

Who's Afraid Of Karan Gulati?



By Kanika G

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The Idealist

Karan Gulati spent his childhood and adolescence at the Barrackpore cantonment on the outskirts of Calcutta. As the son of an army officer, he was patriotic, and as the grandson of two men belonging to the rare breed of honest and upright civil servants, he was principled.

Blessed with intelligence and competence, Karan aced his exams with ease. When it was time for him to choose a career, every door was open to him. A sheltered upbringing and his naivety made him something of an idealist. So ignoring various lucrative corporate opportunities, Karan decided to serve his country through a career in journalism, by amplifying voice of the masses.

With a degree in journalism from Cambridge, he had no trouble finding a job. Initially, wanting to stay on in Bengal, he wrote for *The Statesman*. Within a couple of years, he was scooped by an emerging media conglomerate, gaining popularity as a news channel.

He was offered a well paid position, and a chance to uncover important issues usually shunted away from the

public eye, voice his analysis and opinions on social and economic concerns and revolutionize investigative journalism and news reporting in India. The news would no longer be about the toneless reporting of dry facts. The news channel would help shape the future of the country, by engaging politicians in debates and demanding answers.

The early years were a dream come true. A team of young energetic idealists like Karan flummoxed fossilized politicians with their passion, ingenuity and initiative. Many accomplished politicians were caught off guard, and their hypocrisy exposed. The public cheered these new heroes of democracy, for their selfless service to their country.

Scam after scam came to light. Policies were publicly examined and critiqued. For a while, democracy thrived. But people are people everywhere and all the time, and when something seems too good to be true, it probably made it through some quantum loophole and won't last long.

A losing battle

Seasoned, unscrupulous politicians wield power and know how to use it. Confounded as they may be by a sudden turn of events, they quickly adapted and learned to exploit the weaknesses of idealists. Youth too is in danger of getting carried away by a flood of passion, sacrificing the ideals they once stood for to the altar of the greater

good, forgetting that without the foundation of those cherished ideals, the greater good is just a whole lot of hokum and blarney.

Once the slimy politicians learned their game, they also learned how to beat it. Everyone has dirty or embarrassing secrets, and while a few idealistic youth manage to stay pristine, they have skeletons in their family closets. So when the carrot won't work, though a tad more unpleasant, the stick never fails.

Karan was horrified to see the reporting styles of his colleagues were slowly but surely changing. Some were driven by passion bordering on insanity. When their straightforward and naive methods were stifled, they became hysterical losing all credibility. Others were possibly blackmailed. Some were bribed under blackmail, to create a paper-trail that could be used to destroy their future credibility. Every one of them succumbed to pressure of one form or the other.

Karan stood tall through it all, walking a tight rope of patience, while staying firm, relentless, clean and strong. Unlike most of his colleagues, he chose sustainability over glamour in his methods. But his nerves were jangled, and everyday he felt just a little more exhausted. He couldn't keep going forever, especially not with every pillar around him crumbling to dust.

Through it all, Karan did have one shoulder to lean on. Priya Sharma, wasn't a personal friend, but she was prin-

ciplined and did not scare easily. He drew strength and inspiration from her relentless pursuit of the truth. Her presence in the company was comforting, for he felt he wasn't battling the system alone. Her struggles gave him hope. Sometimes, she did seem to border on crazy, when she had a point to make, but for the most part she kept it together.

Just around this time the country, most unexpectedly, found it self at war with a long time hostile neighbor. War is a tricky time for a democracy. Should democracies be transparent? Of course. The new breed of journalists thought so, and considered it their duty to brave the bullets and report from the battlegrounds. Priya Sharma planted herself in bunkers and roughed it out with the soldiers so she could report directly from the front. She wanted people to know first hand, what dangers and hardships the brave men and women in uniform were facing.

Karan admired her courage until ...

A life changing event

One day, soon after he had finished a telecast, his secretary paged him. "Urgent, come to the office." the message read. Karan had been thinking of stepping out for a sandwich to the local *Barista*, but the message changed his mind. When he returned to the office his secretary informed him he had a call from home.

“Maya, that’s not urgent. I’ll call Ma in the evening.” He grumbled, annoyed. Ma was always calling to ask the silliest questions, and Maya should know better, he thought. But something in Maya’s grim expression caused him to reconsider. “What is it Maya?”

“I think you should call your mother. This is important. It’s about your dad.” Her grave and somber demeanor frightened Karan.

“Dad!” Karan stared at Maya in dismay. Ever since Brigadier Gulati had been deployed to the front the atmosphere at his home had been tense. Patriotic as he was, Karan realized what he really wanted was for his dad to be back home and safe. With trembling fingers he dialed home.

His father was seriously injured and had been rushed off to the nearest army hospital. He would probably survive, is all they could tell him at the time. Somehow the enemy had learned the location of the temporary command center and sent covert special forces to bomb it, to demoralize the troops by striking at their core of operations.

Karan had always known the risks his dad faced in his job. Still, they had always seemed like a distant possibility. After all war did not come that often, and now that it had, his dad was in a senior position, away from the actual fighting. So even though he was worried, deep down he had actually expected his dad to come home unscathed.

Karan took the day off and waited anxiously for the phone to ring with news about his father's surgery. The doctors had informed him that his father's left arm had been badly injured with shrapnel, and there was a possibility that they would need to amputate it. Strangely, the first thought that came to him was, no more basketball for Papa. His father teaching him to play basketball, was one of his fondest childhood memories. As Karan grew up, but not too tall, he lost interest in basketball. His father however, continued to play every Saturday morning that he was home, adhering to a routine that had not changed in over two decades.

Karan switched on the TV for a distraction. The scene of his dad's injury was being replayed endlessly on every news channel. It made him sick. The breaking news flashed in grotesque bold white font on a red background. News casters raged about his father's injury and prayed for his recovery. Perhaps they were sincere, but it all seemed disgusting to him. *Is this how I make other people feel*, he wondered.

As he flipped the channel, he noticed Priya Sharma. There she was reporting from the scene of the disaster. Her presence felt like an unwelcome intrusion at a time of tragedy. The officers and soldiers needed space and time as they grieved. Some were comforting their friends, and others were tending to physical injuries. Yet there she was, pestering them with stupid questions, airing their misery for the world to see. After everything they did for

their country, did they not deserve privacy, respect and dignity? But all Priya seemed to care about, was telling a sensational story.

He had always considered his profession noble, but today it seemed so ugly, feeding the morbid curiosity of the masses devouring the misery of vulnerable people the media made a circus act of. He had always assumed that those who suffered would want the world to know of their suffering, but today he wondered if it was true. These soldiers and their families could not want their lives turned in to a dramatic soap opera.

His father was right to disapprove of his profession. They had been fighting about it for years. He thought his father did not understand him, but perhaps his father understood it better than he did. Tears trickled down his cheeks as he contemplated his life. Had he wasted it pointlessly? He had given up so many lucrative offers thinking he was a part of something great. He chided himself for being foolish and naive. That day something changed in Karan Gulati. While his father eventually made a full recovery and retained his arm thanks to the skillful work of experienced army surgeons, Karan never quite recovered.

He was no longer a superhero championing the cause of the common man. He was a disillusioned idealist doing a job. But his transformation wasn't quite complete. It had only just begun.

Hitting rock bottom

It wasn't until a few months after the war concluded, that certain strange details were coming to light. Priya Sharma's reporting was put on public trial by rival media company that had been growing in to prominence over the previous few years.

Initially, Karan dismissed their coverage as a desperate attempt to discredit an effective and dedicated journalist. But as the evidence mounted, he could not ignore it. Priya's eagerness to get sensational coverage had put several soldiers in harms way. They could not afford to have her injured on national television, so she was heavily protected by able army officers wherever she went. These officers resented it, as they would rather contribute to the actual war effort than babysit her.

Besides, in one of her telecasts, she had indirectly broadcast the position of the temporary army office which led to the bombing that injured his father. Perhaps, it was an honest mistake, but Karan began to see that Priya was driven by ambition. He heard from his father about what a nuisance she made of herself ignoring instructions of senior officers while she chased a story.

Karan's world collapsed around him. What was he doing? Had he wasted his life? He had turned down many lucrative and powerful positions in television and politics because he believed he was doing something meaningful.

But now he didn't think so. He was done being a naive *padawan*. Anakin could not handle the real world, so Darth Vader would conquer it.

Rising from the ashes

Around this time, Karan was offered a lucrative senior position with the rival media company that had carried out the investigation on Priya, and he took it. He used it as an opportunity to remake himself. He would no longer be the polite and upright Karan Gulati. His would be a name that struck fear in the hearts of all he chose to bully. He would be aggressive and ruthless. Most importantly he would make himself rich and powerful. After all, he had learned the hard way, that idealism and principles don't last in the real world. Money speaks volumes and power calls the shots. He would have both. Then it didn't matter what other people believed. He could do whatever he wanted, however he wanted.

Unlike many journalists who had given into hysteria and tantrums in desperation, Karan had one quality that has sustained him all these years. He was patient. He knew better than to launch into a diatribe right away. That would come later, after he had unshakably installed himself in the hearts and minds of his countrymen.

Karan spent the next few years slowly gaining the trust of the people, in the way he handled politicians on television unearthing scams and tackling controversial issues. Very

gradually he raised the pressure and became more and more aggressive, but never seemed hysterical for he was able to sweep the masses along with him along a gentle rising tide. The unscrupulous politicians did not quite realize the danger he was to them, until it was too late. People cheered for him and he became what he always wanted to be, the voice of the people.

His popularity grew leaps and bounds, and within half a decade the celebrity status he had achieved was unheard of, for a an Indian journalist. He was raking in cash for his company. They knew his value and compensated him accordingly. But Karan had only just begun his journey. Fame and money were simply stepping stools to power. Karan gradually became strategic in choosing the issues he pursued and investigated, and even more so in choosing the ones to ignore. He would no longer just voice public opinion, but he shape it, and with that he would shape the future of the country.

With time, certain political units eager to make a comeback realized his value. Without ever explicitly mentioning them, Karan had made himself invaluable to their quest for power. They approached Karan, as he knew they would, and he would gradually drive their chariot to victory all the while making them completely dependent on his skills and media following.

This time, Karan wasn't shy to get his hands dirty. He could steer public attention, drive public opinion and manipulate public emotion. This is what he had always done,

but while before he was governed by his scruples and driven by his idealism, his new motivators were the power and riches. *People were weak, fickle and they always let you down, always.* Karan had learned that the hard way. People, even the ones he admired, had proved unworthy.

So he might as well do something for himself. Unlike weak and unreliable people, power and money, would be in his control. After years of trying to control the uncontrollable, Karan finally found something that would answer to his commands. The taste of power intoxicated him. It consumed him, and he did not resist. This is what he wanted to be now. Darth Vader was now driving the bus, and he was insatiable.

As much as Karan believed himself to be in control, control slipped away slowly, but surely. He had chosen his path and the evil bus was driving itself. Soon he found himself championing ideas his conscience and intelligence rebelled against. Anakin was struggling to be heard, but it was too late for him. Karan stifled his conscience, reminding himself that the real world was no place for those with scruples. Rather than being brow beaten out of his principles by a cruel world, he preferred to surrender them on his own terms.

Vader rules

With these cynical convictions, Karan marched on in the protective shell of Darth Vader. His days were glorious, but his nights were sleepless. Anakin, it seems, was more persistent than he had anticipated. Why couldn't the skin of Darth Vader repel the pangs of his conscience, he fumed.

As time went by, Karan adapted to his new ethics convincing himself that's who he really was, and if so many people were with him, could he really be so bad? No, it was just the silly idealism in him rearing it's ugly head, he rationalized. When would he be rid of it, he wondered. He had to get comfortable with living in the real world.

With time, Karan lost the respect of those he had once respected most, and gained followers among those he had always despised. But his fan base and viewership grew daily, as he continued to incite the baser instincts of his country men. Riled up angry people were necessary for high ratings, and Karan knew how to push their buttons, spread discontent and hate among peaceful communities. Peaceful content communities, who did not obsessively watch the news, were bad for business.

When chickens come to roost

Karan sat alone in his office staring at the wall in front. Today, he had hit a new low. A 15-year-old girl from a marginalized community had been gang raped and para-

lyzed by the injuries inflicted on her. She was fighting valiantly to live. She had named her rapists.

He would have to cover the story, but he would have to downplay it. This was the second time and he should be getting used to it. The first time it had been another girl, younger still. He had sent some junior reporters to the scene. He wouldn't get personally involved, of course. It would get the minimum amount of coverage, he could get away with.

The party he had charioted to victory, needed this from him, again, for both times the rapists were from communities belonging to their vote banks, and the raped, not so much. In fact, the rape victims came from communities they usually demonized. He had been posturing and shouting over inane issues for months, and now he would have to hold his tongue. In fact, he might have to come up with ingenious excuses for the political party he championed on air, and perhaps find some other scapegoat, for he knew very well how much his fortunes were tangled with theirs.

A tear rolled down his cheek and then a few more till he bent over his head over his desk and sobbed. This wasn't the time for his conscience to overwhelm him. But if not now, then when? When would Luke come and rescue him? How long would he have to remain Darth Vader?

Anakin longed to return, but Karan was tired. Did he have another fight in him? He did not think so. He had burned

all his bridges and this wasn't fiction. No Luke would ever come for him. Darth Vader would remain in charge, eating away his soul, little by little everyday. Karan finally understood that there were different types of evil. Not all human weaknesses were the same. Some pricked your conscience, some upset and angered you, and others consumed your soul.

Yet Karan hoped against hope to find the courage to redeem himself, somehow. If Ashoka could after the Kalinga war, then was it really too late for him?