

## Prime minister hopes Bollywood glitz on trip to India will appeal to Canadian voters

BY DAVID AKIN, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE NOVEMBER 16, 2009



Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper poses during the declaration ceremony at the end of the the APEC Summit on November 15, 2009, in Singapore.

**Photograph by:** Victor Fraile, Getty

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MUMBAI, India — Prime Minister Stephen Harper will meet India's answer to Brad Pitt on Monday and pose for pictures with Indo-Canadian contestants of a wildly popular TV dance contest.

The reason? More votes in Canada.

The pictures of Harper meeting Bollywood mega-star Akshay Kumar are pure political gold, say Conservatives in Canada. So too is Harper's tour Monday of the television studio that is home to the reality show Premier Dance League — the subcontinent's version of So You Think You Can Dance — that is a hit here and with the Indian diaspora in Canada. Three Indo-Canadians have advanced through several rounds of the contest.

"We're trying to re-engage with India in a serious way that hasn't been done since the 1970s," Harper said Sunday at a news conference in Singapore, where he was wrapping up two days of trade talks with leaders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum.

“We have a great commonality with India and we hope to build on those through multi-dimensional contacts, not just government to government but continuing to build people-to-people contacts.”

Harper’s three days India will certainly contain some of the standard photo-ops one would expect. There will be pictures of Harper meeting Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh — he’ll do that Tuesday — and pictures of Harper paying a visit to a holy place, The Golden Temple in Amritsar — he’ll do that Wednesday.

But pictures of Harper with Kumar and on the set of the TV dance show are nods to Indian popular culture crafted to send a signal to the more than one million Canadians back home who were born in or grew up in this country that Harper “gets it” when it comes to India.

“It’s very smart,” said a Conservative political staffer, speaking on condition of anonymity last week ahead of Harper’s visit.

“The mainstream media might ignore this but this will be front-page news all over the ethnic media next week.”

Whether he actually does “get” India or not, of course, is a matter for Harper and his political opponents to debate. But, Conservative political strategists are convinced that it’s not only smart business to engage with India in order to boost an anemic \$2 billion in annual trade, it’s also smart politics.

The Conservatives believe they may have won a handful of seats in the most recent federal election because of increased support from Canada’s Indian community and are convinced they can take even more from the Liberals in the next election.

They believe, for example, that, in the next election, they will be able to steal the Brampton, Ont., riding held by Liberal Ruby Dhalla. Dhalla often trumpets that she is the first Sikh woman to be elected to Parliament but it is an honour she shares with Conservative MP Nina Grewal from Vancouver. Both women were first elected in the general election of 2004.

Grewal, in fact, is joining Harper in India for this tour along with Conservatives Tim Uppal, a Sikh MP from Edmonton; Devinder Shory, a Hindu MP from Calgary, and Patrick Brown, an MP from Barrie, Ont., who is neither Sikh nor Hindu but who is chair of the Canada-India Parliamentary Friendship Group.

In addition to the MPs, the Prime Minister’s Office has arranged for several Indo-Canadian business leaders to accompany Harper through India.

Bob Dhillon, Calgary-based CEO of Mainstreet Equity Corp., Hari Varshney, Vancouver-based CEO of Varshney Capital Corp., Lucky Janda of Vancouver-based TCM Realty Corp. and others will join Harper’s tour here in Mumbai.

Harper himself, his aides say, pushed for a jam-packed itinerary that is a careful blend of events highlighting Indo-Canadian commercial, educational, cultural and spiritual ties. He has also ensured that there are events that will resonate in both Canada's Sikh and Hindu communities.

And, for good measure, the Ottawa-based parliamentary reporters who normally cover the prime minister's foreign travels are, for this trip, accompanied by reporters from Canadian media outlets that serve Canada's Sikh and Hindu communities.

In Singapore on Sunday, at a news conference wrapping up the leaders' summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation leaders forum, Harper was pressed by one of those journalists why Canada had not done more to deal with Sikh separatists living in Canada.

"Well, of course, we have our own homegrown separatists that sit in the Parliament of Canada," Harper said. "But we don't, in Canada, question people's political views. What we strongly oppose, and work with India on, are people who engage in violence or threaten terrorism. This is a shared value we have with the government of India."

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