



The banner features the 'play to potential' logo on the left. To its right are contact details: a WhatsApp icon with the number '+91 85914 52129*', a Twitter icon with the handle '@PlayToPotential', and a globe icon with the website 'playtopotential.com'. Further right, under the heading 'Also available on:', are logos for Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. On the right side of the banner is a portrait of the host, Deepak Jayaraman, with the text 'Podcast Host' and his name 'Deepak Jayaraman' below it. A small disclaimer at the bottom left reads: '*Just send us a Whatsapp with your name, number and email and we will add you to our distribution list.'

Guest

Atul Kasbekar is an award winning photographer (first Indian to win the prestigious International Food and Beverage Creative Excellence awards 2005, held in London for his work on Kingfisher Calendar), Film producer (His film Neerja won the National Award for the Best Feature Film in Hindi in 2017) and works with the who's who of the Corporate World and Bollywood through Bling! Entertainment Solutions (a Celebrity Management Company) and Corporate Image (a Specialist Imaging Service for top management and spokespersons within an organization).

Atul studied at Champion School, Mumbai and Jai Hind College (University of Mumbai) and then joined UDCT (now Institute of Chemical Technology – one of the leading Chemical Engineering colleges in the country). But against all odds and advice, he dropped out of UDCT and backed himself to pursue a course in photography in Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara. He has subsequently come back to India and has built a distinguished career in Photography, Celebrity Management, Film Production and more.

In our conversation we spoke about the key transition from engineering to photography, the role of resilience in changing trajectories and his reflections on the journey post that. We also spoke about how he has managed to stay relevant and has been able to re-invent himself in new areas as the area of photography has transformed given the onslaught of the digital revolution.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 12th conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast series where I talk to people from different walks of life on topics around Leadership, Transitions and Careers. I am Deepak Jayaraman, the creator and curator of this series of conversations. My objective from this podcast is to have "Learning conversations" with a range of people and share those curated insights with you. This time, I am talking to Atul Kasbekar, a highly accomplished photographer, Producer of the movie Neerja (which won the National Award for the best Feature Film in Hindi) and an entrepreneur who has launched several successful businesses including Celebrity Management and Corporate Image Management. The client list for his work includes the who's who in the corporate world and in Bollywood what really intrigued me was the fact that Atul was a High achieving student all the way in school and was studying Chemical Engineering at UDCT, arguably the best Chemical Engineering school in the country. But he dropped out of there in a couple of years, went to the US to pursue a course in photography and today is a highly accomplished photographer who has won several awards for his work. In our conversation Atul reflected on why he did what he did at the various inflection points along the way and shared his insights around how he has managed to stay relevant over the years. Without further ado, over to the conversation.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): One of the things I am curious about is, how much of whom we are gets baked in early in our lives. So, maybe you could reflect on the formative years of your life, first 10–15 years. Could you talk a little bit about what got formed then, which still forms a core part of who you are?

Atul Kasbekar (AK): I actually had exceptional grades in school. I was in Campion and then in Jai Hind. This is, we are talking now in the '70s and early '80s. So, if you had the grades it was generally assumed at that time that you will become one of three–four professions. Primarily, it was engineer, doctor, chartered accountant, and etcetera. I was exceptionally good at chemistry. I enjoyed that subject. My dad had a chemical factory. It almost seemed logical that I'd become a chemical engineer. Now, I had the grades to get into UDCT, which is now called the ICT; at that time, the University Department of Chemical Technology.

DJ: Possibly the best chemical degree in the country.

AK: Easily. In the country, by far, and rated, I think, in the top 10 in Asia as well. So, it was just one of those things where you got into UDCT and everybody was like, oh my god, you got into UDCT! But when I got there, I realized that chemical engineering had very little to do with pure chemistry per se. The chemical process was pretty much already known. You had to design equipment. It was more physics, and physics I hated. So, all of a sudden, I realized that I was quite easily going to be the worst chemical engineer known. Then, when I checked a lot of the former grads, I found very few of them were still doing chemical engineering. And I couldn't for the life of me figure out why one would spend four years doing something and eventually they are selling insurance or running some company that had absolutely nothing to do with chemistry, the chemical process, physics, or engineering. They were in finance. So, it seemed to me like a singularly useless waste of four years. So, I started talking to people, which is an interesting story.

DJ: This is during your engineering?

AK: Yeah. So, in the first year, I realized *yaar, yeh main nahin kar sakta*. This I really should not do. I am giving you this little build up because then it becomes relevant to where my parents were in the context of this. So, I spoke to a couple of people. One of them was Pralhad Kakkar. And he said a very interesting thing: '95% of humanity goes to work every day and 5%' I am sure he made that number up in his head but it seems very accurate '5% makes a living out of what they enjoy'.

DJ: And how did you get to him out of curiosity?

AK: I don't recall exactly. I think it was, the former head of Air India was a family friend and he headed the advertising of it. So, he said, why don't you meet this filmmaker? So Pralhad said, 'Just ask yourself what is it that nobody needs to tell you to do, and if you are doing that to make a living, then you're never really working. You are never getting up on a Monday morning and going to work. Weekend comes, ho hum, big deal, the rest of my week was also fun. So, if you are going to work, I figure you can work for 6, 8, 10 hours a day. Beyond that, the motivation has to be a passion. Otherwise, it will be work very soon.' So, I said, OK, nobody needs to tell me to take pictures. It was a very serious hobby. I took some rubbish photos of dogs and cats and horses and sunsets and my sister, whatever, but I enjoyed that. So, when I started talking to my parents, we met a couple of people. I met Gautam, which is a very interesting story as to how I met Gautam Rajadhyaksh.

But when I spoke to my parents, they were freaking out. And you can't blame them, because my dad is the eldest of five brothers and he has a Master's in mathematics. The second one is an architect and third's a doctor, the fourth's a chemical engineer, and the fifth one is a chartered accountant.

DJ: What would be called respectable professions...

AK: Yeah, in the context of then. So, they were like, you want to be a photographer? Great, but what you are going to do for a living? That kind of thing. But what was interesting was that I wasn't someone who was flippant. I captained my school for cricket, in debates. I represented Maharashtra at the republic day parade, in the NCC. I was school captain. I captained basketball. So, it wasn't like this guy is going to chuck it all away. So, they could see that he would be fairly seriously about whatever. So, I have to say, it was a very big decision for them and hats off. They tried all these things of, 'But why don't you finish the degree and then you do whatever you want to'. And I was like, why would I waste three years, makes no sense.

To give absolute due credit, even though he couldn't afford it at that time, my dad insisted that 'Whatever education you want is not a problem. You figure out which is the best place in the world to go to and I will send you there.' I was like, but you can't afford it right now. And he said, 'Shut up! That's none of your business. But this is your long rope, because education is everything.' He always had this thing about degree. So, I said, photography, I don't really need a degree. I can assist people, I can learn, etcetera. He said, 'No, I want a degree to make myself happy. That degree is my receipt for the money I am spending. So, you give me my receipt. I don't care what you do with this.' So, it was a great line. He said, 'This is your long rope. Now, you come up with it or you hang yourself up to you, but I am giving you that long rope and after I have taken care of your education and your sisters' education, etcetera, your mother and I will studiously spend your inheritance.' Which I thought was a very cool thing.

And that's one of the few lines I have brutally used with my kids, '*Kya padhna hain bataao?* You get that one shot at the title. After that, good luck, buddy. And if you need me to make phone calls, I am more than happy to make them. Do you need me to stand guarantor of something? I am happy to do that. But you go on your journey now.' Then, that safety net right now which is right under your arse, for my kids, I will move that now 30 feet below, and then further below, and then take it away.

DJ: But it's also interesting that you moved from best in the country to sort of best in the world just in terms of once you said photography. The fact that they said...

AK: There was nothing here. There wasn't anything I could do over here. I checked that out. There wasn't anything. There were some small courses at JJ, which was part of learning fine art. I can't paint to save my life. So, it's not like I am going to do classes in sketching and painting and *side mein photography karo*. So, it needed to be a dedicated program. At the FTII, it was primarily film and moving cameras and that's not what I wanted to do. So, it just then boiled down to where and at that time there were pretty much like three or four places in the world. There's lot more options now. I mean, even pre-internet there were few more. But there was RIT in Rochester, there was Brooks Institute, there's Art Center in Pasadena, in California, and, I think, there one was in London or something. Brooks had a really good reputation at that time. There were a couple of Indians there before me.

DJ: Just persisting with that juncture. Often, it is very easy to be dissatisfied with status quo and say, I want to do something else. So, what's your sense on how do you separate the real passion from a distraction?

AK: If you have to be a photographer you have to a) focus. So, focus has been a strong point in my life, I suppose, even from then, even before it was necessary for me to *focus* on subjects. So, I was quite clear *ki yaar*, I love this. And what Pralhad said makes sense. Someone was telling me what this David Guetta kind of DJs make and it is numbing. It's actually unbelievable. So, I mean, who would have thought that? So, I didn't know at that time, that no matter what you would chose to do, which is true of today and maybe let's say from about a decade ago to now, where you could make a very good living at whatever it was. So, actually, it was a bit of a punt in the dark. There weren't that many known people. When I came back, there were, I mean, I can literally name the five people who were established as photographers. Today, you can throw a stone and hit one. Commercial photography. It just was one of those things where '*yaar, karte hain, yaar*'.

In *Campion*, where, even if I say so myself, I was like best boy and sterling student, absolutely, even my professors and all called me and said, 'What are you doing?' and the term 'wasting your life' showed up a lot at that time. In fact, I was telling Raju Hirani, inadvertently, of course, Madhavan's track in '*Three Idiots*' is really my life. Because he switched in the movie from engineering to becoming a wildlife photographer. So, I shoot wildlife once in a while, but they're mostly on two legs. But that's my track so to speak. And the line in '*Three Idiots*' is 'you be very good at what you do and *success jhakk marke tere pichhe aayegi*' that kind of thing. So, it never was something *ki* if I will do this, I will make that much. I just wanted to take pictures and if someone is paying me to take pictures, oh my god, how nice. Or they gave me an extra zero, even better, but you know I'll take the picture anyway.

DJ: You briefly spoke about the role of Gautam. Often, a lot of us at key pivotal moments, either knowingly or unknowingly, end up benefiting from a mentor. Talk to us a little bit about what he did for you and more importantly, what does it mean for people in terms of having the right mentors around them?

AK: I started investigating what professional/commercial advertising photography would entail. First of all, when I asked myself the two things that I enjoyed doing, one was writing (and I edited my school magazine called '*Campion Review*') and the other was this. And at that time, honestly, the profile of the writer again, mercifully, which has changed was this left-of-centre *jhola*-carrying khadi-clad guy who sat at Samovar when he could afford it and discussed all the problems in the world that he was never going to solve anyway. And the last thing I was going to be was a commie. I will be a capitalist pig till I die, for sure. So, I said, that I can't do. Plus, it seemed like you'd be scrounging around for a living, and that was true at that time. So, I said, I will do the other thing that I enjoyed.

So, then I started investigating more. Wherever you looked at any magazine, there was a by-line. Inevitably, a picture I liked happened to be taken by Gautam. So, I had no idea how to connect with him. I knew nobody in the business in any form. So, I went to the phone directory and he wasn't listed. And Rajadhyaksh is a fairly common surname in Mumbai. So, there is a lot of them, there was like 10–20 pages of them. So, every third or fourth Rajadhyaksh, I would call and confidently say, 'Can I speak to Gautam please?' and they'd say 'wrong number'. So, after must be some 100 phone calls at one rupee a piece or whatever it was at that time, finally, it was some cousin or someone said, this is not his number.

DJ: Brute force method?

AK: Yeah, yeah! So, I said let's not call each one. Let's just go every fifth, every sixth, and then took a highlighter to mark it done, let's not call this guy again or he slaps me, in case I have to go back to the start. So, every day, I would make 10–20 phone calls. Then, finally, someone gave me the number, which was landline, of course. So, I called him. I said, 'Listen, hi, my name is so and so.

Please don't hang up. I need two minutes of your time. I was wondering if I can meet you. I would like to know more about what the profession is all about.' So, there's just silence at the other end. 'I am at Lintas. I work there at Express Towers. Come on this date.' I am like, wow, so I am going to meet the great one! So, I go there and meet him and he took a great shine to me and we remained friends, in fact, till he passed away.

All Gautam did actually was give me time. It was more like a patient and a shrink kind of a scenario. It was just a reassurance that it's a respectable profession. It's not the guy who says 'cheese' at a wedding, because, you know, if it's a photographer, that's the first image that came to mind. Are you going to be at weddings saying, 'Sir, *thoda closer*' kind of thing? There is Mitter Bedi and Adrian Steven and this is the kind of stuff they do. I went for one shoot that he was doing with Vilas Bhende and watched one shoot in action. I never really assisted him, hung out with him on one shoot.

DJ: And this is all when you were pursuing your UDCT degree or you'd decided to move on?

AK: No. So, this is at the end of the first year and then through that second year period. And then, I just registered at Xavier's just in case my application didn't go through.

And at that time, it was really bizarre. People have no idea how tough it was. There was no provision for you to get official foreign exchange to go for a bachelor's degree abroad. So, now you can go for anything. You couldn't go [then]. So, my dad said I am not doing any hawala nonsense at all. Gaud Saraswat Brahmins rooted from Karwar, they don't do such things. So, he said, you want to go, I have no problem, but you please get an official permit. I am like, how do you expect me to do it. Dad said, now, go figure it out. So, I went to the RBI rule book. They said you can go if you prove that a) the degree is not available in India in a bachelor's program and the second thing is, you have to prove that it is useful for the country. That is so subjective.

Then, I realized that very few people in our country want to take a call and put a letter down that actually has no harm to them, but they don't want to do it, because why take that 1% chance of whatever. So, if you write to Mumbai University and say, give me a letter; I told them this is my problem, you need to tell me that this degree is not available in whatever. They won't give you the letter. So, I said, you don't have it in Mumbai University. They said, no. So, I said, why can't you write it and say you don't have it. Then, they thought to themselves and said, OK, I will tell you what, you write to us saying I want to study photography, where in Mumbai University can I do it? And then we will say, we have no such course, one line, which is in direct reply to your reply. So, I would have to get that from four-five universities. Now, Mumbai at least you can go there and catch somebody in the office. Get it from Delhi? Good luck! So, I would send letters to them, registered, with a self-addressed stamped envelope inside, just make it easier for you to just slip it in and send it back. Sixteen reminders later! So, I got four-five of those, first of all to prove in India.

Then, I literally went and beat down the doors of every single ad agency, and this is a random stranger walking in 'Sir, please, Mohammad Khan, this is the thing. I have got this. I need the second part, as many documents as I can get from people saying photography will be useful for the country. Please word it in your own way.'

DJ: And all this is for forex?

AK: For forex. My dad said you can't go...

DJ: You got the admit and now, you are trying to organize the forex?

AK: It wasn't very much. It was like 6000 dollars a year. Then, I must have got literally like 50 letters from various people, every ad agency, and any person.

Actually, I should just tell my kids this. And this is what I mean about safety net. My dad took it away. He said, 'If you want to go, figure it out.' And at that point I said, whatever happens now, I will make this work. I think, to put it into a sense of perspective, I am actually quite shocked now that I think about it. I mean you walked into an enterprise, 'Do you have an appointment?' 'No! Can I meet Mohammad Khan?' 'Seriously?' 'Can I meet Alyque Padamsee?' 'Who are you again?' 'Sir, this is my problem.' This is you are talking to the receptionist, to get past the receptionist whose job is to stonewall you. 'Can I speak to his secretary? Can I write a note? I'll wait.' There goes the day.

DJ: Going back to the Gautam conversation. It wasn't an 'I want a job' conversation. It was a 'let me figure out what this profession is'. It sorts of elevates you, saying that I am here genuinely to find out if this profession makes sense for me. It's interesting that you structure it that way. And from an entrepreneurship standpoint, you are always opening doors much bigger than you. Just having that tenacity to keep knocking.

AK: I think, it just bore down from passion. Now, I have seen a couple of shoots, I am pretty certain this is what I want to do, and I have a feeling that I will be good at it. I don't know successful or not, but it's definitely something that I can do, and you then just sort of do it.

I was telling my kids the other day. I met this guy from Rajasthan. He tried very hard to meet with me and I didn't give him time of day. I mean, there was no connection, he just wanted to meet. So, finally, he connected with someone in the office, someone who didn't give him time of day. Then, he connected with one very sweet guy, who basically loves a sob story and he got suckered into coming to me and saying, Sir, I think you should meet this guy. And I said, why? I mean, we are not involved in that thing, message me before, etcetera. He said, no, I think, there are some interesting things you could have some synergies. Finally, I met with him. Not a whole lot happened. Essentially, what he was doing was he was selling things like Facebook likes, Instagram followers, and I can get so many views and his thing was that he was selling them to the digital companies who were selling them on to the music companies and production houses. He says, you can open all those doors, why don't you get into partnership with me? We can make a lot of money. Here is the money that they are overbilling for things I am doing for them. So, I just said, see, I just find that grotesque, to think that you need to buy these things and say 80 million and so many million views and actually, this is not the case, there are a bunch of bought accounts or whatever. So, I said, I don't want to do it.

But I was telling my kids that the guy can't string three straight sentences in English. He has not let that hamper him. He wants to now open up way bigger doors and he's just not taken no for an answer. I said, now in your line of work, where you have been so mollycoddled along the way and wrapped in cotton wool from your home bubble to your lift bubble, lift bubble to your underground parking bubble to your car bubble. Then, you are fully insulated from the universe and you reach your school bubble, college bubble, airplane bubble. You have just been bubbled through the entire system. And I have jumped railway tracks. I have jumped into running busses. Whatever, no problem. Every person wants a better life for their kids than they had, no problem. I am saying, '*Baahar jaake na chaar dhakke khane chahiye*'. Because the brutality when this guy comes into the ring with his fist swinging, you have no chance, because he will chew you and spit you out any day of the week. Because you are just not strong enough and you are not tenacious enough and you are not...

DJ: And he has heard a lot more no's than you, right? So many people have told him no and he has, sort of like you, kept knocking and some door somewhere will open.

AK: Correct. I find these stories quite remarkable. Nothing happened, but the take from this was, he managed to do what he wanted to do, which was get face time. Eventually, he got the time he wanted.

DJ: Just talking about success in a field like this, it's a creative profession and at some level it seems like a low odds career.

AK: Right now, probably yes. Not then.

DJ: Back to the point about marrying passion with pragmatism. So, how should an individual at the cusp today, who feels a lot like you did at that time, how should that person think about taking the plunge?

AK: So, for example, I believe that the only way I can pay back what Gautam did is to essentially pay it forward. In my head, the time that Gautam and Pralhad spent with me is not a debt I can ever repay. So, even if Pralhad calls me for something utterly random, without question, if I am free, I will always honour it and make time to attend. And it's not like, *accha*, I have done eight of them, now we are done. The debt will never be repaid, very clearly, in my head. If someone comes to me, by and large, I have taken the time to meet with them or chat with them, at least on the phone, or review their work or whatever.

I feel that photography is ridiculously saturated right now. There are just too many people and there is just ridiculous undercutting going on and the people who are making money is a very small bunch at the top, which are inherently shooting celebrities. So, what happens is, the celebrity is getting paid 20 lakh, 50 lakh, 1 crore, 2 crores a day and if they say, '*usko bulao*' whatever that person is charging is pocket change compared to what you stand to lose. In that day, you are doing the film, you are doing the stills; just give him what he wants. So, on the day, if that photographer is billing you 2 lakhs, 3 lakhs, 4 lakhs a day, it's fine. It's par for the course for them. Now, there are a thousand kids out there, established people out there, who are vying for that job, and the level below that is a bona fide disaster.

So, what I am telling people is that look, you know what, if you like photography, that's fine. What's wrong with video? And that is such an exponentially large market that you can do what you love, except its moving. And in the digital world, for example, what's happening is not even funny. The option for visual entertainment is now which is a separate discussion, but it really has come on to your TV screen and your iPad and your phone and so on. Somebody's shooting that and it's all video. So, why aren't you there? Having said this, in any profession, if you are at the very, very top and you are so good, then, again, '*success jhakk marte aapke piche aayegi*,' whether in New York, whether here, or wherever.

DJ: Back to this point about few people who are working with celebrities, who are commercially making returns. What does it take to get there?

AK: A, you have to be good. B, you have to be in that person's good books. There is a relationship piece, which, actually, earlier didn't exist that much. I mean, they liked you, nice guy *karke*. Now, I find that there are a lot of photographers who are fully *ghusaoed* into their personal lives and they are hanging and whatever. If you are hanging because you are a friend, it's one thing. If you are hanging because, hey bro, I am here. Then, you check up with their managers, then you suck up to their managers '*Yaar, kaunsa shoot aa raha hain?* What's happening? You haven't shot for this brand for a long time.' Then, call the brand manager over there, 'You know, he really shoots with me all the time'. And what happens is, at that level the brand managers are least bothered unless they are so

specific that only X or Y will shoot, they don't even care. They are like, OK, this guy. If they want this guy, this guy. They don't even bother investigating, does he really want this guy.

DJ: Hunger wins, basically. That's the point you are making? If you are hungry enough...

AK: *Nahin*. You need to now be doing a lot of setting to make sure that you are in the mix. This is, of course, assuming that all five, eight, 10, 30 people that are there are all good enough to do the job. And that is the case. They are all good enough to do the job. It is no big deal. Especially, most celebrity photography is so basic that you are doing two days' work in two hours. OK, just hold product, smile, and boom, boom, boom, you are done. So, how hard can that be?

DJ: In a creative field, what does excellence mean? When do you stop? When do you know that you have done enough to really get the best shot possible for a single product or whatever the case might be? How do you draw the line?

AK: I mean, on a commercial job, at the point where the client is happy and you are happy. You need to be professional enough to make sure it doesn't really leave your door until you know you have delivered it over a certain line. And then, I guess that absolutely perfect shot, any photographer will tell you that they haven't done that many in their life, that they know that they just can't improve it. That's always open to a subjective kind of conversation. So, you need to know that you have done your absolute best. Otherwise, you won't last very long.

DJ: In a lot of ways, if I look at the corporate world, the digital wave has really changed the way a lot of leaders lead, and a lot of leaders stay up to date with what's going on. How has that influenced success in your field of work? The reason I ask is, earlier, you had to get the picture right. Now, I think the digital post-production leaves you with a lot of opportunity to make amends for mistakes that might have been made. So, how does that work for you?

AK: At a technical level, what has happened is most of the photography is now on the computer. So, let's say, the depth of knowledge that I had in lighting cars, which is curved sheet metal and curved glass extremely difficult to get right, nobody is doing that anymore. The car is generated on a computer and once that's done, it can be twisted, turned in any way you want, lit any way you want, placed wherever you want. You don't even need to take the car there. So, if you have some stunning background plates from wherever, then you are done. Just place the car. So, now, it's the guy on the computer who has generated the car and then each turn, magnification, whatever is easy enough to sort out.

You don't want to be the last guy selling horse carriages when the car dealerships have arrived. That's technology, innovation; it's a constant, it's going to go on. I have maintained this from day one: your knowledge in photography or your expertise in photography will depend greatly on how much you read and immerse yourself in all the arts. And you are just generally aware and you are a sponge and you accumulate and assimilate. You should have a keen interest in all the other arts, in fine arts, culture, cuisine, architecture, whatever it is. Graphic design, you need not know how to design but you can appreciate good from great.

If I am doing a lecture or something, I will ask them, how many of you been to this place? Few hands will go up. Did any of you visit this museum? They have no clue. Or very rarely is there. Even if you say something like London, did you get away from Oxford Street. Did you go to Tate, wherever? Even if you went to shop, did you go to, let's say, Portobello Road as opposed to the standard nonsense that everybody does. No problem, but after you have done that. If you are in the arts, you need to be aware of all the other arts. So, similarly, when it comes to photography, there is certain, I like to

call it, democratization of a medium, and it's become massively accessible to everybody. So, on a given day, your doctor could take a world-class photo and by himself, aided with some filters, apps, whatever it is, that photo is unbelievable. Point is, can he do that time and time again and day after day? Then, I guess you would be a great professional. But why I say this medium has become so democratic is because on a given day that doctor can take a great picture. On no day can you either prescribe medicine for one of his patients nor can you perform a heart surgery. Forget it! That ain't happening, digital or no digital. On a given day, you can't design that building but your architect can take a world-class picture. So, to some extent, not cheapened, that's not the right word, but '*haan, yaar, main bhi kar sakta hoon*'.

DJ: True, it's made it accessible. If I were to use a metaphor from the sporting world. I remember reading an article which talks about the difference between Usain Bolt and Michael Phelps. It says that not everybody is a swimmer but everybody can run. So, that makes him that much of a bigger deal because he is competing in a completely democratized sport. So, on some level, everybody with a phone that's probably taking it too far but everyone with a decent camera...

AK: No, no. James Cameron just said that: 'If you have a phone camera with video in it, you are now a director. Go, make a film.'

DJ: But actually, when you look at people who've managed to sustain greatness over a period of time, what have they done to stay relevant and continue the excellence over a period of time?

AK: I love the word 'relevance'. I am glad you used it. I think, hats off to people who have managed to do that in their careers for long. I mean, for example, whatever criticism anyone does of Mr Bachchan, I am a huge admirer. And I am a huge admirer just from the fact that he wakes up every day and he thinks to himself, 'This is a new day, it's a new fight, *kal tak jo kiya hain bhool jao, aaj kya kiya hai batao*' and onward ho! I don't know when the man sleeps, but he still writes his blog and he will date it and he will number it, and it's incredible! And he has stayed relevant, and he is getting paid a lot of money, and more power to him, whether to endorse something or whether to whatever.

So, I think, if you can do that over a sustained period of time it is only because of a couple of things. I think, one is, the fear that you will be number four, five, eight or forgotten. And that's traumatic to most. So, then, you work extra hard. I guess, it's like Muhammad Ali wearing a top hat and tails and walking down Trafalgar Square the day before he was fighting Henry Cooper and made a poem in his Ali-esque way, which I forget, but basically saying that Cooper will fall in four. Now, are you insane? Black man in the '60s walking up and down Trafalgar Square. '*Tere desh mein aake keh raha hoon ki tere champion ko haraunga woh bhi kis round mein*'. You know, are you completely mad? And this is without security, couple of his boys. I am amazed that he didn't get killed. Now, that puts incredible pressure to work that much harder and do a few more pushups or whatever it is to back that claim, because you are going to fall in a pile of dung if you don't back that. Amazing! So, I guess it's a fear of failure or the fear of irrelevance that would drive most people.

I was just talking a couple of days ago about film directors. Look at Clint Eastwood. I mean, somewhere in his 80s and we're talking Dirty Harry who made some utterly time-pass Westerns in his time. I never had any great respect for him then, in his heyday as an actor. But man, I will touch his feet if I meet him now! Because I mean, oh my god! A, as an actor and b, as a director, what has he done? You cannot be doing 'American Sniper' at 80. He is 80 something. It's a really complicated film, on location and bombed out areas and this is like hectic. And you know, if you have been in a film shoot, you know how difficult it is what he has done. And he is doing that at 80-something. He is

not saying *haan, yaar*, what I have done is enough for a lifetime achievement in whatever the hell I want it to be. And let's now stop. Incredible!

Now there are directors out here who have been directing since they were, I suppose, in their late 20s, early 30s, massively successful in their time and can't put a movie together and you are 60 something or early 60s. What went wrong? Did you just sit on your laurels and say, oh yes, that movie of mine. Of course, terrific film! Then, what? It's done, it's over, and it's gone. Now, after we got the National Award for 'Neerja,' I told myself we are not discussing this again. It's over, it's done, and it's gone, *aage badho*. Now, somewhere, if we've got 10 films and they do a retrospective, of course, it will come up and someone might ask for an anecdote from it. That's fine, but there is nothing to crow about anymore. It's done, it's gone, move on. And I just think that with the absolute assault every day, the amount of information in every form that's coming at you, the time to mull and reminisce on it is like reduced, if it's there any way. If you even see something like deaths. People die just as surely as they will be born. And if you notice, now, life moves on after a death, any death, much faster than it ever did. I mean, the people who have lost their own are back at work in like, two days. It's not like relatives are hanging for 10 days like they used to. There is no time.

DJ: You started as a photographer but clearly you've moved on to do other things. Kingfisher Calendar was sort of an entrepreneurial venture. You're now into celebrity management. You take care of people's personal brand using images. Talk to us a little bit about how you've thought of entrepreneurship along the way with the base as photography.

AK: The core of it was that if I looked at the market in India, it just seemed like a lot of people in this profession became or even abroad, for that matter at some point, it tended to become irrelevant, sometime in their 50s. After 60, forget it! So, it just seemed like this is a younger man or woman's job. And if an art director who is handing out the assignment happens to be late 20s, early 30s, at some point, if you are 55 you are going to be uncle. They'd rather work with somebody who, however cool you think you are, there is a cooler person who happens to be 20 years younger. So, I figured, at some point, you are going to get nudged out of the mix. I realized that you need to have a plan B in place at some point. The other thing to it was that when I did the three-year degree program in Brooks and then assisted for a year in Los Angeles with a bunch of different photographers, they all had agents. They just took the picture and someone else went and sourced the work for them, chased the work for them, wined and dined the art directors, and if necessary, chased the money, got them paid, realized what kind of work they wanted to do, pushed the photographer if they felt he wasn't working hard enough or could deliver more: 'I need more pieces like this, work at it' or whatever.

DJ: And that industry didn't exist in India at that time?

AK: No! I came back and I said, I think I'll get an agent and they're like, what's that. So, it was always in the back of my head that. So, I think it seemed like a logical sort of a thing to get into because there was a need and so one did.

As far as the Kingfisher calendar is concerned, I mean at a very simple level one wanted to be able to do an assignment where I didn't really need to answer to too many layers. Because you felt that the creative process, somewhere along the way, possibly became 'a camel is a horse designed by committee' kind of situation. Then, you start looking for the lowest denominator of agreement. So, I said, here, I want to answer to one person; if that person likes it, we are good. Well, eventually, someone is paying the bill, so that person needs to like it, sure. I had always been fascinated by a process where a photographer like Bruce Weber would get an assignment where he would be told, OK, this is Calvin Klein's new perfume. It's called 'Eternity'. These are the catch words and now, go

forth Bruce and bring us the images, and we'll put our logo below. It needs to say eternity. And then, Bruce will put on his thinking cap and do some tests and then shoot and come back and say this is it. And Calvin Klein says, wonderful, just what I have been looking for. There Bruce Weber was talking to Calvin Klein and the discussion was between those two heavyweights. They have figured out what the world wants and the hedonistic era of obsession is over, and it's much more family and its much more togetherness. So, let the light be much more backlit and white and beautiful and shadow-less. The 'Obsession' campaign was three-four naked people on a swing and it was much more sort of mad.

Again, what happens in celeb management is that you build up somebody, you work very hard and not make very much in the early part of their career. Then, they start blossoming and 10 people pop up with good work and say, come to us, we will be cheaper, come to us, we will do this. So, at a time when it would seem fair, when that person is doing really well, you are there as well to collect in the journey together, there is no such thing. So, once they've arrived, a lot of people tend to forget where they came from. And the only about decent thing they might do is say that you have been there for a while, some X, Y is at the table and is offering to do it in half, if you can match that you can please stay. If you started to think that star X made 20 per year, hence we bill two. We are estimating it could be 25 this year, so we will make two-and-a-half. Maybe I should make a down-payment on that house or whatever. You make some calculations accordingly. You could well have a situation where star X comes and says, listen, someone's at the table willing to do it at half, so if you can do it at half then great. And you say, yes. Then, all of a sudden, your two didn't become two-and-a-half; it became one and quarter. So, we wanted to own some IP. So, we said, let's try and do something that actually we are responsible for and you own that and that creative process is yours and for better or worse, it remains with you.

Then, the talk was, should we do a TV show? Should we do a digital something? And I came across a seven pager, one of my partners, Shanti, came across a seven-pager that Saiwyn Quadras had written. And to give us due credit, to be honest, he had written 'Mary Kom' and we didn't know that and 'Mary Kom' had not released. So, it's not like we bought a seven-pager from the hit writer of 'Mary Kom'. We just bought it from somebody who looked like Jesus and who walked in through the door, pretty much. We said, OK, if we get the rights from the family we will try and make this film ['Neerja']. So, we actually believed it from a paper. But I am enjoying this. I have a friend who is a spiritual guide and he lives in Bangalore. He was saying that this is an excellent space for you because what you may not see but what he sees and it actually turned out to be quite true he says, you know, you're actually a very habitable platform for people, who otherwise would never meet each other, to be pulled on to and to co-exist and work in a harmonious way and be able to create.

DJ: What made him say that according to you? What do you think?

AK: I was actually talking in terms of, should I stop doing photography? Should I do this? Should I do film production or not? Seems like a dirty business. There are all kinds of people. For me, what you say is what you mean. If you didn't mean it, why did you say it? I hate to think that I have to spend my time thinking 'he said this, but what did they mean? Where is the catch? Just look properly at clause 14 point C point 8, whatever. This is it, this is the deal, which part did you miss?' There isn't any skulduggery. It is just so tiresome to lay and play these silly games. If it doesn't work for you, it's fine. Like the other day, someone said no to a script we had, which is really OK. But they did the classic Bollywood thing of the idea of saying no, because you might hurt them, just avoid. So, finally, I sat the person down and said, listen, I will tell you what, I am made of sterner stuff. I am very fond of you and we can still be friends. We may make a movie together or we may never make a movie together. It's still OK, we will still be friends. That's OK. What will really piss the crap out of me is if you decide to play these silly games and ignore and then duck. It's not that complicated.

So, he said you are good at this. You have to be the alkali that sort of neutralizes acidic situations and you will just bring them and create an atmosphere where people can be harmonious. They work nicely as a machine unit and they do this. So, actually, in 'Tumhari Sulu' we have really got an excellent bunch of people working together. At some point, when the director's written it, it's very close. Then, we manage to convince him that it needs a little more additional writing and punching up. So, he agreed and then we got a writer he was comfortable with and so, he still feels like it's his, and that's really important. And Suresh [Triveni] is a great guy. And he then has involved other people and we suggested whoever we thought and where it's worked, he's taken it and where someone else has worked, we've let that happen, and it's beautiful. The art director owns the script, the DOP owns the script, and the guy who is told that when Atul Kasbekar's unit leaves this place, it will be left as good as when we found it. So, they will not say, look at all that plastic chucked in the bag and he owns that part of the script to know that of the production, you know, hey, I am going to make sure I do a great job. And there were so many different units working together. If you create that space, it's great.

DJ: And back to the celebrity management you said you work with people and help them build up. How do you spot potential, right? It's like in the music industry as well, right? How do you as a scout...

AK: There's no formula, but...

DJ: What do you look for?

AK: I have an eye for picking out the x-factors, lots of beautiful people, but you put eight people in a room, I will tell you who has the spark.

DJ: Hmm, and is it, is there a way to decode that recipe which is sort of more generalizable around attitude?

AK: No, basically it's just I mean, when Deepika Padukone walked into the door it was really for example someone who she, the gynac who delivered my twins she is their niece and otherwise I don't want to meet people, I want to see their pictures because I only need to know what you look like in pictures.

DJ: Sure.

AK: She said, no, please meet my niece and she happens to be Prakash's daughter so you know so I said, oh wait, Prakash's daughter? I want to meet Prakash's daughter, because I am a huge sports junkie and you know our dad was always one of my heroes. So, we met but you meet this coltish looking thing at 18-19 and you are like, oh my god, where have you hiding her whole life. She had not even really shot any pictures per se so but you just felt that there was something special here. So, it just hits you and you have met enough 19-20-year-olds and it doesn't hit you that you know what there's something, there's a spark here.

DJ: Back to film production. How do you walk that tightrope of creativity and commerce? As a producer, you are solving for commercial returns but at some level you need to ensure that the creative tastes are in line with what the audience needs. As a producer, how do you walk that line?

AK: In our head, we're redefining. And honestly, we're too new in the business to be giving any kind of *gyan*, but I believe it's in a state of flux and the audience is prepared to listen to alternative points of view. So, I think, in our head what we tell ourselves is a) we want to make a commercial film that

we're proud of. It needs to be a commercial film and the definition of a commercial film for us is one that works commercially.

DJ: And is there a sort of predetermined return that you have in mind?

AK: No, you can't. There's no *pundits* in this game. Everybody is an expert after the fact. It's not like, some big massive studio who knows nothing other than making movies and they have been weaned in the business, they don't wake up one day and say, everybody come to the conference room, think of the most crappy idea you have and let's make a gigantic flop. Nobody says that. Everybody thinks that they are making the next 'Sholay' or the next 'Three Idiots,' and there is so much effort that goes into making a single movie that it's traumatic when it gets wiped out of the box office. So, nobody knows. Anyone tells you they know, they don't! Other than Aamir and Salman, there is no such thing as a guaranteed minimum box office draw any more. So, in the same year, you could have two movies with the same actor; one does well and one does not do well. So, even our audience, I think, is in a state of, let's figure out what we want to watch kind of a thing. What the internet has done is that on Friday afternoon, the smell of the movie has gone forth, and a group of people sitting saying, '*Yaar, weekend pe kya karein? Yeh picture dekhein kya? Nahin, yaar, suna hain bahot ghatiya hain. Kya bol rahe ho?*' And boom, just like that, your plans have gone haywire. Or they've said, I believe it's damn good, let's go. Now, who would have figured that the biggest grossing Hindi film is a dubbed Telugu film? Let that sink in.

DJ: And what worked in that case, if you had to reflect on that? You're talking about 'Bahubali,' I guess.

AK: Yeah. It's just the scale and you haven't seen a level of VFX like this. It's a full fantasy movie, massive Indian emotions, another level of production, and it worked. Now, the fact of the matter is, that doesn't mean that everybody who spends 300 crores making a film is guaranteed to rake in 1000 NBOC [net box-office collections] at the box office.

DJ: I have heard you talk in a couple of other forums about this whole supplier mindset versus being a trusted advisor. That concept is relevant in several other professions. So, talk to us a little bit about what you mean by that and what it means in your profession and what the lessons are?

AK: I have realized that for me, it's most fulfilling and gratifying to be in a creative space. So, in the process of creation, whether it's movie or whether it's someone's career or whether it is a photograph or so on, I feel, it is extremely important, especially speaking for myself in the creative space, that you make everybody in the mix seem really important and valued and bring them to the table early enough.

So, for example, let's say, since we were discussing the Kingfisher calendar, the stylist is brought on two months before we've left for shoot, three months before; they know they are doing the job. Now, I want to know what you think. What are the trends? We are thinking of shooting in Mykonos; apart from the obvious blue and white of the Grecian stripes, what do you think? What do you think of hair? These are the models I am thinking of; what do you think? This 'what do you think' empowers a lot of people to feel like they belong and like they co-create. Then, they go beyond just the transactional value of what you are paying them to do that. When you do that, you've arrived in a good space.

So, it would really bother me when people said you are a supplier, supplier payment comes only in these many days. Screw you! I am not a supplier. If I am a supplier, you have lost me very early.

Then, it's a very transactional kind of thinking. So, I have learnt this along the way that at least when I'm doing this, I'm going to ensure that everybody feels like *'yeh meri project hain'*.

So, for example, when we did 'Neerja,' we couldn't have done it without literally so many people feeling like it's theirs. So, for example, I spoke to Naresh Goyal, and said, listen, there is this Punjabi girl whose story you may not have heard of. I am sending you a one-pager. We don't have the money. It's a female-oriented film. We don't have the money. I need your Jet Airways hangars for two days and some work at the airport, etcetera. And I need Sonam and the crew to be trained by your stewardess training college, whatever that is, for one week and I have no money to pay you. He said, no, we will work out at a good deal. I said, the only deal is free. I am not the kind to otherwise negotiate. I will reach London and send him a text this flight was great, this flight was not great, this food was awesome or this was not, but *'woh haq se I am telling you because paise dekke aa chuka hoon main'*. I am not telling you before, hoping that you upgrade me or some sidey stuff like that, which other people do. So, he knows it's not the kind of stuff that I would inherently do. So, he said, done! The same thing with Sanjiv Goenka at Saregama.

DJ: And what was in it for him, out of curiosity? Was it just the relationship?

AK: I think, relationship, and they just felt that they were suddenly part of a movie-making process, that this story needed to be told. I would like your help to tell the story, it's that simple. And that was the truth. Same thing with Sanjiv Goenka. We need 'Bye, bye, Miss, good night,' I need the rights for free. That's about a 25 lakh of value for them to give that Rajesh Khanna song, but we needed the song. And Sanjiv is nice enough to say, yeah, this is a great story, *chalo bolte hain*, done. I mean, Fox was in shock that we got anything from Saregama for free. And why should we? It's a business for them to sell music rights. It's only fair they charge whatever it is. They thought this was worth it and they felt part of the process.

DJ: So, how do you enlist people into your vision and your dream?

AK: I think, at the base level, it's just about honesty. If you are just achingly honest, then, I think, at some point I told someone who was collaborating with us, you can go through the whole rigmarole of finding out for yourself, but I can cut to the chase and tell you right now and then later you can tell me whenever you figure it out. I said, you know that we are really decent blokes to work with. One cut, two pieces, what you see is what you get, simple. So, he actually put a Facebook post some one year later saying, he told me this long back, and I have to say he was right. Quite sweet either on you can go through all these negotiations but I am telling you now this is it.

DJ: Any one or two things in conclusion, that you want the listeners to walk away with for them to play to their potential?

AK: I think, whatever choices people are making right now they really need to be careful. I mean, there is that WhatsApp post going around, which is also on Facebook, in terms of, how most lawyers will be redundant, this will be redundant, etcetera. So, I think, it's extremely important, to understand whether your passion realistically has a future, because just like one had the industrial revolution, we are in the middle of a revolution, and you need to be extremely careful that you are not selling horse carriages when there are cars, to use a metaphor. Like I said, if someone comes to me saying I want to do photography, I'd say, please do, but do consider first being a cameraman shooting video, because the prospects of a successful life and you're still taking pictures.

The other thing is there are just far too many human beings out there. Whatever it is you are looking to do, there is someone who is willing to do it cheaper. I don't know about better, but certainly

cheaper. Not many clients out there want to pay for Louis Vuitton. So, either you have to be so good that '*woh chahiye toh uske paas jaana hi padegaa*'. Then, whether you are a *kadia* placing marble, but what you do, you are a freaking artist, great! You will get money and you will get paid your due. If not, then you better be the guy who is literally everywhere and you are the Coke can, you are 30 feet away from whoever. That in-between guy is going to get wiped out if you are not careful. So, you just need to, sort of, be everywhere. That's a very simplistic level. I am no economist, but it seems like that's the way.

So, your choices, I think, you need to investigate what the future is likely to hold, because again I don't think that there are any experts who absolutely, for certain, know. So, *thodasa, be careful*.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: There were a couple of takeaways for me here. First is that I guess, in every industry we see around us, there is disruption and the key question for businesses and for leaders is how do I stay relevant given what is happening around me. No easy answers here but I really liked what Atul said earlier about not resting on the past laurels and treating each new day as a new fight. One of my professors at London Business school, Lynda Gratton, in her book 100 year life, says that earlier if you knew somebody's age, you knew their stage of career. Life was that predictable. That is not the case anymore given the pace of disruption in the digital world we live in. The second takeaway was that given the explosion in market places and gig economy and other such trends, there is an explosion in supply of services from around the world. If you are in any business or a profession, the future prospects of being an average, middle of the road Joe are quite bleak as the tsunami of supply hits each industry. It is arguably super-critical for each one of us to find a niche where we have a distinct edge and passion where there is market opportunity and go after it. The era of coasting along which was a decent survival strategy in the Industrial era might be over. I hope you found the conversation purposeful. I look forward to having you at one of the subsequent conversations of the Play to Potential podcast series. To see some of the other nuggets or conversations please visit playtopotential.com. Bye now.

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Atul Kasbekar - Nuggets

- 12.00 Atul Kasbekar - The Full Conversation
- 12.01 Atul Kasbekar - Transitioning from engineering to photography
- 12.02 Atul Kasbekar - Being tenacious through the transition
- 12.03 Atul Kasbekar - Marrying passion with pragmatism
- 12.04 Atul Kasbekar - Staying relevant over the long term
- 12.05 Atul Kasbekar - Entrepreneurial pursuits beyond photography
- 12.06 Atul Kasbekar - Balancing commerce with creativity
- 12.07 Atul Kasbekar - Enlisting and empowering people in your team
- 12.08 Atul Kasbekar - In Summary - Playing to Potential

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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