadians, made a mark contributing substantially to both the public and private spheres in the National Capital Region.

This book traces the growth of the Indo-Canadian community as well as its institutions. These include the creation of community associations, and the acquisition and building of places of worship such as gurdwaras, temples, mosques and other spiritual centres. They actively took part in the organization of major social, cultural and religious festivals, such as the Festival of India Ottawa, Diwali, Vaisakhi and Durga Puja; and setting up of classes and schools for language training imparting proficiency in a variety of Indian languages — such as Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil and other regional languages. They also established institutions for

teaching Indian dance and music to preserve their cultural heritage and pass it on to the next generation of Indo-Canadians. The community's role in setting up charitable organizations and taking part in various mainstream humanitarian activities is also recorded.

The document records the challenges faced by the community including discrimination faced by some early immigrants in employment while settling down in a place with an entirely different climate, socio-cultural environment and culinary practices, from the country of their origin. It examines the participation of Indo-Canadians in municipal, provincial and federal public services, academic institutions, businesses and commercial institutions, social and charitable organizations and political processes. It concludes by outlining the current challenges faced by second and third generation Indo-Canadians in becoming fully integrated as equal participants in their new homeland of Canada.

## **Post Your Story in Canada**

**Let us augment the History of Indo-Canadians in Ottawa.**

We invite stories of all first-generation Indo-Canadians (*people of Indian origin who immigrated to Canada*). Submit stories online at:

**<http://icccottawa.org/story>**

Tell us why and how you came to Canada, about your life in Canada, about your family, and about your achievements and contributions in the professional field, business, community and philanthropy.



# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **Background**

This project for developing a historical profile of persons of Indian origin living in the National Capital Region had the full support of the Indo-Canadian Community Center (ICCC). At the outset, it traces the history of the first Indo-Canadians to arrive in Ottawa. It documents the growth of the community during the 1960s and 1970s as Canada overhauled its immigration regulations with the introduction of a merit-based point system to select immigrants from all countries, including India. It also examines the community as it presently exists, coping with the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for both the first-generation immigrants and their children and grandchildren.

The project follows the growth of the community and its various institutions. These include the creation of community associations, the building of places of worship such as gurdwaras and temples, setting up schools and conducting classes for language training in a variety of Indian languages including Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati and other regional languages. It narrates the establishment of several cultural institutions to teach Indian dance and music, to preserve the cultural heritage and pass it on to the next generation of Indo-Canadians. It records initial challenges, including discrimination faced by early immigrants in finding employment and settling down in a place with a very different climate, socio-cultural environment and culinary practices from their country of origin. It examines the participation of the Indo-Canadians in public services, academic institutions, businesses and commercial institutions, social and charitable

organizations and political processes. It concludes by outlining the current challenges faced by second and third generation Indo-Canadians in becoming full and equal participants in their new homeland.

It is not possible to list, let alone narrate the story, of all the illustrious early Indo-Canadians whose efforts developed the Indo-Canadian community in the National Capital Region into what it is today. Choice for interviews and focus group participants depended on the availability, accessibility and the constraints of time to examine the life and contributions of a few. Hence, any element of subjectivity in the narratives was unintentional.

The project uses both primary and secondary sources of information to prepare a comprehensive report on Indo-Canadians in the National Capital Region. The project methodology and data sources are outlined in Appendix 1. In addition to interviewing the pioneers of the community who arrived during the period 1948-1967, several focus groups were identified to cover business and the private sector, women's issues and the challenges of the second generation of Indo-Canadians (see Appendix 4). Three focus group of second generation Indo-Canadians were identified for their unique problems and perspectives.

The members of the project team are Nand Tandan, Prabir Neogi, Indu Gambhir, and Anil Agrawal.

## **Context**

Indo-Canadians, one of the most successful immigrant communities of Ottawa, have made significant contributions to the social, economic and cultural fabric of this multi-cultural capital. There has been no formal study of the Indo-Canadian community. This project documents the growth of the

community for more than 60 years—from its early beginnings to the present state where its second and even third generations are making their presence felt in public and private spheres.

## **Assistance from the City of Ottawa**

In November 2013, the authors Nand Tandan and Prabir Neogi applied for a grant under the City of Ottawa Cultural Grants Program for the project to trace and record a history of Indo-Canadians in Ottawa. This project was initiated by The Indo-Canadian Community Centre (ICCC) and supported by the India Canada Association, Deshantari (the Bengali multi-cultural association of Ottawa-Carleton) and some other Indo-Canadian organizations. In February 2014, a grant of \$5,000 was approved, and funds were made available for the fiscal year 2014-15. The project team thanks the City of Ottawa for its valuable assistance, without which the project could not have been completed.

## **Community Impact**

The project documents the history of the pioneers of the Ottawa Indo-Canadian community for the benefit of the subsequent generations and to keep alive the memory of their trials, tribulations and achievements. It also raises the awareness of the community at large regarding the contributions of Indo-Canadians to the rich multi-cultural heritage of the Nation's Capital, thus building bridges between Indo-Canadians and the local community. Hopefully, the project will serve as a template for similar projects by other immigrant communities in Ottawa. An outreach program will be carried out after the formal completion of the project to disseminate the results to educational institutions, libraries and other institutions.

Indo-Canadians of Ottawa are a diverse group, consisting of several regional and linguistic groups with their own distinct culture and heritage. They reflect the multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious character of their home country. The project has involved all these sub-communities. Volunteers from other organizations were invited to assist in the project, as and when required.

## Chapter 9: Conclusions

This project studied the growth of the Indo-Canadian community of the National Capital Region. This community has grown from a negligible presence until the 1940s to one of the largest and most dynamic communities, numbering more than 25,000 in 2011 and likely more than 30,000 today.<sup>35</sup>

Along with the growth of the community came its diversity. While, initially, all Indo-Canadians thought of themselves as Indo-Canadians only and, indeed, were part of the larger community of the sub-continent, and their social relationships cut across ethnic, linguistic and even national divides, this changed as more homogeneous groups across linguistic and sub-regional lines became socially and numerically viable. The first community organization to be formed by the newcomers was the India-Canada Association (ICA) which continues as a strong body today. It was followed by organizations catering to Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and other major linguistic groups. The new associations were not restricted to linguistic groups, and catered to religious and professional needs of the growing community as well.

The study has revealed the unique nature of the Indo-Canadian community here. Historically, the first-generation immigrants to Canada, as indeed in any society, had to struggle in entry level jobs to create a better future for their children. In the case of the Indo-Canadian immigrants to Ottawa, most of the early newcomers came to Canada under the merit-based point system and were highly qualified individuals who did not have to enter the labour market at the low entry point. They were scientists, engineers, economists,

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<sup>35</sup> The results of the 2016 census for Ottawa are unknown at this time.

statisticians, medical professionals, etc., who held post-graduate degrees frequently enhanced by advanced education in the U.K. or North American universities.

Members of the Indo-Canadian community are concentrated in certain sectors for their employment. The public sector, both federal and provincial, is a large employer of Indo-Canadians, especially of the first generation who found jobs in the federal government, universities, schools and colleges. The medical profession, too, accounts for a substantial number as medical doctors and nursing staff. The second generation followed in similar professions. Many of the later arrivals, who were not as highly educated as the first cohort, have found jobs in the transport sector, both in the taxi business as well as in OC Transpo, the local bus service. During the 1990s, when the Telecommunications and Information Technology sector was thriving in the National Capital Region, many came to join the then heavyweights like Nortel and JDS and some even reached senior management positions in those companies. As the number of the heavyweight corporations declined, some Indo-Canadians started their own companies. There is now a dynamic chapter of The Indus Enterprise (TIE) in Ottawa, where new and old entrepreneurs meet for networking among themselves and with other TIE branches in North America.

Entrepreneurship runs strong in the Indo-Canadian community. It has taken the form of running corner stores, owning and operating gas stations, owning taxi businesses and running restaurants. Indian businessmen have been especially successful in the real estate sector of Ottawa. These entrepreneurs started in jobs as professional civil servants, and then gave up those jobs to take a chance by starting their own businesses.

The first-generation immigrants were confronted with challenges of assimilation in the new country in matters of climate, food, culture and

social patterns. Their adjustment was helped by the fact that most of them were quite proficient in the English language before landing in Canada. Some of the biggest challenges faced in the early days were in relation to availability of grocery items peculiar to the Indian cuisine. They frequently ended up leading a double life, being part of the mainstream at work and retaining their Indian identity (“Indian-ness”) at home in matters of food, language and cultural norms. Women had more adjustments to make as many of them came from an upper middle-class background and were used to having domestic help around the house. They also did not have extended families to help them when raising children or in times of need. They compensated for this deficiency by establishing strong bonds with friends, who became proxy families for their children.

There were few reports of cases of overt discrimination either in interviews or in the several focus groups. Many complained of covert discrimination, especially in matters of promotions. In the public service, while many of the first-generation immigrants occupied senior professional positions as scientists and in technical categories, very few of them made it to the senior management level. This situation started to change in the last two decades after some of them fought against discrimination in Human Rights Tribunals and Courts. A few of those technocrats succeeded in graduating to senior management positions. The second-generation Indo-Canadians in the public service seem to be rising faster in the senior management category, and several have now risen to the ranks of Director General or Assistant Deputy Minister. It is worth noting that the current Chief Statistician, Anil Arora, is an Indo-Canadian.

The first-generation Indo-Canadians have successfully overcome the challenges of establishing themselves in the new country and have become a strong and viable community. It is now facing new challenges. Those who

came in the 1960s and 1970s are now facing the challenges familiar to a community of graying population. They were used to a culture where the young looked after their elders living in the same household; children remained at home at least until they got married. Frequently, three generations of a family lived in the same house. In the new society, children move out even before marriage, and frequently after high school, to pursue college education in a different city. Many older parents have now also come from India to join their children here. They frequently lack the language proficiency and the adaptability to a new environment that is easier at a younger age. The problem is more acute for people who need long-term care, as culturally-appropriate facilities, especially their dietary needs, are not yet available.

It is a desire of every community to pass on their language and culture to their next generation. The Indo-Canadian community's efforts in this regard have had mixed results. If language is the main vehicle of passing on a community's heritage, then the Indo-Canadian community has not been successful. While most Indo-Canadians in Ottawa wanted their children to learn their parental language, they also wanted English to be their first language. They sent their children to Indian language schools to learn their parental language, but did not insist on speaking to them in their own language at home. The fact that both parents in most cases could speak English became, in effect, an obstacle to their passing on their language to their children. Indeed, the children in homes where one of the parents did not speak English were more conversant with their parental language. The second-generation children, even siblings, invariably speak to each other in English.

Similarly, the second generation has not followed their parents' religion in many cases. They have not converted to another religion, but they do not



follow religious practices beyond celebrating some festivals or observing some rituals such as getting married according to traditional practices. In contrast, the first generation has been quite successful in passing on some of their values, such as the importance of education and closeness of family and love for their extended families in India. Most of the second-generation Indo-Canadians seem to enjoy their visits to India, its sights and sounds, though they also complain about the extreme poverty and lack of sanitation that prevails in that country.

The second generation is also very appreciative of the support they receive from their parents, which has enabled them to obtain a college or university education with little or no student loans, to get a head-start in life. The second generation has imbibed a liking for the Indian culture, and the younger kids especially like the popular culture represented by Bollywood. Many of the second-generation girls have attended one of the several dance schools teaching various classical dances of India, and proudly display their talents in the festivals and cultural shows, including the annual Festival of India Ottawa.

Indo-Canadians have built noteworthy institutions and organizations over the last five decades, including religious and cultural institutions. Although there are some notable exceptions, most of these institutions are still run and led by the first-generation Indo-Canadians. The second generation does not seem to be as enthusiastic as the first in running these institutions and carrying them forward. This is best illustrated by the case of the secular organization, the Indo-Canadian Community Centre <sup>36</sup>. Most of its membership consists of seniors, who have been members for over 35 years, and a small number of younger members. For these organizations to grow

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<sup>36</sup> The Indo Canadian Community Centre is the sponsor of this study.

and to remain viable, they require far more enthusiastic participation by the second generation of Indo-Canadians.

## **Post Your Story in Canada**

**Let us augment the History of Indo-Canadians in Ottawa.**

We invite stories of all first-generation Indo-Canadians (*people of Indian origin who immigrated to Canada*). Submit stories online at:

**<http://icccottawa.org/story>**

Tell us why and how you came to Canada, about your life in Canada, about your family, and about your achievements and contributions in the professional field, business, community, and philanthropy.