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The Life of a Moral and Radical Crusader

Narain Kataria has spent most of his life trying to combat radical Islam

By Anugya Chitransh

Slowly but steadily, more people gathered in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York. There was a man beating the dholak, a two-headed drum. Accompanying him was another man blowing the conch. It was September 27, the day of the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's, maiden address to the General Assembly and Indian-American people were gathering to welcome him.

They came carrying banners, posters, fliers and were waving the Indian tricolor and the American flag. Some women were busy handing out Modi masks and T-shirts. Buses carrying community members from across New York and New Jersey slowly made their way to the U.N. through the heavy traffic and security around the area. There were close to 1500 people present, along with the media.

Wearing a grey suit and blue shirt with a red tie, Narain Kataria was busy getting things ready. What little hair he had, had gone white a long time back and the sun glared off his bifocal spectacles. He did not stand out among the myriad of Indian people present but he was leading the show as one of the organizers for the 'America Welcomes Modi' rally. A prominent Indian-American community leader, Kataria championed Modi during the Indian elections earlier this year.

“We consider him as the savior of India and Hinduism and he is a true nationalist. He is a true Hindu,” says Kataria. He was happy when Modi got elected as prime minister and was overjoyed about his visit to the U.S. “The people who say Modi is bad, he is corrupt, are funded by foreign governments like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and other church groups. They want to destroy the Hindu identity,” he adds.

He asked me which newspaper I was with and how I heard about the event. “Who told you about me?” he asked and I gave him the details. He seemed satisfied.

At 85, Kataria may be well past his prime but he's still going strong. After his retirement in 1998 as a secretary in a law firm, he became one of the founders of the Indian-American Intellectuals Forum. As the president of the organization, he's made sure that their goals have remained unchanged since the beginning, "To strengthen the Indo-American relationship and educate and awaken and enlighten the Americans and other people about the threat of radical Islam to humanity."

While the organization does not have a physical location, Kataria works from home. Sitting in his Elmhurst, Queens flat, he sends out email blasts as he wages his war against Islamic terrorism and human rights violations. A desktop computer in his bedroom and an Internet connection are his weapons.

"Wherever you go, in any country you see that Islamic people are killing other people, local people," says Kataria. "When Muslim people become a majority they will not let anybody survive there. They have to either convert to Islam or they will be killed. So people should be told clearly that this is the biggest danger." And Kataria goes about distributing this information. He collects articles and videos from newspapers, websites and friends and shares it with his contacts. His emails range from the current war in Syria to stories of forced religious conversions in India.

Seeing him, one wouldn't know the amount of influence he wields from his home office. "We have thousands of supporters spread all over the world, U.S., Canada, UK and even India," says Kataria. His lists of contacts are stored in multiple M.S. Word documents. Each document is more than 50 pages long comprising of continuous lists of email ids. It takes him a few hours to get an email out to every person on his list. "I must be reaching a million people at any time I send an email."

Kataria was born in Sukkur, a city in the north-western part of British India in 1930. He was the oldest son in a Sindhi family, an ethnic group native to the Sindh province. His father passed away while Kataria was still in school, but they were financially stable. Their house had been in the family for many generations and they were living

peacefully with their Muslim neighbors. His father passed away while Kataria was still in school, but they were financially stable. Their house had been in the family for many generations and they were living peacefully with their Muslim neighbors.

In 1947, India gained independence from the British rule. India and Pakistan were being carved out with the latter being an Islamic republic. One third of the western portion of British India was going to be Pakistan. The Kataria's then became part of the Hindu minority in a Muslim country as Sindh was now in Pakistan. Soon communal clashes along religious lines broke out all over the country.

Then 17 year-old Kataria had to take charge of his family, which included his mother, his three brothers and his sister. Neighbors and people whom he thought of as brothers were now dangerous. Forced conversions to Islam had become the norm. "If you don't convert there will be problem for you, you will be killed and your women will be raped," Kataria recounts being threatened with. The family was harassed on a daily basis but they did not have enough money to leave for India.

In 1948, the family boarded a train that took them to Karachi. "There was a lot of stabbing and killing of Hindus going on. Muslims were killing Hindus. Hindus were running helter-skelter," remembers Kataria. Later, in the same year, the family took a ship bound for Mumbai, India.

Now they had to survive in India, as they had left everything of value in Pakistan. Kataria was only 18 then. "We could carry only small things because on the road also there were lot of Muslim people who were robbing. Since we were refugees, we had no money." They were put in a camp on the outskirts of Mumbai and as the oldest, Kataria started doing petty jobs in the city but violence followed them across the border. "When I came from Pakistan to India, I was surprised that it was Muslims who were killing Hindus in India."

They managed to save up and the younger brothers started going to school. Soon there was enough money for Kataria to also enroll part-time in a high school. The family's financial condition improved as the Indian government resettled the refugees. Kataria completed his education and then got a job.

That was when he started his crusade against Muslims. He would write letters to newspapers about the problem of radical Islam and the trouble the Muslims were causing to the Hindu community.

He got married in 1953 and had two daughters. He decided to move to the U.S. in 1972. “The main intention was to make money. I was the first family member over here,” says Kataria. The pace of life in New York was familiar to him as he came from Mumbai, an urban city. He got a green card within six months and within five years, most of his family, including his brothers had moved to the U.S. He had been a secretary in a New York law firm for 25 years when he finally retired in 1998.

Despite his nine to five job, Kataria kept himself occupied with his cause. “The problem with radical Islam and the ideology is damaging to the entire humanity. When I came over here, I was shocked that the problem was here too.” He continued to pen letters and joined Indian religious and political organizations that had started their chapters in New York. He became a member of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a right-wing Hindu nationalist non-governmental organization. He would attend their meetings and help organize events for them. He was also supporting the Bharatiya Janata Party, another right-wing Hindu nationalist political party.

But he was not completely satisfied with both organizations. “They were somehow a very nice, decent, mild Hindu group,” says Kataria. “I was worried that they don't understand the problem India is confronted with, they don't understand the gravity and danger the problem is posing for India.” He was also worried that in their political correctness, the message was getting lost.

“I wanted to tell people that radical Islam is a very dangerous thing,” says Kataria. He wanted to be a part of something that was more vocal and not worry about political correctness. That's why he started the Indian American Intellectuals Forum.

“If you look at the acts of terrorism all over the world, you'll be surprised that most of the acts are done by followers of Islam,” says Kataria as he

mentions 9/11, the 2002 and 2005 Bali bombings, the 2004 Madrid train bombings and other incidents where casualties have been anywhere from a few 100 to thousands. “So we have seen that most of the people who kill were all Muslims.”

He has read many of the Islamic scriptures and feels that the problem arises from the religious books. “These things are already written there and they are taught these things in their mosques,” he says. He alleges that up to 80 percent of the mosques in the U.S. are controlled by Wahhabis, a sect of orthodox Sunni Muslims. “They are very extremist people. And people who go to the mosques daily are being radicalized.”

In this line of work, it's a little hard to make friends when your most pressing concern is the threat to the world from Islamic terrorism. But Kataria does have social friends whom he meets casually. “They don't understand these things,” he says. Usually they talk about day-to-day things. “I think they understand but most of them don't know these things.” He has very few Muslim friends, naturally. “I talk to them but I don't really trust them.”

On being asked the name of some people he interacts with regularly, he asks me why I want to contact them. “I have done these interviews before, never have they asked me whom do I meet.” Then he reluctantly gives me some names.

Subhash Arora, met Kataria for the first time 20 years ago. He had accompanied one of his friends to Kataria's house. “I hardly had any interaction with him,” remembers Arora while recalling what they spoke about. Arora, 65, is one of 'social friends' who meets Kataria at events and community gatherings. They even talk over the phone sometimes.

“We have certain agreements and certain disagreements,” says Arora when asked what they usually talk about. “I don't think any civilized person will agree with Islamic views... radicalization of any sort is not good,” he adds. But when one asks him if he agrees with Kataria's views, he fumbles.

Dinner table conversations in the Kataria household also veer away from his work, as his family does not want any part of it. “They have their children, their education, they have to pay rent. They understand that this problem is there but they don't want to do much about that,” says Kataria of his two daughters, who also live in New York state.

His wife had been the one who supported him the most but she passed away this year, days before Modi's arrival in the U.S. “I did not tell people about these problems. Somehow I overcame them because I always give priority to my duty,” he says.

More questions about his family lead to him asking why such a personal tack is being taken. “You are interrogating me like a police officer,” he says. “Why do you want to know how my daughter reacts?” But ask him questions about his work and he gets back in the flow.

When asked about his peers, he doesn't count many. “People don't want to think like me because they are selfish,” he says. “If they talk like me, they'll lose their positions. They'll be dubbed as fundamentalists.” But he knows that there are people out there who might hold the same viewpoint.

“If you go on the Internet you can find a lot of people who hold my views,” he says and that's how he built up his contact list. He collected email ids from chat rooms and forums and saved them. He wrote to them and sometimes they replied. “Slowly I collected their emails and now I reach about half a million people whenever I send an email.” But even his Web followers might refuse to stand with him if the moment arises. “My job is to tell them that don't just stick to political correctness because it will bring your destruction. We want all the people to unite against Islamic designs.”

Nagendra S. Rao though, is one of the few who would call Kataria a friend and a colleague. “Narain Kataria-ji (an honorific) is a person for whom I have great affection,” says Rao but then continues. “His educational socio-cultural background are very different from mine, but there's still a high level of coherence in our world views of what's necessary for the future of India.”

Rao, who is in his 60s, is the founder president of Sanatana Dharma Pratishthapana Foundation, a religious Hindu organization. But his relationship with Kataria didn't start on the same foot. "I had little use of him at that time," recalls Rao of their first meeting. "He represented everything that I, with my Ivy League background, wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole."

Rao's views though, changed drastically over time. "As I got to know him, while talking, I realized... Kataria-ji is one of very few people who is truly a Hindu. Others are just 'political hindus' but from a religious and cultural aspect, Kataria-ji is a true pundit," said Rao.

Both are old-people night owls, as in they go to bed by midnight or sometimes even after that. "I'm from the age of Numenor and so is Kataria-ji. To protect hobbits is our duty," says Rao making a 'The Lord of the Rings' reference where Numenor is a great ancient race of men while hobbits are dwarf-like creatures.

Kataria's outspokenness has landed him in hot water a few times. The most famous one was in 2008 when the Indian National Overseas Congress, the U.S. branch of the center-left Congress party, filed a \$100 million defamation case against him.

Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Congress party, which had then been in power in India then, had been invited by the U.N. to deliver a speech to declare International Non-Violence Day on Mahatma Gandhi's birthday. Kataria and his friends released a full-page advertisement in The New York Times stating that she was not a true Gandhi and as such should not be invited.

While Kataria won the lawsuit, ever since then he has been cautious about what he writes. If he gets worried about something that might possible get him in trouble, he asks Rao for help. "He'll call and ask me, 'This won't send me to prison right?' and then I go through it," says Rao.

Kataria's activism is not limited to the Web. There are several organizations in the U.S. that talk about the threat of radical Islam and he supports them and works with them too. "There's Human Right Coalition against Radical Islam. Then there's another organization being headed by Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer, we support that organization," says Kataria. "And we support anybody who has been affected by Islamic attacks. They call us and we support them," he says about his humanitarian efforts.

People within the community have awarded him with the "Hindu Rakshak" or the protector of Hindu award. They have honored him at various events for his work and for his contribution to the Indian community.

He hopes to bring in a new era for the Hindus living in India. "The Hindu culture is about preserving humanity and only Hindus do it. I'm not saying this because I'm a Hindu," he says. "There's no other religion, even Christianity and Islam which do that. Islam classifies and labels that you're a Muslim, you're not a Muslim and if you're not, then you will go to hell."

But Kataria's actual influence is still questionable. Despite his concerns for the Hindus in India, his call to arms will probably not yield a result in India. Munish Gupta, the international coordinator of South Asia with the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) International, said that the community's influence on Indian politics is confined to diaspora policy. Their importance is limited to championing India's cause in the Congress. "Even when Modi was here, the Indian-American community made sure that their representatives showed up to greet Modi," said Gupta.

As for the claims of a single person, Gupta rubbishes them. "We've reached a point where the Indian government respects our views, recommendations and guidance," said Gupta. "But we cannot influence any other policy."

Maybe I had been too inquisitive, asked the wrong questions or probed too deep. A request to accompany him to one of the meetings resulted in me being lambasted. "I think you're working for the FBI. Or your editor must be working for the FBI. You don't know these things," he tells me.

I plead not guilty to those charges but he continues, “They recruit unsuspecting girls like you and send you to keep an eye on me. This happens quite frequently, every few months some new person shows an interest in me.” He is quite sure now that I don't know anything about what is happening and I'm a pawn in the “Keep an Eye on Narain Kataria” game.

“I have nothing to hide. You should go investigate those mosques instead, where terrorists are being trained. This is a waste of your time,” he tells me as he refuses. “You don't understand these things.”