

Verdict
2008

Harmeet Dhillon launches California Assembly campaign

GEORGE JOSEPH

After winning the primary unopposed, and with endorsements from several bigwigs, Harmeet K Dhillon launched her campaign for California Assembly's District 13 at Fior d'Italia, San Francisco's oldest restaurant.

A moderate Republican and an ardent supporter of Senator John McCain, she is the only Indian American in this year's election to the state assembly.

"The campaign is going well. I am getting support from many sections of the community," said Dhillon, an attorney and activist.

In November, she will face popular San Francisco Supervisor Tom Ammiano, who was unopposed in the Democratic primary. The seat is held by Mark Leno, who will not contest thanks to term limit laws.

The district covers the eastern half of San Francisco city and is heavily Democratic. Of the 260,000 voters, 57 percent are registered Democrats. Republicans are a mere 9 per cent, while a further 28 percent have no party affiliation.

Dhillon thinks the numbers are not a handicap, but an opportunity as, in her view, Ammiano is considered a candidate with extreme leftist views. Her moderate ideas have attracted Democrats and many are rallying behind her, she believes. Besides, one third of the population is Asian and this community has evinced a keen interest in her campaign.

She recently won election to the San Francisco Republican Central Committee, coming in fourth in a field of twenty candidates to fill twelve seats. She currently holds a position on the California Republican Party as one of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's twelve appointed

delegates, and holds seats on the influential Resolutions and Platform Committees of the state party.

"The campaign is going well," Dhillon told *India Abroad*. "So far, friends and family have been generous enough to allow me to build a solid campaign team. I'm particularly honored by the fact that many of my supporters are

Democrats, and even Green Party activists who have crossed over to support my campaign because of my many years of civil rights activism on behalf of religious freedom, hate crimes, domestic violence, and human rights."

She says that over the past fortnight, her campaign has focussed on the issue of eliminating criminal youth from San Francisco schools, the topic of San Francisco's status as a "sanctuary city" which shelters violent juvenile undocumented aliens who go on to commit sometimes fatal crimes against law-abiding residents; and balancing the state budget, currently in crisis due to runaway spending and pet projects for legislators.

She takes time out for her work as chair of the Civil Rights Committee of the South Asian Bar Association of Northern California, which is engaging in issues such as voter registration, hate crimes, immigration issues, and discriminatory racial profiling.

"Running a campaign, dealing with a large community's civil rights concerns on a pro bono basis, and being the managing partner of a boutique corporate law firm leave very little time to spend with friends and family outside



■ Harmeet K Dhillon

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the work and campaign context," she said.

"I am reminded by my colleagues that I am the first Sikh American woman to run for the California legislature, and the only Indian-American candidate, Democrat or Republican, on the state ballots this November."

At the launch event, San Francisco Planning Commissioner Dr Michael Antonini introduced Dhillon, describing her years of support of Republican causes in the heavily Democratic city.

Dhillon spoke about her platform, including balancing the state budget, improving educational choices for California elementary and secondary school students, controlling illegal immigration and meeting the promise of equal opportunity for all Californians, regardless of racial background or religion.

She pledged that if elected she would serve no more than two terms before returning to the private sector, in contrast to her opponent, who has been a politician for over twenty years.

Dhillon has been endorsed by former US Congressman Tom Campbell and California Assembly Member Guy Houston, as also former police chief Tony Ribera. "I am running for a local election, not for the US Congress. International or national issues are not much relevant here," Dhillon, said when asked if opposition to the Iraq war was impacting on her campaign.

She will hold a few fundraisers soon in Washington, DC, New York and Baltimore. "The more we collect, the more we can advertise and influence people," she said.

Dhillon is opposed to the nanny State concept, where the government takes care of individual needs. She opposes rent control that will adversely affect property owners to invest. Though her law firm provides health insurance to its six employees, she is opposed to the law asking small businesses to give insurance coverage to its employees.

Her political involvement began during the 1988 Presidential election, when she was chair of Dartmouth Students for Jack Kemp. Punjab-born Dhillon moved with her parents to England as a child. The family then moved to New York and later to North Carolina, where her father is an orthopaedic surgeon.

She is a founder and partner of the law firm Dhillon & Smith LLP, where she represents businesses, entrepreneurs and executives across many industries. Recently, Dhillon was awarded the prestigious Best Lawyers Under 40 honor by the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association.

Vijay Kumar's insurgent campaign wins fans in Tennessee

GEORGE JOSEPH

Vijay Kumar, who faces the Republican primary for Congress from the 5th District in Tennessee August 7, has attracted attention with his provocative ideas.

His opposition to the Muslim personal law (Sharia) and illegal immigration, and staunch advocacy for making English as the only national language, have made him popular with conservatives and attracted the derision of liberals.

Hyderabad-born Kumar, 54, is not letting the criticism worry him. He said he hopes to defeat his opponent Jerald Jonathan, a businessman, in the primary and says the chances are "very good". This, despite the fact that the Nashville-based district, currently represented by Representative Jim Cooper, is heavily Democratic and has not elected a Republican in over a century.

Kumar works for a telecommunications company and also owns a small business. "If America was a country of racists as its detractors portray, I would be a busboy at a fast-food restaurant, not running for Congress," he said. "On September 10, 2001, I thought of myself as an Indian American. But on September 11, 2001, I became an American-American."

On his Web site, Kumar notes that 'Congress has failed to take leadership on the issues of illegal immigration, taxation, English as our official language, our economy, healthcare reform, abortion, and the War on Terror. I hope you share my belief that it is time for new leadership.'

He is opposed to multi-culturalism and advocates the melting pot theory. "I dislike hyphenated phrases like Indian-Americans. What we need is just Americans. People should become American, plain and simple," he said.

To this end, the English language is very important, he believes. "Multiple languages are harmful. It creates problems in Belgium, Canada and Sri Lanka. We cannot entertain another language. English is our national treasure," he said.

He says multiple languages are a part of India's social fabric, and that has created its own set of problems. "Even

the Telengana agitation [a reference to an ethnic problem in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh] is based on language and accent, though they may say other things."

After 9/11, immigration has become an issue of economics as well as national security, he believes, and says he is totally opposed to amnesty. "A driving license is a privilege. Illegals are not entitled to get it," he emphasizes.

He believes that America is an open-minded country. "Nobody asked me where I came from or to what caste I belonged. I have not experienced any discrimination openly. The genius of the American Constitution elevates this country."

His main theme, however, is his opposition to the Sharia. "I am not anti-Muslim. But Sharia is not allowed to be practiced in Britain and France. We should not allow it here," he said.

He argues that Islam has no exit policy for its followers; one cannot leave the religion. "When I left Hinduism to join an evangelical church, no Hindu attacked or bombed me," he noted.

He believes that certain people come to America with the intention of replacing the American way of life. "This is something we must not allow. The US should only grant citizenship to those who want to embrace American values and culture," he said.

On the economic front, he stands for abolition of the IRS, and many taxes. Instead, he advocates one simple, visible, federal retail sales tax administered primarily by existing

state sales tax authorities. Families would be taxed only on what they spend, not on what they earn, save, and wish to leave to their children, is his central belief.

He is opposed to universal health care, on the grounds that the quality will be lost. "I am pro-life, unwavering and without compromise. Adoption and education is the solution."

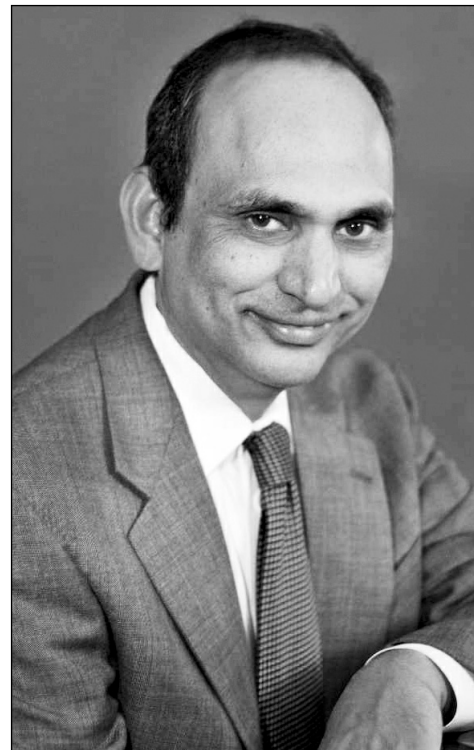
Kumar came to the US in 1979. Four years later he married Robin Mix, a native of Bowling Green, Kentucky. They have a son Vijay, 17. The family attends the Bellevue Community Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Robin has worked for Vanderbilt University for more than twenty years, and is currently program coordinator for the medical center there.

Prior to coming to the US, Kumar worked in Iran for a European construction company and, while there, witnessed firsthand the radical transformation of Iran from a modern nation to a repressed, fundamentalist state. This, he says, changed his outlook on jihad and the Sharia.

He believes the war on terror must be waged on multiple fronts: Ideologically, financially, and militarily. "On the economic front, we must stop all forms of aid to terrorist-supporting nations and groups such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Palestinian territories, regardless of

any short-term gain we derive from supporting them.

"We must leave Afghanistan immediately, because attempting to eradicate terror in Afghanistan is addressing only the symptoms of terrorism. When we leave Iraq, it must be on our terms, not the terrorists' terms."



■ Vijay Kumar