

CHANGE

# Traffic control

What do you know about **RICKEN PATEL**, the global leader of online protest? To start with, his idea goes back 20 years. By AARTI VIRANI

Ricken Patel is the founding president and executive director of the global civic organisation, Avaaz

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—RICKEN PATEL

**T**For a man who steers the world’s most formidable online activist network—*Avaaz.org*, a seven-year-old web movement that’s empowered millions to tackle everything from corruption to climate change—Ricken Patel is surprisingly soft-spoken. But there’s an urgency to his statements. “This is going to sound whacky,” prefaces the 37-year-old, holding court at his Manhattan office, with views of bustling Union Square, “but [our civilisation] has multiple doomsday powers. To get it right, we have to let community and cooperation win.”

## HE WIZENED UP EARLY

Born to a Gujarati father and English mother, Patel was raised around Edmonton, Canada. “Lots of prairies, horses and time to reflect. I was the only kid who wasn’t white or Native American. It was a really violent and unhealthy culture,” he says, admitting the community was riddled with alcoholism and drug addiction. “But it gave me insight into social ills.”

## BIG AMBITION OR BIG EGO?

His organisation’s fuzzy beginnings formed when Patel was a teenager. “I sat my family down when I was 18 and outlined something like Avaaz. Only, we didn’t have the internet at the time. The idea of organising people from around the world seemed almost megalomania-

cal,” he says. “My read on history was that men with big egos were the problem. So a part of me was like, ‘Am I one of those guys?’”

## HOW DOES HE DO IT?

Now, with teams in six continents, the Avaaz community, which works in 16 languages, is made up of volunteers who sign petitions, fund media campaigns, lobby governments and organise ‘offline’ protests. When a Bangladeshi garment factory collapsed last year, Avaaz persuaded retail behemoths like H&M to sign a work-safety plan; following the attack on 15-year-old Malala Yousafzai, Avaaz urged the Pakistani government to fund the schooling of 30,00,000 children. “I used to think changing the world was just about having great ideas and being passionately committed,” Patel asserts. “Now I really believe that in addition to those things, it’s about empowering others.”

## HIS RESPONSE TO CRITICISM

Avaaz has attracted its share of sceptics wary of ‘clicktivists’, as the movement’s tech-savvy foot soldiers are dubbed. “No one accused Mahatma Gandhi of practising ‘walkivism’. The internet’s just a tool to get people together,” Patel says. “People come to Avaaz because there’s no other constituency that can reach out to every country in the world in six hours and mobilise.” ■