

# Indian community needs to get more involved: Natarajan

She's been there and done that, so to say. Indian American ANU NATARAJAN, 44, made history last week when she became the first from the expatriate community to be elected to the San Francisco Bay Area City Council. This is also the first time an Indian American woman became a leader in city politics. Natarajan, an Urban Planner and Architect by profession, served in the Fremont City Planning commission before being appointed to a vacant City Council seat in 2004. This was the first time she was contesting for any public office and that the voters accepted her wholeheartedly can be gauged from the fact that Natarajan was able to get broad-based support from Fremont residents. Her election also marks a victory for her untiring efforts to unify the faction-ridden Indian American community. Excerpts from an exclusive interview with SAM RAO:



Sam Rao

## ■ Congratulations Ms Natarajan. Your reactions on the victory.

Thanks. It feels great. We ran a good campaign and I'm glad that the people of Fremont responded so positively. It feels good to do something well and represent the Indian community.

## ■ Your victory also marks the first time an Indian American has been elected to the city council of a major city in the San Francisco Bay area. What would you attribute this victory to?

That's right and I got 35 percent of the total votes polled. All of us worked hard on the campaign and the most important thing in this exercise is to reach out your name and message to the voters. It is also imperative to listen to the community

so that you are closer to them and serve them better.

## ■ Your reactions on following on the footsteps of other illustrious people like Congressman Dilip Singh Saund, the first Asian and Indian American to be a Congressman.

There is no comparison. I am not comparing myself to Congressman Saund. I don't think such comparisons are valid. Congressman Saund did some really pioneering work so I don't think my win would be in the same league. Still, I must say that I ran as a candidate of City of Fremont and then as an Indian-American. I was, therefore, not just an 'Indian American' candidate.

## ■ You reached out to the mainstream community through your volunteers.

We had broad-based support from every single organization, including those of Indian origin. And every group responded positively for a large base of support. Our campaign team and volunteers spanned across the spectrum, across all ethnicities and age groups. Nearly 70 high school students, and a couple of Chinese-American girls were the most dedicated in our

team. We also had seasoned campaigners on staff who've run major campaigns in the past. We got lot of help from the Indian-American community as well.

## ■ This is your first campaign although you have been involved in local politics before, including a stint as a member of the Planning staff, commission and other committees. What did you do differently and what did you learn during the campaign?

One thing that is clear to me now is that the Indian community needs to get more involved and get into boards, commissions, Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) etc. Basically, the idea is to get involved in the larger community. I started as a volunteer in the planning committee, and later became a staff person and then commissioner. Probably, the most memorable event I was involved with in the city of Fremont was to be on the Chair to celebrate Fremont's 50th anniversary event. It was a very successful, diverse and successful event.

## ■ Fremont is on the threshold of becoming a major city. There are even talks of building a large sports stadium etc here. And with your background, you could be the key to Fremont's success in the future. Do you consider yourself 'Pro development' or 'Pro business'?

I consider myself believing in 'smart development'. I want to work with business and represent the people. I have worked in business, with business and as a consultant. You may say that I am extremely 'Pro business' in that sense. But at the same time, I have a very clear understanding of a responsive government

and the need to be responsible to the needs of the community. I strongly believe that we cannot be dictated by outside interests and we should be clear on who we are and where we are going. My strength is that with my background in Urban planning and Design. I therefore look forward as we develop our downtown and become more of a full-fledged city.

## ■ When did you come to the US and what prompted you to join politics?

I applied for a Rotary Graduate Studies scholarship and came to the University of Washington on a scholarship for a MS degree in Urban Design and Planning. I came to the US in 1995 and then to Fremont in 1996. I worked with the Fremont Planning department and then became a Commissioner. I became a US citizen on Nov 18, 2003 and got appointed to the City Council in 2004, when Councilmember Bob Wasserman became the Mayor. So now I have been in Fremont for 11 years.

## ■ When did you first decide to run for office or consider a career in politics?

It was not planned. Given that the appointment for Council member came up, while I was serving in the Planning commission, many people asked me to consider becoming a City Council member. Taking their advice, I decided to throw my hat in the mix. I was working as a consultant in San Francisco and around December two years ago, I decided that the commute was not worth it. I wanted to stay closer to my home in Fremont. So it was not a deliberate attempt but rather an opportunity that opened up.

## ■ Fremont is a very diverse city with

many different ethnicities. It is great to have an Asian-American on the City Council, with Chinese-American Steve Cho already a Council member and now you as an Indian-American. What, in your opinion, is the future of the city?

We are a very diverse community. Over 150 languages are spoken here. All of us live in harmony and embrace our diversity for the most part. However, there are undercurrents of racism and intolerance that do exist. We need to acknowledge the reality and face it. I intend to create forums and create positive dialogues, build awareness instead of being merely politically correct all the time and living with stereotypical misconceptions about minorities and other races. I am a realist about our role as a minority community and we need to become more and more involved. I think we are doing a good job and the current Mayor has been extremely proactive.

As a minority, we need to work twice as hard and that's ok. However, we have a strong support base of all people who have wholeheartedly supported me.

## ■ How do you stay calm and collected in the midst of all this frenetic campaign? Do you meditate?

I meditate occasionally, but not as regularly as I would like to. But I stay focused on positive aspects and enjoy things that I am doing. That is my secret of not feeling stressed.

## ■ Tell us about your family?

My husband Sundaram works as a software engineer. My parents are in Bangalore and my sister recently moved to Bombay from London.

# Ali wins the faith of people, despite negative campaign

SUJEET RAJAN

IT was not only his political opponent, incumbent Joan F. Stern, that Saqib Ali, 31, had to beat to win a seat in the Maryland House of Delegates from District 39 in Annapolis. He also had to shun off a racist protester who tried to debase him and his religion leading up to the polls. Ali, however, made it to the House of Delegates, becoming the first candidate of Muslim origin to do so and the second Pakistani American ever, after Saghir Ali in Massachusetts, and the second of South Asian origin in the House of Delegates after Indian American Kumar Barve.

District 39 covers Montgomery Village, North Potomac, Washington Grove and parts of Germantown. Its horseshoe-shape around Gaithersburg encompasses 110,000 voters of growing diversity and economic backgrounds.

In mid-August this year, a man planted himself outside Ali's home, wearing a t-shirt that read: 'This mind is an Allah-free zone,' and carrying an anti-Islamic sign in his hands. He also told Ali, who works as a senior software engineer: 'You are a terrorist... you guys are violent extremists.'

This was during Ali's run-up to the primaries in September which took place a day later, five years to the day of the terrorist attacks. Ali reacted in a way that forced the man to leave: he remained silent to the provocation.

In an interview to *The Washington Post* at that time, Ali, born in Chicago, said that his



candidacy was about such matters as "roads, the schools", and not his religion, a divisive issue in America, post 9/11.

He reiterated that statement after his win in the primaries which set him on to course for his famous November win: "If we win today, we'll prove that's an anomaly. And we'll continue to talk, not about whether I'm a Muslim or a Hindu or a Christian or a Jew, but about roads and schools and how to improve them," he said in an interview to his hometown newspaper

Ali's win, therefore, is not only laudatory and a sure sign that bias is being replaced by reason that Muslims are not being viewed with the same suspicion as before, but a testament to his maturity not to capitalize on that incident involving the protester into political fodder for his own means.

"I am percent Muslim and 100 percent American," said Ali, adding that "my faith is my faith... but that's incidental."

Ali's secret to his victory was a vigorous grassroots campaign that tilted the scales in his favor.

"As far as I could see, he followed the book on how to win an election," Gene Counihan of Montgomery Village, a state delegate from 1982 to 1994, was quoted as saying in the *Montgomery County Gazette*, after his stunning victory last week. "I saw him on the campaign trail more than anybody. He was out door-to-door; he had impressive literature. He wanted it."

In a statement, Ali thanked his supporters and the people who supported his campaign for his remarkable win.

"Even though it was my name on the ballot, this victory belongs to you and the hundreds of other people like you who have given generously of themselves over the past several months. Whether you donated money, put up a yard sign, made phone calls from our campaign headquarters, distributed fliers on my behalf at the polling stations, marched in a parade with me, or simply voted for me, I owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude," said Ali.

"Our campaign had a lot of energy. It had that underdog feel that struck a chord with people and resonated," Ali had said in a previous interview. "When you talk to real voters, not the insiders, they care if you pay attention to them. They remember that you listened to them. People appreciate new blood."

Ali has lived in Montgomery County since 1991, when he moved there to attend college. He received his Bachelors and Masters de-

grees in Computer Science from the University of Maryland, College Park.

He has had an illustrious career in grassroots politics and social service: he was the co-chairperson of the Longdraft Road Coalition; the first elected President of the District 39 Democratic Club; the Legislative District 39 coordinator for the Howard Dean presidential campaign in 2003 and early 2004; and worked full-time for Congressman Chris Van Hollen's general re-election campaign in 2004; and was co-chair of the Montgomery County Democratic Spring Ball in 2004 which raised tens of thousands of dollars for the Montgomery County Democratic Party.

Ali was not the only Muslim-origin winner that shot into the limelight in this mid-term poll. Voters elected a black Democrat as the first Muslim in Congress after a race in which he advocated quick US withdrawal from Iraq and made little mention of his faith.

Keith Ellison, a 43-year-old lawyer and state representative, defeated two rivals to succeed retiring Democrat Martin Sabo in a seat that has been held by Democrats since 1963.

Ellison, who converted to Islam as a 19-year-old college student in his native Detroit, won with the help of Muslims among a coalition of liberal, anti-war voters.

The number of Jewish politicians too has gone up. The number of Jewish senators rose from 11 to 13 and the number of Jewish representatives in the House jumped to 30, with six new faces, creating all-time high of Jewish politicians in Congress.

