



Veena Sharma prepares for Diwali at her family's store in Mississauga, Ont., where the holiday brings a spending surge that mirrors its US\$45-billion in sales across India. CHRIS WILSON-SMITH/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## Diwali brings a boost of business, and a sense of unease

CHRIS WILSON-SMITH

Veena Sharma paces a table of Diwali decorations as she fields another call, nudging a few gift boxes so they sit just so. From the sputtering rain outside, customers shuffle through the short aisles of Mr. India – a grocery store anchoring a small strip mall in Mississauga – in search of sweets, oil lamps and other necessities.

For Ms. Sharma and her family, who own the store, the stir of life around this time of year is a relief. In a city home to one of Canada's largest Indian communities, Diwali brings a spending surge that mirrors the US\$45-billion in holiday sales across India.

"Diwali time, we make the money to help if we don't make much the whole year," she said.

The festival arrives as a balm after another year of slow business, but under a new cloud of global shifts never far from Ms. Sharma's mind. "The cost of living, tariffs, fewer people spending," said Ms. Sharma, 76, who came to Canada from Northern India in 1974. "It all feels like it's getting worse day by day."

Across the surrounding community of about 780,000, where 15 per cent of its residents trace their roots to India, a time of light has been tinged by disquiet – over immigration caps, over Ottawa's diplomatic whiplash with New Delhi and even over fireworks. City council decided just last week to continue allowing them on Diwali after staff had recommended a full ban, which had sparked anger among those who said it would have dis-

proportionately hurt families who celebrate Diwali.

High gold prices, driven by investors seeking insurance against economic uncertainty, are weighing on jewellery sales – typically booming during Diwali, when buying gold is believed to invite wealth and good fortune – but none of the seven local retailers contacted by The Globe and Mail would say whether the slowdown had reached their stores.

For all of these reasons, a sense of unease across Indo-Canadian hubs would be understandable, said Vina Nadjibulla, vice-president of research and strategy at the Asia Pacific Foundation. But a fraught geopolitical backdrop is not being experienced the same way across such a diverse community, which spans generations, regions and religions. Ottawa's shifting immigration policies and diplomatic turns with India are being met with the same mix of trepidation and hope as anywhere else, Ms. Nadjibulla said.

A recent poll by the Angus Reid Institute and the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada found that a majority of Canadians support a diplomatic reset with India, even as views of the country remain largely unfavourable. Canadians are now evenly divided between prioritizing the rule of law and expanding trade – a marked shift from last year, when relations were still raw after then-prime minister Justin Trudeau accused Indian agents of involvement in a killing on Canadian soil, triggering a diplomatic rupture and an RCMP investigation that later led to

arrests.

"People see the headlines shifting so quickly – from diplomatic crisis to talk of trade – and they want to know what's really changed," Ms. Nadjibulla said in an interview.

Ottawa's recalibration is happening against a wider backdrop of protectionism. U.S. President Donald Trump's trade measures have pushed many countries, including Canada, to set aside diplomatic tensions in favour of economic ties.

At Anjappar, a South Indian restaurant tucked among the tangle of plazas that line Mississauga's roads, 25-year-old server Ghody Narayanan takes a pragmatic view of her own. She said she supports the immigration reduction but hopes Canada will open its doors more fully once housing and labour conditions improve.

"Right now, the job market is so slow. If they put a restriction on how many people are coming to Canada, people will get more opportunities," said Ms. Narayanan, who moved from the Southern Indian state of Kerala three years ago. "For now."

Ms. Narayanan said she plans to mark Diwali quietly at home, where she shares a flat with a few others on work visas – though it won't carry nearly the same intensity as celebrations in Kerala.

But Diwali, Ms. Narayanan said, is about sharing light and friendship wherever she happens to be – qualities she also found in Canada after leaving India "to learn life, to meet different people and to know different beliefs."