

Indo-Canadian entrepreneurs make their mark

Many are already giving back significantly to the mainstream community

Having a lunch at Prego Della Piazza in Toronto's upscale Yorkville neighbourhood, Aditya Jha looks every bit the CEO.

The custom-made shirt and designer suit signal that he heads a string of successful businesses throughout the GTA. The private corner booth in one of the city's most iconic power-lunch venues solidifies the impression. Jha, an enthusiastic, passionate man, can't help falling in love with new ventures. Two years ago he bought the landmark eatery because he liked the food.

"I have this foolhardiness about me. I see something I like and keep thinking I can do a better job," Jha says with a laugh, tucking into artfully presented sea bass and prosciutto.

Jha's rise is the supercharged version of the immigrant success story. He grew up in a village in Nepal without running water or paved roads. Within a few years of immigrating to Canada he'd made more than \$100 million from the sale of his first company.

"Isn't this incredible?" says Jha, waving his hands at a room packed with diners sporting Prada and Hermes shopping bags. "Fifteen years ago when I came to this city I would never have dared to walk in this restaurant. But now it's astonishing to me I can eat whatever I like."

Jha is one of the most visible examples of an emerging and wealthy Indo-Canadian society. The new Canadian establishment is likely to be brown, white, yellow or black as immigrant groups start to flex serious economic muscle, with an impact felt beyond Bay Street.

"It was a real delight to see someone, an immigrant doing not just well entrepreneurially, but giving back significantly to the mainstream community as well," says Ryerson University professor Sandeep Agrawal, director of the school's graduate urban development program.

The Star got an advance peek at a study by Agrawal to be released this month looking at high-income Indo-Canadians such as Jha, and what makes them successful.

The paper comes at a time when the Indo-Canadian community, arguably the largest Indian diaspora in the world and

the second-largest immigrant group in Canada behind the Chinese, is enjoying a much higher profile.

"There really has been a demographic and societal shift that is going on right now that is really interesting," says Agrawal. "We all know the typical story of the struggling immigrant. But what about the immigrants who made it? And how did they do it?"

Others are asking the same question.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper visited India for the first time last fall, focusing attention on Canada's growing relationship with the emerging global powerhouse. And Toronto is increasingly becoming a centre for the Indian diaspora. Next year the city is set to host the International Indian Film Academy Awards, the first time a North American venue has been picked.

From technology to real estate to manufacturing, Indo-Canadians have made a major impact on the economy.

The new Indo establishment includes Calgary-based real estate landlord Bob Singh Dhillon, Steve Gupta, who has a string of hotels throughout the GTA, Vancouver-based broadcast mogul Kulwinder Sanghera, and Hari Panday, former CEO of ICICI Bank Canada.

Jha arrived in Canada in 1994 and has a masters degree in computer science. His wife Deepa has a doctorate in urban planning. Jha worked in Singapore, Malaysia and other parts of southeast Asia before arriving in Toronto.

He started work at Bell Canada before forming his own educational software company, which he sold to Sun Microsystems for more than \$100 million (U.S.) in 2001.

Since then he has been on a philanthropic tear, donating money to causes across the country, including endowments at Ryerson, Trent and York universities, while building a string of other businesses ranging from another software company to a candy factory in Hamilton.

"Not everything I do is successful, but trying to do something beyond your means is what being an entrepreneur is about," says Jha. "But being successful means that you also have a responsibility to give back."

East Indian immigrants have been making contributions to the Canadian economy since their arrival 120 years ago, when the first Sikhs from Punjab made their way to British Columbia, says Agrawal. They worked mainly in the forest sector and steel industry.

Today, about half a million Indo-Canadians work in diverse sectors of the economy. Recent forecasts from Citizenship Canada project that India will replace China in the near future as the No. 1 source of immigrants to Canada.

Still, it is only recently that a new millionaire class of Indo-Canadians has been created.

Over the last two decades characteristics of Indian-born newcomers have shifted dramatically. Earlier immigrants largely comprised families with low educational and skill qualifications and limited English abilities. A large proportion now arrive as skilled professionals, such as Jha and his wife Deepa.

But old habits die hard, and despite their philanthropy, the couple remain frugal millionaires, flying economy class and living in the same 2,200-square-foot house in Mississauga they purchased for \$250,000. "My wife thinks we will get spoiled if we move," says the affable Jha.

His first big splurge after he sold his company was a tennis racket and a new bicycle. "I was the king at SportChek," laughs Jha.

There was one big extravagance: A neat freak, he treated himself to a new shirt every day for six months.

His philanthropy, meanwhile, earned him an honorary doctorate from Ryerson last fall.

In his convocation speech, Jha barely spoke about himself. Instead, he talked about the high unemployment rate of native Canadians and the need for a "demographic dividend."

"The changing and hugely diverse demographics of Canada could be a recipe for success or disaster, depending on whether we leverage it for growth ... but if we are unsuccessful our demographics will be a ticking time bomb," says Jha.

He has put his money where his mouth is: His charity, Project Beyshick, pairs native youth with Toronto CEOs in a unique mentoring process. He is also working to build a school for the children of landless farmers in India and bring computers to kids in Nepal.

After his convocation, at a private dinner attended by Ryerson President Sheldon Levy, Chancellor Raymond Chang and

a who's who of the Indo-Canadian community, Jha wasn't above a little ribbing from friends.

"Now that Aditya has got his PhD in Canada, we can safely say that he is now qualified to drive a taxi here," says the moderator. The biggest laugh comes from Jha. But there is a bitter grain of truth in the joke.

For every Jha, there are many more Indo-Canadians who are still struggling, says the Ryerson study.

Indian immigrants have a higher unemployment rate (6.3 per cent) compared with 4.8 per cent of Canadians in general, according to 2000 census figures. The proportion of Indian-born low-income earners is also significantly higher than the Canadian average, according to the study.

Those who have become high earners typically settle in Canada before they are 34, and have a university degree or are proficient in English, concludes the study.

"Indian immigrants who have experienced the most economic difficulty tend to arrive missing one or several of these traits," says Agrawal.

The study also finds that about 20 per cent of all high-income Indo-Canadians earn their incomes from entrepreneurship.

It's Jha's hope that a rising tide will lift the boats of all Canadians, regardless of sex or colour.

"Every new migrant community eventually makes the transition to a stage where they start to build mainstream success and to contribute to the mainstream," says Jha. "Canada needs us as much as we needed Canada, and that's a healthy relationship."

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