

■ Campaigning for American Presidency

Indo-Canadians joined effort to mobilize grassroots for Obama

By Ela Dutt

Two days before Election Day, Akhil Sharma, an IT Security professional in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), drove three hours from his hometown across the border to Buffalo, NY, entered the busy Obama campaign office, and was put to work at the phone bank with a list of some 100 names he called to rally American voters.

He was among several Indo-Canadians and possibly hundreds of Canadians, who joined the global crescendo to bring the first African American with a middle-class upbringing, and a mixed heritage, to the White House.

"I've been following the campaign for a while, I felt I was in the sidelines and wanted to be involved. I was inspired by Obama's candidacy," Sharma told *News India Times*.

"So I went first to the Obama 'grassroots' center. They expect you to bring your own cell phones but I did not have any so they sent me to the main Obama HQ in Buffalo. There they found a cellphone for me, showed me to a seat and gave me a script and a list of numbers and basic instructions and I went to town."

Sharma was part of a scattering of Indian Americans like Ajay Puri of Vancouver, British Columbia, co-founder of 'Canadians for Obama' (www.canadiansforobama.ca) which formed this February and began mobilizing voters for Obama.

"It was exhilarating. And last night (Nov. 3) I called people in Florida - about 30 people," Sharma said.

"I did question myself on why as a Canadian I was pushing for a Candidate that I cannot even vote for," Raj Salooja, a World Bank employee in Washington who just finished her Masters in foreign policy from Georgetown University told *News India Times*.

"But the Americans I canvassed with had a vision of what they wanted and it is a vision a lot of Canadians share. And a lot of people apart from Americans have a stake in this," asserted Salooja who campaigned for Obama as part of the organization Young Professionals in Foreign Policy.

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Akhil Sharma at the Obama campaign office in Buffalo. Sharma, an IT security specialist drove three hours from his home in Ontario to Buffalo, to volunteer for the Obama campaign the Sunday before Election Day. (Photo: Courtesy, Akhil Sharma)

"We canvassed a lot, going door to door out in Virginia. You really get to meet regular people who are not going to toe any line and tell you really what they think and ask you questions and want answers. And you are representing the campaign. So it is about issues that concerns voters," she said.

Salooja estimated she must have talked to at least 100 people. Her group of canvassers, Saluja reflected, was so diverse when they were knocking on doors. "That diversity was in itself a message -- when a person opens a door and finds five different ethnicities facing them."

Puri told *News India Times* 'Canadians for Obama' had 800 Facebook members and a

regular list of 400 members. It also partnered with the well-established Democrats Abroad group in Canada.

"I was never involved in politics but with Obama on the ticket we started this group. It is not funded by anyone. When we first went across the border, we were 20 or so - a mix of Conservatives, Liberals, New Democrats, and uncommitted."

He has spoken to at least 10 Indo-Canadians around the country who were mobilizing for Obama.

"I have heard so many stories about South Asians around Canada helping. Obama speaks to minority groups. If a Black person can take on the U.S. Government and win

the presidency then anything can happen, that's what I was hearing from groups. People could be from Punjab or South India, or Vietnamese or Chinese -- all say the same thing. And racial prejudice is undone. People from all backgrounds have the same view."

Obama speaks to the youth, Sharma and Puri felt.

"Him going to law school and instead of going to a big law firm, choosing to work for \$10,000 - for less fortunate people - that's the main motivator - that he was a community organizer - that really spoke to me."

Since early 2008, Puri has made some 2,000 calls, nearly 500 of them two days before Election Day.

"I did it between work. And I have phone banking at home. Most people have been really nice about it.

"One woman - about 45 years old, from Centerville, Virginia. - she told me she got 16 calls last Sunday including a call from Vietnam!" Puri said.

"It was unbelievable that the whole world seemed to be rooting for Obama." I talked to a guy who was in an automobile factory worker and lost his job some months ago. He was very depressed. And I told him that Obama knew his problem, that Obama was a community organizer, and he would be able to help."

Obama's presidency, according to Barinder Singh, a medical resident from Vancouver, was a step closer to abolishing racism.

"We are going to start anew and invest more in renewable energy resources. Your children and mine will find it easier to become the prime minister of Canada if they so chose. We are going to make the world a friendlier place for the minorities around the world," Singh said.

Salooja also spoke about what affect an Obama presidency would have on Canada.

"The most promising thing about him is the multilateralism (in foreign policy). If Obama asks Canada to do more in Afghanistan, it is not necessarily a bad thing. I know our capacity is very limited compared to the U.S., but the quality of our services can be good."

■ Images



PHOTO ABOVE: Some 'Canadians for Obama' team members out volunteering in Washington State, who went across the border from Vancouver, British Columbia. From left, Ajay Puri, Chuck Wootten, Vikram Commodore, Harjit Gill, Braeden Caley. (Photo: Courtesy, Ajay Puri)

PHOTO RIGHT: Raj Salooja, a Canadian, was in Washington, D.C. campaigning for Barack Obama over the last few months as part of the group Young Professionals for Foreign Policy. From left, Jasmine El-Gamal, Diane Binder, Salooja, Elia Boggia, Daria Gage celebrating Obama's victory. (Photo: Courtesy, Raj Salooja)

