



Ujjal Dosanjh



Raminder Dosanjh

United by Common Causes

A Profile of Raminder and Ujjal Dosanjh

It is not often that you come across the likes of Ujjal and Raminder Dosanjh. Ujjal is the first Indian to have earned the honour of being appointed attorney general of British Columbia after having served as a legislator in the state assembly. Raminder founded one of the first organisations for Indian women living in Canada. I met them first in 1980 and was impressed by their commitment and energy as well as their warmth and generosity to the needy. We lost contact for some years but during the 1980s, when Sikh extremists had taken over gurdwaras and succeeded in terrorising the Sikh community in many parts of North America into endorsing their violence-prone separatist politics, I heard very impressive accounts of the courageous role played by Ujjal and Raminder in openly challenging Khalistani terrorist politics.

In 1997, Raminder invited me to address a public meeting organized by her India Mahila Association in Vancouver. The time I spent as the guest of the Dosanjh family in Vancouver was a memorable experience. It is not very often that one meets a couple who have been able to build such an egalitarian partnership while at the same time creating a happy and relaxed atmosphere at home for themselves, their children and all those who come close to them. Both are independently active in public life and yet they share a rich personal life together. This article has been put together with help from **Tanmayee Das** based on interviews with Ujjal and Raminder taken in 1997.

—Madhu Kishwar

“Lately I have witnessed a very dangerous trend of communal violence and hatred unleashed by the proponents of the so-called Khalistan. For me, the Indian Tricolour and the Canadian Maple Leaf represent my natural and adopted homes respectively, and the burning of either of these shall cause grief and concern to me. I have served you across Canada on the human rights issue, on the farm-workers issue, on the issue of the janitorial workers’ rights and on other issues that have been faced by us from time

to time, without fear, intimidation or hesitation. I know that you would expect me to do the same in this situation. Some of you have expressed to me surprise as to why I have not spoken earlier. I did not speak earlier because, like all of you, I had been hurt because of the tragedy that hit Punjab, unexpectedly as it did. I know many of you have counselled me to refrain from expressing my views in public for fear of reprisals, but enough is enough. We have now had enough time to assess where we stand. I stand

with India, with my people of all faiths, all religions, all walks of life, without any distinctions of caste, creed or colour. I stand for free and peaceful expressions of our views, and am opposed to any form of violence. With this, I want the people of India in general, and the people of Punjab in particular, to know that there are many in distant parts of the world who are with them in their hour of sorrow and in their desire to remain one in the face of great odds, yet not insurmountable difficulties.”

When Ujjal Dosanjh issued this press statement in 1984 in reaction to the terrorism in Punjab, his was a solitary voice but Ujjal was not one to be daunted. In 1985, he was attacked by Sikh terrorists while leaving his law office. It took 80 stitches to close the head wounds his assailants inflicted with an iron bar. Yet, he continued to give press interviews even from his hospital bed. Ask him to look back today, and he has no regrets.

“Nobody was sitting there holding a gun to my head and telling me to do it,” he says. “It was a very well thought-out decision. It wasn’t done for popularity, either. My kind of stand wasn’t popular in those days. The decision to speak out was born of a sense of responsibility to the community. I felt that 10 years later, we would look back and say, we were wrong, we shouldn’t have been violent, we shouldn’t have been threatening broadcasters or boycotting newspapers. Certain kinds of freedoms are very dear to us and we should protect and promote them; some of those very fundamental freedoms were being threatened. I wish somebody else had been around to say the things I did but no one was. I felt that if I didn’t say anything, perhaps I wouldn’t be able to look in the mirror again, because part of the reason one doesn’t say things is fear. If you allow yourself to be afraid, you will always be afraid and never be effective.” Although it is believed that he had the implicit backing of the Indo-Canadian community, Dosanjh was alone along with his wife Raminder, who supported him throughout in his bold public stance against extremism. “Ujjal and I both agreed that somebody needed to take a stand,” she says. “Ujjal had my full support.”

However, this was not the first time he was prominent in taking a strong stance on a political issue. Mere days after taking charge as attorney general of British Columbia in 1991 the former legislator surprised his critics and admirers by successfully resolving a situation that would have fazed even a seasoned minister. When a group of indigenous Canadians established an armed camp near Gustafsen Lake, claiming rights to privately owned land, as a result of tough and persistent police action a peaceful surrender of these armed militants was negotiated.

The Dosanjhs are first generation immigrants and both have made a circuitous journey to their present high profile positions. They form a good team. Ujjal strongly values Raminder’s independence and courage. He is a keen supporter of her many crusades and their relationship is based on mutual respect and a sense of equality. Raminder has been an equally committed activist, working on issues that trouble South Asian women in Canada. Her 26-year old India Mahila Association (IMA) has been in the forefront of the fight against racism and sexism.

As a young man, Ujjal was strongly attracted to politics, which was not strange considering his constant exposure to matters political while growing up. Ujjal’s earliest memories of politics relate to his father, who was an Indian National Congress activist in the late 30s and had also worked for the Akalis and Jetu Morcha.

Politics, in fact, runs in Ujjal’s blood. Ujjal’s mother had communist leanings which she acquired from her father who had lived in Shanghai for several years. When Ujjal’s maternal grandfather returned to India, he got involved

in the Gurdwara Reform Movement and actively participated in the freedom movement and spent many years behind bars. He eventually became a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI); he served the party all his life. Over the years, Dosanjh rubbed shoulders with many politicians who had fought alongside his grandfather for India’s independence. He recalls many stories of his grandfather’s political activism.

“I grew up in a village called Dasanjh Kalan in Jalandhar district. My mother passed away when I was seven. However, she had sent me to study at my *nana’s* (maternal grandfather’s) village where, during the next four years, I met people like Dr Phag Singh and Darshan Singh Canadian and other communists. And I must have carried this political influence in my subconscious all along because I remember all these images very vividly. I even remember as a child my grandfather asking me to sing on the stage at peace conferences.”

These peace demonstrations were held during the 1950s, sponsored by the Soviet oriented CPI. The Soviet camp was then considered the camp of peace and the western capitalist camp that of war. Ujjal went back to his village after grade four to enter a village school founded by his father. During these formative years, his father’s involvement with the Congress Party served as a constant encouragement to his own political development.

Ujjal had other revolutionary relatives as role models. His maternal grand uncle Baba Bir Singh, a Canadian resident for several years, was one of them—he was hanged by the British in the Lahore conspiracy case in March 1916.

“In that era, I became acutely conscious of the fact that my

mother came from a communist background. My *nana* and his communist colleagues would come to our village to address conferences and stay with us. At the conferences, they would talk against Congressmen like my father. And then, *nana* and my father would argue late into the night. Thus, I grew up in the midst of the cut and thrust of debates where you could differ and yet be related in a very intimate fashion,” reminisces Ujjal.

He had other political heroes besides his immediate relatives. “I grew up in a period when you had the Kennedys and Nehrus of the world as role models. When we were growing up, these people seemed like giants to us. We always felt that politics was a noble calling. I think all Indians at the time believed that we would get somewhere, that we were moving.”

However, it was not the calling Dosanjh senior wanted his son to answer. He preferred that Ujjal groom himself for a more stable career such as medicine. Ujjal was obediently following his father’s dictates and reading about medicine. He finished high school and then suddenly his father decided that a doctor’s life is too stressful and Ujjal should instead study to become an engineer.

“I had read all the books I could lay my hands on to prepare myself for medicine so I obviously wasn’t pleased about the switch,” says Ujjal. Disgruntled though he was, he gave in to his father’s wishes, but only for a very brief period. At 17, Ujjal decided he wanted to alter the course his life was taking. He decided to leave engineering—and India—behind him. He sought the help of a friend and secured admission in a college in England. “One of the reasons for leaving was that I felt I couldn’t persuade my



Ujjal and Raminder Dosanjh at home after the attack in 1985

father to let me do what I wanted to do,” says Ujjal. “By then I wanted to go into political science; one way of being able to do so was to get away. Every generation rebels against the old; I ran away from a father who wanted me to do certain things while I wanted to do other things.”

However, his father did agree to pay his airfare to London—the money was actually borrowed from his aunt who now lives in Canada. It is curious that despite his family being so heavily influenced by communism, most of its members headed towards Canada and not the Soviet Union. “People did not emigrate for ideological or philosophical reasons but for sheer economic reasons. They simply wanted to send much of the money that they earned back home,” explains Ujjal. “I came more for personal than economic reasons. If I had felt that I could fulfil all my dreams and aspirations in India within the context of my family, I might have stayed,” he adds reflectively. Theirs was a family which commanded respect but not money.

His wife Raminder, however, came to Canada influenced by a rosy picture of the country painted to her by an uncle who was living in here. “Ever since I knew him, I dreamt of coming here,” she explains.

Of an independent bent of mind, Raminder learnt from an early age to fight for what she wanted. The second eldest child among four sisters and two brothers, Raminder was the rebellious one. Her father was an army officer. The family was constantly travelling and the children had a fairly metropolitan upbringing. Raminder went to school in different cities (Agra, Shillong, Chennai, Amritsar and Jalandhar). She was enrolled in a Masters degree in Psychology in Amritsar when she left India for Canada so she never completed her degree. Her college education was at Agra, followed by a B.Ed. from Guru Nanak University, Amritsar. She pursued a career in teaching, first at Dagshai Public School in the Simla hills near Solan and then in Amritsar. But all along, she was planning a future in Canada. Although her parents were fairly liberal and she was allowed to bring

male and female friends home, Raminder discovered that the freedom was valid only for as long as she did not present a groom of her own choice. Raminder says she could do as she wanted, “till the time my parents found out that I wanted to get married to someone who was not from my religion or caste. Then I was pulled out of college and made to study at home and write my exams as a private student.”

However, with time, her parents eased the pressure, allowing her to take courses at college and later, a job. They eventually also agreed to let her come to Canada, and her father even encashed his insurance policy prematurely to pay for her fare. They felt the transition would help Raminder forget about the marriage she had then desired. Canada, of course, would bring Raminder to her future husband, Ujjal Dosanjh.

During this period, Ujjal was trying to earn a living in England through a series of jobs. The college that had given him the admission turned out to be a fraud and he never went to school there. Nevertheless, the journey to England had been fortuitous. “I remember a few other passengers. There was an Indian professor and an Australian professor who were both going to London to teach. The airlines was Qantas and that was the first time I had seen a fork and a knife, or a toilet. I remember them asking me at the airport ‘why have you come here?’ and I remember saying just three words: ‘For higher studies.’” Ujjal was lucky, because the next Qantas plane which landed at London was packed with students for the same college and they were all turned back. England was not easy on Ujjal. He moved from cleaning toilets to shunting

trains to working in an auto parts factory to being an assistant in a school lab to working in a rayon factory... But Ujjal persevered. For over three years, every Saturday he would go to the county library in the neighbourhood where he lived—first in Bedford and then in Derby. He would stand in the reading rooms and devour all the newspapers and on the way out return the books he borrowed the previous week and borrow some more. “I don’t think I have read as much in the rest of my life as I did during those three years,” recalls Ujjal. “I would read almost any book I could lay my hands on—on India, the world, history, peace... I would also listen to the radio a lot. At that time, BBC used to have a station with no commercials or music—only commentaries, talks, discussions, UN Security Council debates, all the serious stuff. Somehow, I got hooked onto that. Or there was this Japanese radio through which I would connect to All India Radio and listen to Hindi film songs.” England, however, could not contain him. He never came to terms with the sense of racism he experienced there and in 1968, moved to Canada.

Ujjal knew that Vancouver was going to be his second home the moment he set eyes on the city. While still a student there, Ujjal met his wife, Raminder. He found that she had come to Vancouver with a zeal very akin to Ujjal’s. She, like him, was seeking independence of spirit. They had found the right match in each other. His marriage to Raminder, a few years later, was also contrary to conventions. No matchmaker had compared their horoscopes, but clearly, this was the kind of marriage that is made in heaven. Ever since, they have supported each other through thick and thin.

When they got married, both were students, Raminder working in her spare time to make ends meet as a medical secretary after school and also put in 10-12 hours of work a week at the school library. Soon after, however, she secured a full-time contract as a teacher and this pulled them through until Ujjal finished his law degree.

Raminder prefers a modest assessment of their relationship. “Our marriage has been no different from other marriages,” she remarks and then adds, “But ours has been a very equal marriage. Ujjal comes from a rural background and has had a traditional upbringing. He was used to his sisters taking care of him. He lost his mother at a very young age and was pampered all along by his sisters. And yet, he was very sensitive to women’s issues. That’s how we met. He was involved in public events and so was I, and most of the time we would work together. We were one of the few couples who went out and worked as a twosome in any event. And he never restricted me in my activities.”

It is obvious that the couple has been positively influenced by each other in more ways than one. “What drew me to him was his bright personality. I saw in him qualities that I would have liked to possess myself. He would fight very aggressively for what he believed in. I saw the humane side of his personality... he fought for people who couldn’t do so themselves,” reflects Raminder.

Ujjal also appears to have provided her with a fresh perspective on various issues. “Ujjal was to the left of centre politics. He was aware of issues from a totally different perspective. He was extremely concerned about the exploitation by immigration agents of our own community.

He would fight for the right of workers against some of our own people, the establishment and the community.”

Like Raminder, Ujjal appreciates her commitment to her work, for involving him in—until then—alien areas of concern such as women’s issues, and for being herself.

“I got involved in women’s issues chiefly due to my wife’s influence,” he admits. “Rami was teaching at the time we got married. She worked and supported me and our two children while I was still a student at law school. Slowly, as I became more sure of myself, I realised that I couldn’t do half as much in life as I could with her. I consciously decided to marry her, not only for emotional reasons but also because she helped me a great deal and acted as a honing and tempering force. She is a great organiser, and helped me organise my life.” Ujjal’s appreciation of his wife is completely transparent. It was inevitable that he would support her whole-heartedly when she decided to launch the IMA. “She gradually became aware of women’s problems in Canada, particularly women of South Asian origin. She realised that there was a battle to be fought,” Ujjal says of his wife.

Accepting her perspective on women didn’t come easily to him, however. “I came from a village. It was very difficult for me to share her views as an average Indian male, let alone a Punjabi—to accept ideas of gender equality and women’s liberation. But as I grew stronger intellectually, I realised that changing my perspective was not only the right thing to do, but also a necessity. If I was to stand with the others on International Women’s Day and profess



Raminder and Ujjal with their sons, Umber, Assem and Pavel

women’s rights, I had to believe in those ideas myself.”

Ujjal is clearly grateful to his wife for the role she has played in his life. “Rami has been an independent and equal partner,” he reflects. “More importantly, she is a contributor. She is very courageous and efficient. Whenever I need some work to be done, I ask her to do it. We make a very good team.”

The Dosanjhs actively pursued their desire for social change even before they were sufficiently settled in their new home in Vancouver. Much before Dosanjh was called to the bar in 1977, he was involved in problems faced by farm-workers. Horrified by the stories that his sister-in-law, a former farm-worker, related about the ill-treatment meted out to them, Ujjal took the unusual step of disguising himself as a berry picker. After witnessing the poor working conditions and the verbal abuse to which the farm-workers were subjected, Dosanjh, along with some friends, formed the Labour Advocacy and Research Association and the Farm-workers’

Legal Information Service.

“We tried assisting farm-workers with wage claims; we assisted them in getting some justice,” says Ujjal. “Farm-workers’ rights hadn’t been framed in those days and the few legal rights that did exist, were hardly known. So we published a leaflet listing the number of rights they had and the various ways in which we could assist them in getting those rights. Eventually, we turned over all our material and contacts to the Farm-workers Organising Committee, which then became the Canadian Farm Workers’ Union.”

Ujjal also dealt with the grievances of janitorial workers and several similar issues. The experience with the farm-workers and the Labour Advocacy Research Association strengthened Dosanjh’s political ambitions.

“I was very conscious that there was a lack of representation of minorities in any elected fashion at the provincial level,” he says. “Not that it’s important to simply have someone who is of a certain colour or cultural background; it’s important to have representation so

that all the issues that aren't on the agenda can be placed on the agenda, such as farm-workers' issues, domestic workers' issues or the issue of racism."

Yet, Ujjal disagrees that his political career began with his involvement with the farm-workers. "My interest in politics was never interrupted," he maintains. "When I was in England, I helped out organisations for labour rights. I also formed the Young Indians Association, the first of its kind in Bedford, in 1965. In my village in India also, I also did something similar. I was its first president, and it still survives to this date. I also worked as an assistant editor writing editorials on certain issues. In Canada, I joined the New Democrats. I also went to Gurdwaras and spoke about democracy and freedom of speech. Once I was assaulted by some goons who though not against my speaking freely, wanted a criminal record against me to destroy my career. Yet again, in 1975, I was prosecuted on falsely laid charges for denouncing undemocratic practices at the temple in a radio show. So you see, politics has always been with me."

However, it was to be some time before his political ambitions would crystallise. Ujjal lost two provincial elections—in 1979 and in 1983—before being elected as New Democratic Party (NDP) legislator for Vancouver Kensington in the 1991 election. "The NDP is a natural home for someone who wants to deal with fundamental issues," Ujjal remarks.

He opted out of the 1986 elections. "One of the reasons," he says, was that he wanted "to be able to make some money for my family." His family by now included three

sons—Pavel, 21; Aseem, 20 and Umber, 16.

"Long before Raminder and I decided to get married, we would go together to meetings where people discussed community issues," he says. The Dosanjhs believe that it is their moral responsibility to speak out on social issues. And that perhaps is why Raminder too has been so deeply involved in public life and in women's issues. This innate sense of duty is the reason she ascribes for setting up the IMA. Another reason, she explains, was that the existing women's organisations "centered around white Anglo-Saxon women and their problems." These organisations would not discuss issues that confronted immigrant women such as language barriers, their sense of isolation, or the need to find jobs. "Their discussions focussed more on equality for women in general, job

opportunities in industry and such like," relates Raminder. "I realised there was a big gap between the immigrant women's needs and mainstream women's organisations. I felt that we needed to do something."

Raminder's years in college were a period when feminism as a movement was gaining significance. However, it had not influenced her then. "I wasn't involved in anything political when I was in India. All that matured was my independence, and my education," she says. Her desire to do something for a larger cause became manifest only in Canada. She admits that she had to fight her own battles as a girl and she did observe her friends being discriminated against in their families for being girls. "When I came here, I had more time to think about this," she explains. "One of the temples organised a series of

India Mahila Association

India Mahila Association (IMA) was established in 1973 to develop leadership and participation of South Asian women in Canadian society. It was co-founded by Raminder Dosanjh.

IMA is an organisation of Canadian women of South Asian origin. The membership includes women from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, East Africa, Fiji, and Europe. It is an organisation of working women, homemakers, married and unmarried women of all ages. While its membership reflects a wide diversity of religions, traditions and customs, the organization operates on secular principles.

IMA aims to fight racism and sexism in society and in particular to address issues affecting South Asian women living in Canada. It believes in strengthening families by promoting the unifying aspects of South Asian culture while challenging those that devalue women. Over the years, it has continued to provide support, referral and information to various women of South Asian origin. Violence against women is of major concern to IMA and it is committed to eliminating it.

lectures that I got involved in on Indo-Canadian culture in conjunction with the Continuing Education Program of University of British Columbia. I did a lot of research at that time,” she adds. Her orientation towards women’s issues got another boost when she started to discuss issues with women in her own community. For about a year, she and a few other Asian women would meet and discuss issues that concerned them in particular. The need for starting an organisation soon became palpable and finally, in 1973, a core group of five or six women started the organisation. Most of them were married women who felt there was a discrepancy between how women were being treated and their legal and natural rights.

When IMA was first formed, the focus was on finding ways to help integrate the women with their new surroundings, to initiate discussions and debates. “We wrote a constitution and identified our objectives. Initially, we started with two projects. The first was to get more women involved in our work and so, we started a folk dance group. While our dance group performed in multi-cultural events, more importantly it served as a socio-politied place for women to come together, discuss issues and get more involved. We were able to draw women who were otherwise not allowed to come to regularly scheduled meetings. Two, we hired women to try and enrol newly arrived women in Canada in English classes. We felt that if we could get them to learn the language, they would understand the socio-political system better and integrate better. We also helped them to learn how to open bank accounts and shop, the kind



Raminder speaking at a meeting held to honour her for 25 years of volunteer work and contribution to promoting equality for women

of language to use in parent-teacher meetings, etc.”

Yet, as the organisation consolidated itself, Raminder Dosanjh and her associates also started intervening in issues instead of just theorising about them. “Initially, when women came to us, we did not intervene but we gave them information about the options they had and left it to them to decide. But eventually, we did intervene,” Raminder relates. “For instance, there was a woman whose husband had taken her children away from her and would not let her near them. One of our volunteers went with her and just picked up the kids who were playing in the courtyard. Now, it was up to the husband to go to court. At another time, there was a case of difficulties in an extended family. We intervened and talked to the husband. In yet another instance, I helped a student who was being blackmailed by her ex-boyfriend. We threatened that we would take him to the police and expose him in public. It worked. But in all these cases, we maintained that

there was just so much we could do and the women had to learn to be independent.”

In the meanwhile, Raminder and Ujjal had also started living separately from Ujjal’s joint family as Raminder’s involvement with public issues and her lack of interest in household chores did not go down well with the family. However, at about this time her own parents emigrated to Canada and her mother helped considerably in bringing up the children.

Raminder also involved her husband in her efforts. “Involving men in the organisation helped a lot,” she says. “For instance, my husband would speak up not only in our meetings but also at other public meetings and functions at the temple for example and say things like—‘I just did the *atta* today and that did not make me feel small... we men should share the house work.’”

What characterises the Dosanjhs’ is that they keep up the crusade no matter how controversial the issue or how isolated they become from the community as a result of their beliefs.

His vocal condemnation of extremism amongst Sikhs was one such example. When he visited India, Ujjal also met Bhindranwale to register his concern. "I found the meeting totally non-productive. But I told him about what a negative impact his activities were having on the Sikh community and I wasn't afraid of the consequences of my act."

The issue of Khalistan has now receded into the background: subsequently, the Dosanjhs have been articulate on other issues that have concerned the community.

While Ujjal Dosanjh has publicly derided those remaining inequities propagated by the caste system among immigrant families, Raminder Dosanjh has broadened the IMA's scope by starting a South Asian women's support group as well as a senior women's support programme, which includes visiting women who may be isolated in their homes or institutions. "We believe in providing emotional support and referral to women in crisis," says Raminder on her new role. "Through the media, workshops and public meetings, we have tried to deal with related topics such as divorce, dowry, arranged marriages, gender bias, the youth of two different cultures, the double workload on women, sexism and racism."

Ujjal too has been vocal on the issue of racism. "Discrimination within the community should be tolerated no more than racism directed at the community," he says. Ujjal agrees that racism continues to be amongst the most significant issues faced by visible minorities, but he maintains that some progress has been made in the recent past. He cites a personal example: "When I ran in

the 1977 election and canvassed door to door, many doors were shut in my face before I even spoke. When I ran in 1991, not one door was shut on me throughout my canvassing."

Yet the battle is far from over. And there have been many incidents to prove that, Ujjal believes. For example, there was the Canadian Legion's much publicised—and eventually reversed—decision to bar orthodox Sikhs from their halls, and the defacing of a synagogue in Vancouver.

Ujjal believes the struggle against racism must be fought publicly, consistently and on a political level. "If we ignore these issues, we ignore them at our own peril. We need to constantly address them and try to find solutions for them." He also says that people generally protest against an incident which is personally threatening. "In fairness, you cannot afford to ignore any assault. If you ignore gender issues because you are not a woman, they'll come after you next. If you ignore racial issues today, then the day after

tomorrow you might face caste issues within your own community. These are challenges we have to overcome. I'm aware of them through my other ministries—multi-culturalism and human rights—but that shouldn't detract from the fact that we've come a long way," he maintains with his characteristic optimism.

Ujjal has come a long way himself. Progressing from a humble background in a little known village in Punjab to British Columbia's attorney general's office has been no mean feat. Tenacity, a decisive attitude and insurmountable courage have been the reason for Ujjal Dosanjh's success. These are qualities that Raminder also possesses in ample measure and that have characterised her work with the IMA.

"This is not a personal achievement, but a tribute to how far we have come as a province and a country, to a situation where there is a lot more acceptance," says Ujjal. "It just shows that all the struggles that have been waged by our community have borne fruit." □

Manushi's Wish List

Most of our old gadgets gifted by our subscribers have broken down or become unreliable from regular use. Therefore, Manushi needs the following equipment:

- Two tape recorders
- A professional quality camera with zoom and wide angle lenses
- A fax modem
- And, of course, a pentium computer