



Guest

Vinay Sitapati is an Assistant Professor in Political Science and Legal studies at Ashoka University. He has a PhD in Politics from Princeton University, in addition to degrees from National Law School Bangalore and Harvard University. His book - Half Lion: How P.V Narasimha Rao Transformed India (Published by Penguin Randomhouse) - traces P.V. Narasimha Rao's journey from his modest beginnings in Telangana to the post of the Prime Minister. More importantly, the book talks about the fact that despite heading a minority government, P.V. Narasimha Rao was able to drive significant reforms that have fundamentally altered the economic trajectory of the country.

In our conversation, we spoke about P.V. Narasimha Rao's unfettered curiosity across disciplines, his resilience that saw him manage the vicissitudes in his political career, his intellectual and implementation agility, his ability to reflect and introspect, judgment around playing like a Lion, Fox or a Mouse depending on the context, capacity to reinvent himself across various shifts and turns in his journey, how he built teams and added value as a leader, how not making a decision was a decision in itself and driving change through a complex system where there is visible short-term pain but long-term gain.

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Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 30th conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast. A series of reflective conversations across three broad themes – Leadership, Transitions and Careers.

I am your host Deepak Jayaraman. I am an Executive Coach and I help leaders and organizations play to their potential by engaging with them during periods of high stakes transition – personal and organizational. You could visit transitioninsight.com for more details.

My guest this time is Vinay Sitapati – an Assistant Professor at Ashoka University. He is a PhD in Politics from Princeton and has degrees from National Law School and Harvard University. His journey itself is an interesting one. From studying law to journalism to pursuing a PhD in politics to writing and teaching. But the primary reason for me to speak with him was his book HALF LION, a biography of ex-Prime Minister of India, PV Narasimha Rao. The book is a nuanced and insightful read about Leadership under extreme constraints and about how we could think about staying relevant over time and playing to our fullest potential.

In our chat we spoke about how Narasimha Rao grew as a leader, specifically his habit of reflection, how he managed to decode signal from the noise when he tried to make sense of his surroundings, what made him resilient given the number of ups and downs he has had in his political career, how he adapted his leadership style to context to be the Fox, Lion or Mouse as the situation demanded, How not making a decision is often a decision in itself and much much more.

At the outset, I should mention that if you want to listen to conversation offline, say during an airplane ride or during a gym session or another time, you could access it at iTunes, Google's Podcast Player, Stitcher, Saavn or any of the other podcast apps that are out there.

Without further ado, over to my conversation with Vinay.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): What your pie chart of time looks like today, why you do what you do?

Vinay Sitapati (VS): I am assistant professor at political science and legal studies at Ashoka university near Delhi, so I live in Delhi, I teach three times a week but almost 50% if not more of expectations in university are more in terms of research so it's just not teaching, so I am currently, I had written a book a couple of years back a biography of Narsimha Rao and there are a lot of language translations coming out so some of my time right now is spent looking at the text of different translations or Hindi for example is coming out this week, so I am just working with the Hindi translator on that, I can read Hindi unlike Tamil and Telugu so I actually know that, I can also read American English so the American version is coming out next month and it's an academic book by Oxford university press so it also has an introduction for an American reader and I am also working on a book currently on the electoral history on the nationalism on parties such as Hindu Mahasabha, Jansangh and of course the early years of the BJP so mix of teaching and research.

DJ: I'm curious about your career choices. How you thought about the various forks in the road after 12th?

VS: To give you some sense like I am sure with the others in the podcast at the time at the time you are making the transition, at the when the fork in the road presents itself you typically go through instinct or you are not really rationally thinking through what lies on the either end of those two choices but looking back I just can think of myself, am basically focusing on look am I enjoying myself? And am I growing and am I being relevant? I think these are the three things that, looking back that I try to ask myself that these three forks and I am only 34 so I don't have all that many forks and I don't know the end of the road in many of those forks, so please keep in mind that unlike your other guests on this podcast I am not that success story that you are now reverse engineering to find out that what worked? But if I want to just look back at my limited career and my limited life I could think of three fork the first is when I finished my 12th standard now unusually I had taken classes in fine art painting as well as in science and even then I had a sense that I had an interest in creative expression no I like painting I also like writing so there was a clear choice that presented itself between law and architecture so I got into national law school Bangalore, India's best law school and I also made it I think to the final round of the interview for In CEPT Ahmedabad which is arguably India's number one architecture school and I have to kind of pick between two and I picked law it was intuitive I think my father also pushed me saying that look it was better suited to your personality and looking back that was exactly right because I enjoyed doing creative things but I also

enjoy speaking and writing and law is much more suited to that so I think that was the first kind of fork that I could have got either way I could have been an architect or a lawyer as I turned out I am neither but what I am doing is little more suited to law and the skills required to be a lawyer than it is to be an architect. The second career fork was in 2007, so I had done 5 years at National school of law at Bangalore, I got into Harvard law school for a masters, I was over the moon but then the question was what do I do after that? Do I be a corporate lawyer in the US? Am I back in India litigating or do I be an academic? So I was thinking through these choices and I remember taking a class in corporate law guy called Guhan Subramaniam who Indian origin guy but basically American who taught corporate law in Harvard law school and he had a joint appointment at Harvard business school and he was the best teacher that I can think of, he had spent some time at McKinsey, his courses were highly structured, every minute it seemed was planned and he was very very good, and I worked hard and I think I got a B minus or a C plus or something like that and I think it was a very clear symbol that if you are taught by the world's best teacher in a particular subject and you work hard and you do badly then you should look for something else so I think it was a very clear signal, I also was interested in writing at that time, I was never interested in academia I like the idea of a university so it was determines do a PhD and I was thinking of a PhD in political science because I was more and more interested in Political and Law rather than law itself and I didn't applied immediately for a PhD because I felt like I should have something approaching life experience and working as a political journalist in Delhi with Indian Express seemed like a life experience that could complement a PhD in political science, in India you can't work for parties in the same way so just seemed and it also catered to my interest in writing so I came back to India, and came back to Delhi and worked in journalism and most people thought that I was ridiculous but given that I already had a degree from Harvard Law school they didn't thought I was crazy they just thought I was eccentric and I think there is a big difference in the two, like poor people are crazy rich people are eccentric so if you have options and you screw it up people think you are eccentric, if you have no options and you screw it up they think you are crazy and I wanted to spend only a year in Indian Express, I wanted to cover that 2009 elections the one which UPA comes back to power so I wanted some experience in covering campaigns and writing about them and I did a lot of that but I loved my job too much and so the third fork in my career came around 2010 when I was asking myself, I like Delhi, I like reporting I clearly like this world of politics and the world of the public sphere, I wasn't getting paid much but I liked so should I do that or should go to Princeton where I already got a seat for a PhD in political science and that was the third fork, I sort of thought about it and I just picked a PhD because on the assumption that I could always come back and pursue journalism and on hindsight I think it was one of the best decisions I made because it gave me a lot of skillsets like research library to study documents that journalist doesn't give you, what journalism gives you is the ability to interview the ability to write quickly sticking to a deadline. Academics are terrible at that, so it was a very good compliment in my current job the current book I am working on or the last book this marriage of journalism, law academia with all its rigors, I think has really helped me so looking back in my limited life I would say these are the three forks.

DJ: Back to the point of coming to Delhi and working as a journalist after a degree in Harvard law school I am sure a lot of your classmates must have been pursuing a career, whether compensation levels were huge multiple talk to us about what was easy and what was hard about that choice?

VS: It's a good question on the hindsight I should have been worried about this question but I had enough of the sense of the kind of hours they put in, especially if you are a corporate lawyer in America to realize that, that kind of money with a lot of physical, emotional stress, the fact that you may not be doing things that you are enjoying so an average corporate lawyer has work in some cases or some clients that he or she loved but if I would ask them they would say that's the 20% of the time and I didn't want a career where I am being paid a lot but I am happy 20% of the time so

looking back again I had the sense of the kind of money you have made if you are a corporate lawyer in New York I also had the sense of the cost of that and also look from Harvard law school getting a corporate law job in New York is not, it wasn't a walk in for me I would have to add effort because this was just after the financial crisis, so it wasn't as easy as you think it is after a Harvard law school degree.

DJ: Given the various things you have done so far how do you think about your identity and how that's evolving?

VS: I have a Law degree I have been a journalist I have been an academic and you can be bad in all three so that's been a bit of question are you an academic think of view, as a poor academic, journalist you are nowhere in India you say "*Gali ka Kutta na ghar ka naa ghat kaa*" so it's a little bit like that but I think the one thing I have learnt that A is focus on the product not on the category so question is not are a journalist, are you an academic but what is your output? If you are a journalist you can be somebody who writes books and articles that are so well researched and refer to existing scholarship in a way that more better than academics and as an academic you can be somebody who actually gets on the ground gets her or his legs dirty in a way that would put more journalist to shame so rather than ask yourself which category you fit in I think it's very important to realize what product you fit into and the second thing I have learnt from all this careers is that, you would think that academics would talk about academic ideas all the time and lawyers would talk about legal rights but actually all of them are talking about the same thing which is whose office is smaller whose office is bigger and a lot of the things you are associated with law for example legalese speaking in legal jargon is actually ensure that to create artificial value for a lawyer, journalist write a certain code, academics use jargon because if they wrote in simple English people will realise that often they don't have value and so all different professions end up creating protocols that are not intrinsically adding value but to exclude normal people and make them feel special because that's why you will pay them if a lawyer wrote in simple English then the client may be able to do that too, then why do you need to pay a lawyer? So I think one advantage I have had is I have been able to separate what I hope is a lot of bullshit associated with these professions to ask at its core what value is it providing.

DJ: Your PhD thesis was about getting to good Judgment, in your study of various judgments that have been made and the judges behind those judgements talk to us about what stands out about them? What we can learn in terms of how to get to meaningful judgments especially in shades of grey?

VS: So my PhD thesis topic was the marriage of my interest in law and my academic career in law married with my work in journalism, because I was a lawyer my boss in Indian express put me onto a cover of a lot of legal cases and I was looking at a lot of these judgments what people call path breaking judgements after the judgment, so the title of dissertation was after judgment day and I remember one of the people I interviewed who has affected by a judgment telling me, he said it in Hindi "*Hum jaante hai ke kutta bhokta hai par kya wo katata hai?*" we know that the supreme court of India seems to bark but does it bite? Does it have an impact? And that stayed with me and while I was a PhD student I just kept pushing this idea, let me pick a bunch of cases that everyone thinks were successful and let me follow it ten years from now, let me follow it 15 years from that to see actually if the intended impact of the judge take place on the ground and the answer was no and it was a pretty simple reason that the judge simply didn't understand her or his ecosystem that the same judgment pronounced by the top court in Switzerland and the same judgment pronounced by the top court in India and the same judgment pronounced by the top court in Somalia will have will have very different implementation effects and the reason is that state capacity the ability of the state capacity to implement its will very vastly between Switzerland,

America, India and Somalia and I was astounded that very few lawyers thought about it and then I realize that lawyers only care about this and judges only care about this until they get the judgment and everybody gets money everybody goes home but there is the whole world of the effects of the judgment after that so I think the first big lesson I learnt about not just lawyers and judges but also people who are keep going to court for social causes that maybe you are wasting your time maybe you don't understand the ecosystem in which you work, if you are not able to get things done outside the court what makes you think you can get it done within the Court? When the same problem affecting implementation outside inhibit the court from actually being powerful within so I think that was a very big lesson for me. You are a leader understand the power you have before making a judgment before making a decision first realise do you actually have the power to enforce that or not? And if you don't then you should maybe tailor make the decision to not what is ideal but which is actually implementable on the ground given the implementation capacity you have.

DJ: Talk to us about why you decide to write a book?

VS: So it wasn't thought through, I knew nothing about him, I never met Narsimha Rao, I am not Telegu speaking like I am not from Andhra Pradesh or from Telangana, I didn't know much about him before I decided to write a book on him, I wanted to write a book on India changing on transitioning in early 1990s, I had personal experience my father moved from a government job try to make it in the private sector and I also speaking to the friends I realized that the 90s was the period of transition and as a journalist and academic the data supported that it's an inflection point when it comes to consumption of goods when it comes to real incomes across percentiles so my personal anecdote into mirror a larger transition in India and I had an instinct that the conventional explanations namely that it just happened or that Manmohan Singh armed with the PhD did it or India changed under pressure from the IMF wasn't the complete story but I didn't know anything more than that I didn't know much about Narsimha Rao but I read this book maybe before a year I started working on the book called Deng Xiaoping and the transformation of China by this Harvard historian called Ezra Vogel and it was a biography of China changing in 90s super imposed with the biography of Deng Xiaoping the political leader, the person who did it and I said immediately there's a book waiting to be written in India of India changing in the 90s and the political leader at the time Narsimha Rao and as am the political scientist let me tell the political story, so again I went with it complete neutrally I didn't write a book to make Narsimha Rao look great but while I was doing research I realize that the character of Narsimha Rao was far more interesting than the limited story of liberalization in India so the book then morphed into from what was initially seen as a book on liberalization seen through the eyes of Narsimha Rao to a full length biography of Narsimha Rao in which liberalization is just two chapter so it's kind of very organic way in which, I thought about something and I just followed the evidence.

DJ: Talk to us about Narsimha Rao's learning approach over the years and am also curious about how that evolved over time? How he thought about developing himself?

VS: There are three things which make Narsimha Rao stand out with regard to what you have asked and merging it together that really helped his learning. One is he was the man with unusually high IQ and it's not really understandable through his social base, his family were Brahmin land owners they weren't very educated Telangana being Telangana they were not allowed, even in Telangana region they couldn't get government service, most of them were landed gentry they didn't really read books they didn't have that so his IQ levels were unusual in social context definitely, second is he was intently curious guy and I think that links to his loneliness, from a childhood he is the lonely person doesn't really identify with human beings which is unusual for a politician so instead he was reading books, he was reading articles he's reading poetry, he's writing so I think that's the second part of him that adds to his leanings the third is that he had unusual amount of experience in India

from working in a Panchayat level to working as a state minister to working as chief minister, to working as union minister for nearly a decade to then being prime minister and holding MLA position in Telangana as well as an MP from three different states in India where he campaigned in three different languages the man had a very unique range of experience and I think that's mix of being somebody who was curious, who had a high IQ and who were just put in so many different public positions in India gave him this enormous ability to learn and learn very quickly and learn in changing circumstances.

DJ: Talk to us about his habit around reflection and introspection and what can we learn from it?

VS: So I think one is what the cause is and two is it helpful, is it helpful? I think the cause was firstly as I said he was a lonely guy so what is he doing in the evening? He keeps a diary and he didn't have too many friends, so the diary was fundamentally a diary that you are talking in the absence of a friend but luckily for him he was lonely from childhood so when he reaches the top in politics, when everybody is lonely he was pretty used to it so he is not worried at that point because he was prepared for loneliness all his life but the diary was way where he could be true to himself because a lot of politicians get fooled especially when they are in power, they are fooled by the world around them unable to tell flattery from the truth and Narsimha Rao's ability to be introspected to be inward helped him sift the day into what or to put in statistical terms to be able to sift the signal from the noise so I think that is the first thing that introspection taught him that one is it taught him don't trust anyone except your diary which is a pretty good skill in politics second is that you should be able to sift the signal from the noise who are the people you met every day how many people are being honest? How many people are lying? To give you one example one of the diary entries which I have in the book is from 22nd May 1991 this is the day after Rajeev Gandhi has been killed near Chennai and Narsimha Rao until then basically eased out of the congress and was about to become a Monk in monastery called Kutrallam in Tamil Nadu and was closing his bank accounts he suddenly realising that by virtue of being the least ambitious man in the party he's prime to be Prime minister of India and the diary shows 22nd May he's back in Delhi, he's in ten Janpath where Soniya Gandhi and Rajeev used to live and the pieces of Rajeev Gandhi's body there were just pieces, not the full body are kept there and all the congress men around the body pretending to cry some of them were actually crying actually trying to manoeuvre to see who would succeed him? And he has this wonderful passage about how Pranab Mukherji who was in the boon docs them but would later recovered to become president of India beadies up to him and said we think you should become congress president which is the proxy for Prime minister of India and Narsimha Rao immediately says "I immediately told him that I am not the right person knowing full well the kind of person he is, I also gave him the name of N.D. Tiwari for Prime minister of India knowing even he was that he was even less likely a candidate than I am" and I think the introspection in the diary allows him to do that it allows him to reflect over the day, otherwise somebody else, Pranab Mukherji came up to me and says maybe you should be prime minister of India I wouldn't stop to ask what's his angle? So I think the introspection gave him that ability and I think the third thing introspection gave him was to take the long view, often we are so caught up in the movement that we are unable to see short term benefits from the long term cost than unable to separate that for example Narsimha Rao was frequently side-lined from the party, frequently. He never complained, he never protested against Indira Gandhi, he never protested against Rajeev Gandhi and very soon he would be back whereas people like Sharad Pawar or Arjun Singh or N.D. Tiwari at the first sign that they were out of favour in the Nehru Gandhi court was either form a separate party or sulk or protest, and their careers would end instead of just kind of taking it and hoping that your luck changes which has happened to Narsimha Rao, not everybody is luck changes but I think Narsimha Rao's ability to take the long view and not make silly short term beneficial decisions also contributed to the kind of career he had.

DJ: Decoding the signal from the noise, it's very interesting that he is sort of decoding the signal from the noise in a lonely fashion, how do you think about that? Because how do you decipher intent in a lonely fashion, common sense would suggest that you need to have your agents out there who would come and give you information for you to make sense so how do you reconcile that two?

VS: I think the key to the answer is to look at the ecosystem that Narasimha Rao worked under, all of us work under different organizational forms in some organizations it's important to have your tentacles everywhere but in an organization like congress party especially in the 70s, 80s loneliness was an enormous political virtue because if you didn't have too many friends it meant you didn't have too many enemies the way the congress system worked and this is our famous political scientist Rajni Kothari's phrase was that especially in the 50s and 60s when there was no opposition to congress all the factions of India the Dalits or Brahmins, left wing or Right wing, south of India north of India was within the congress party so you would have a congress politician who was Dalit like Jagjeevan Ram or Brahmin politician like N.D. Tiwari, you will have a north Indian politician you will have a south Indian politician you will have a capitalist politician you will have a socialist politician and even at the state levels you would have factions which are not really based on ideology so you will have in Maharashtra alone if you look at the congress you will have an Ashok Chavan faction you will have a Prithviraj Chavan faction and earlier you have had a Sharad Pawar, Suresh Kalmadi factions and the beauty of that system is, it suits the high command very well because everybody is cutting each other so nobody is threatening Sonia Gandhi, nobody is threatening Rajeev Gandhi because at the state level everybody is cutting each other now given that this is the dynamic of the congress party you should not be associated with the faction because the moment you associated with the faction by nature you have some friends but you have a lot of enemies and typically what happens in faction struggles is that and this is what happened with Narasimha Rao when he became the unlikely chief minister of Andhra Pradesh in 1971 that there were these two very big factions both very powerful and each one said we don't want other guy to be chief minister and so there was a compromise candidate a person who was weak, who had no friends, who was lonely, who didn't threaten everyone and that man was Narasimha Rao why was Narsimha Rao made prime minister in 1991 because for Sonia Gandhi and people around her the other far more obvious candidates, Sharad Pawar, N.D. Tiwari, Arjun Singh were also powerful were also people with friends so the ecosystem of Narasimha Rao was such that loneliness was the virtue but if loneliness is the virtue then how the hell do you get information? And you get information through introspection not by having tentacles within the party but to be fair NR had a lot of tentacles outside the party so he had people like Chandraswami Tantrik opposition member telling him about the congress because within his own party he just couldn't trust anyone so I think the answer here is that your levels of introspection you have to keep in mind the organizational ecosystem you work under and it varies from even within the Indian party system the congress organization structure is very unique and it comes from a history of being the only political party in India and therefor the opposition parties are actually within the party itself and in such a situation you have to NR drives.

DJ: Just sticking to the theme of introspection is there anything to be said about the nature of the introspection or the nature of note keeping was there a certain pattern or discipline, or a certain heads under which he would capture his thoughts or was it free flowing?

VS: This is I am just inducting base on what archives I saw but he kept diaries better when he's out of power once you are in power you just much busier but there were frequent periods in the congress party when he was out of power, when he was hanging around, so that time diaries are pretty strong now this is bad for a biographer because you actually want to know a little more about what he's doing when he was in power so for that I used the appointment diary because I knew he was meeting for every 15 minutes so I didn't know what they were talking about but I had the sense of

world the people he was meeting with but his own diaries are kind of less detailed and less gossipy certainly when he was in power.

DJ: How leaders spend time? What their pie chart looks like, when you analyse his diaries, appointment diaries when he was in power and if you had to draw a pie chart do you have the sense of what the big segments are?

VS: I can give you a morning Upma to night Raagi story but I don't think that's what you care about. I think politician you have to put them in three categories when it comes to time first is during election campaign election campaigns are really these movements that galvanise parties, money pours in if you go to any party office and there's no elections the party office is dead, in fact I once visited a party office in a district I don't want to name when between elections they would basically make it into a Sabji Mandi they could get rent out of the office because no activity takes place around elections so when around elections politicians are very different and that's when they really come to them the mass politicians really come to themselves they are traveling intensively, they are meeting hundreds of people, money is pouring in so I think that's one phase, phase two is when they are in government and that is a routine which moves between so when they are in government they are typically not spending any time in their constituency but the time in government moves between constantly dealing with file like files and signing files and files moving up and moving down, it's a daily job of a politician and between meeting people, they are constantly meeting people, and a lot of time meeting a minister and meeting a prime minister is an end in itself so you will have like the secretary to Dalai Lama coming and wasting your time for an hour and you have to do it it's less important you can forbid off to a junior minister but otherwise you have to do it so in many ways the prime minister of India is not just an executive head it's also a titular head so there's no shortage of people, the martyrs of Indian independence association will call you for lunch, you have got to show up there if you don't go it will be taken as a slight so I think that's two but the main thing politician in government does is fire fighting and contrary to this view government of India or any government functions perfectly you are there and every morning you wake up reading a newspaper typical and that's where you get your information and there's a new crisis and you have got to figure out how to react to it so I think the key especially in the Indian government the state capacity is being what it is, is you are frequently dealing with problems not of your making and which no one is warned you about and you have got to react very quickly so I think that's broadly what the day looks like if you are in power and when you are in opposition you actually have a tonne of time, so some politicians take to painting others take to hanging around making your way through the opposition party so I think when you are in opposition it's a different game Narsimha Rao luckily had a tonne of hobbies, he knew how to paint, he knew how to write he was constantly learning languages so he wasn't making foolish mistakes when in opposition. To give you an example arguably the greatest politicians Maharashtra has produced is the guy called Y.B. Chavan who in a non-dynastic party could have been a Prime minister of India, so again I may have got the facts wrong you just check that but in 1977 when Indira Gandhi loses very badly and the Janta government comes to power if my memory serves Y.B. Chavan makes the mistake of rebelling it's a problem because Indira Gandhi backs three years later and Y.B. Chavan is now a rebellious man. Narasimha Rao could have also rebelled because everybody at that time was writing Indira Gandhi's political obituary, what does he do? He drives his own car to Jawaharlal University enrolls in this Spanish language department and learns Spanish and often politics it's a marathon race not a sprint you have to realize that in the lean periods you shouldn't make stupid decisions and the fact that Narsimha Rao had interest outside of politics meant that he wasn't morning to evening asking himself how do I get to power? And that prevented him making short term beneficial decisions that would prove catastrophic in a long term.

DJ: and was there a certain theme to the curiosity or was it just unfettered curiosity?

VS: I think it was unfettered, I have so many stories read where he sees a motor pump and he wants to figure out how it works, then head of the nuclear program the man who appointed Abdul Kalam the guy called VS Arunachalam went to meet NR to when he became prime minister to talk about the nuclear program NR wanted a drawing about what the bomb looks like where is the uranium kept just a simple map so I think he was just he fundamentally wanted to figure out how things work and that coupled with the fact that he didn't have a narrow experience he had such a wide range he was defence minister, he was education minister, he was foreign minister he was even Hindu endowment minister in charge of temples in Andhra Pradesh he was chief minister, he was prime minister gave him a really unique sense of how to apply your curiosity to very different fields and I think there's a lesson therefor for people outside politics, if you want to rise to the top know how different parts of your organization work or you should have at least the working knowledge so if you are a CA by training you shouldn't have a finance sense of the organization even if that's your core competency you should have some sense about how different parts of your organization work because at the very top you have to have some sense of that.

DJ: Where NR got the strength, what made him resilient?

VS: So it's hard to say because, so I can talk about his family and his growing up but there's a part of a human being that, two plus two in human being is not always four so you might think of your best friend or somebody you know very well, you think you know them very well and you think that you understood the components that made the person but then they surprise you. To give you another example of his resilience or shall I say his ability to surprise me was that he was the lifelong economic protectionist one thing he didn't know much about and he was the protectionist he didn't believe in opening the economy he was very suspicious of capitalists but when he becomes prime minister in June 1991 and he realized the scale of the economic crisis within two or three days he has changed his mind 180 degrees and that's remarkable and it's not something I tried very hard to find out is it because his father treated him in some way is it because he was served in a and I think that's useful as a biographer and trying to understand human beings but sometimes human beings surprise you and that his resilience, his slight tangent to power, it's not easy to explain is it his inherent curiosity is it the fact that he see himself as a scholar or is it which I believe the most likely explanation, he has interest other than power he like to paint, he like to learn other languages, towards end of his life he wanted to ward off arthritis to his hands so he learnt to play the piano so he found meaning in things other than the immediate interest in power I think that is partly what gave him tangential view of power that greatly contributed to his understanding of it to use the old ZEN phrase he was in this world but not of it so NR was in politics but he was not of it.

DJ: You speak about how he quickly changed his opinion the notion of intellectual agility, how leaders have strong views but when they see data saying something else they are very quickly able to shift their beliefs, so talk to us about what gave that agility to Narasimha Rao?

VS: Firstly there are plenty of examples of this and the most famous one is which is used on economic reform it was the one few post he hadn't held he never been an industry minister before he became prime minister he never been minister of finance and that was one area he didn't know very well to the extent he knew it he was in Indira Gandhi's style protectionist and when confronted with change in evidence and when confronted with the fact that the Indian economy was simply not working we had a balance of payment crisis when he became prime minister in June 1991 he changes his mind in a couple of days and what is remarkable is once he changes his mind he has this ability to execute to implement, implement, implement in India full of ideas NR's remarkable ability is this is underrated because people think of him as intellectually agile as being a scholar they forget the fact that he was tactically agile too he knew how to get things done he would have an idea he would have a view but also knew the art of the possible and I think that this agility, both these were

a kind of jugalbandi they worked hand in hand that he could change his mind when it came to ideas and he could also constantly refine implementation of those ideas let's take the classic example of Air India, initially he believed that Airline sector in India should be a national sector you should not allow private competition and you should certainly not allow foreign money but he changes his mind in early 90s and he realises that look we need private competition when it came to Airlines Indian airlines alone just won't do so therefore definitely had the ability when faced with data to change his mind he also had the intellect the agility when it came to implementation which is what I call Fox, Mouse and Lion he realised that you needed private competition, he allowed Jet Airways, Damaniya, East West Airlines. Jet Airways takes off I think in 1993 and today again correct me on the data but 80 to 90% of domestic travellers don't travel on Air India they travel on Indigo on Go Airways so NR's bet worked at the same time Narsimha Rao had the intellect or let's say the implementation agility to realize that if he went too far and he privatise Air India at that time the unions would protest hugely and his entire liberalization agenda would fall because he was a very weak prime minister so he publicly swore that not a single Indian Airlines or Air India employee would lose his or her job as a result of privatisation that's exactly what he did so the unions were happy because they won't get fired, he created things like VRS for the unions who were happy as well as the consumers were happy but NR was smart enough to realize that you can't keep hiring in Air India and Indian Airlines if it isn't making profit so you should just look at the data hiring into Indian airlines and Air India and other peers begins to freeze after NR comes to power because NR realises that those who haven't yet got job aren't going to protest against him so I think that there was an intellectual agility of the man, his ability to frequently change his mind when confronted with data there was also an implementation agility and NR's genius was both ideas and implementation came naturally to him and that's what makes him really rare.

DJ: I want to pick up on the three animals that you use to sort of make the point Lion, fox, mouse so let's double click on that talk to us about what you have in mind when you say that but more importantly how does Narsimha Rao exercises judgment to figure out what to be when?

VS: So that's very hard to answer, I means ask this question to yourself like anyone listening to this podcast would frequently be in situations where you have to play lion you have to be aggressive and you have to play to win, slightly smarter ones who are listening to this podcast would also know that sometimes you have to lose, there is this American phrase "Do I want to die on this hill?" like some battles are not worth fighting because you may win the battle you may lose the war and sometimes you have to lie you have to cheat you can't say what you wanted to say NR's ability to get both timing and circumstances very right and is very hard to just to push that into the set of transferable skills because and that's why judgment is so precious but to give you just one example of that India opening up to Israel just one example of that since the mid-80s it was pretty clear that India had to move away from the Soviet Union towards the US was clear that the Soviet model of economy was not really working and Rajeev Gandhi was trying to make an outreach towards Washington DC, it didn't really go the way he really wanted to go when NR becomes prime minister he was told that look the Berlin wall has fallen and America is alone super power and we were on the wrong side of the cold war so we have to make an over churn to Washington DC and NR was also told by his IFS officers his diplomat that the road to Washington DC runs through televise that India currently doesn't have diplomatic relationships with Israel for a variety of reasons we need to have diplomatic relations with Israel as a signal to America that we are America now this was a domestic political hot potato because there was a feeling in India that Muslims might object, there was a feeling India that for the most of India's independence we had supported the Palestinian cause so it was sensitive issue opening up to Israel having full ambassadorial relation so what does NR do? He invites in Jan 1992 Yasser Arafat the head of the Palestine liberation organization as chief guest to India he hugs him he tells his cabinet secretary Naresh Chandra to spread that photograph, the message is India is

not deserting its Palestinian allies. In private however Narsimha Rao tells Yasser Arafat that look you are talking to the Israel is what would ultimately culminate in Oslo accords of 1993 if you want us to lobby the Israelis on your behalf we have to have an ambassador and Yasser Arafat was as much wily as NR publicly states in Delhi that exchange of ambassadors is question sovereign question and we won't interfere with what our brother India does, NR immediately announces full diplomatic relationships with Israel goes to parliament and says publicly with the blessing of my brother Yasser Arafat I am sending an ambassador to Israel that is timing, its understanding political context understanding the different stake holders and getting the sequence exactly right and contrast that to someone like Rajeev Gandhi who came to power in 1984-85 with the largest mandate any prime minister got in India, he actually tried in 1985-86 to open up to Israel and he failed so just power alone, just mandate alone, is insufficient if you don't understand timing if you don't understand your opponents and that what NR was genius.

DJ: One of the things that comes through very clearly in the book as an attribute of NR is "Driving change under extreme constraints" two terms before and four terms after him lasted less than a year see it was fascinating that he was able to last the full term, so again if we think about him being able to drive change under these constraints are there themes that come out which are worth talking about in terms of what he did well to manage sort of the slender context with the heaviness of the stuff that he was pushing through?

VS: Well, this is the heart of the book the central question of book how does the man so weak achieve so much change so it was not just that he was running a minority government his own party hated him, he had to report to Sonia Gandhi and the crisis that India had from secession issues in Assam, Punjab and Kashmir to a balance of payment crisis to fall of the Soviet Union to Rajeev Gandhi assassination so here's a man with a very little power and NR also had the charisma of dead fish so he was a really boring guy so man with very little charisma very little raw political power very little mandate and facing an inbox from hell made this kind of change and that's really heart of the book and I push it again and again, I think a core feature of why NR was successful was that instead of focusing on what needed to be done he focused on how it should be done? I think that's very important the what needs to be done question presumes you have a mandate presumes you have the ability to get things done the first question you should ask as a leader is where do you get your power from? How much power do you have? If you want to do X can you do X or can you do only X-1 in which case you should begin by trying to do X-1 because that's the maximum you can do I think that was NR's genius that he had no illusions that he was a weak prime minister he wasn't easily flattered by normal Chamchas around you who make feel all politician the Alexander the great he knew he was not charismatic he knew people didn't like him he knew he was a fill in for Nehru Gandhi because Rajeev has died and he relentlessly focused on how you should get things done. Second is he had this ability to lay one constraint against the other so he had a lot of people who didn't like him so he spent a lot of time making sure that those who didn't like him were busy fighting each other to give one classic example the main two opposition parties he had to deal with were the left and the BJP and if the two of them voted together in any no confidence motion NR would have been toast, he would have to resign immediately so NR spent a lot of energy making sure that these two constraints, the BJP and the communist were always fighting with each other so for example he would go and tell when the communist would come in to him and complain about the liberalization one communist MP told me this NR says forget about liberalization think of Babri Masjid it is communalism that is the problem today we need to focus on secularism and on this you have to be on my side he does this instinctively, its remarkable this is the fox and think about what that achieves immediately after the demolition of Babri Masjid, when everyone is baying for NR's blood when everybody on India thinks that his political career has ended what does he do, he opens private licenses for bank that's what he does soon after Babri Masjid now in India giving private

licenses for new banks is a highly political subject, remember that Indira Gandhi's nationalization the famous socialist phase began with the nationalization of private banks, it was nationalize once in the late 1960s and a second time in 1980 so giving licenses to new banks which are today very famous, ICICI, HDFC for example is a politically loaded subject so when does NR pick the time to do it? Immediately after demolition of Babri Masjid when the communist when the socialist within his party are rallying around him against the on slot of the communal BJP that's NR's ability to lay constraints against each other but at the same time being deeply aware of the fact that it very important to focus on how to do things in India not what to do?

DJ: How NR reinvented himself as he moved from one era to another?

VS: I think it was just great skill, let's begin with the first big transition when he moves as a freedom fighter, he begins his career as freedom fighter which in Telangana meant being both anti British and anti-Nizam and he moved from that to being a congress politician and immediately moved from being somebody who is freedom fighter to a Nehruvian socialist who believes in the power of the state he is a socialist he understands how to play with the faction that there are these different factions, it's not that India was given freedom with this united group and they remain united because the moment the British leave the congress party begins to fight with each other and he gets that very well, he understands that is his first transition and he does it very well the second big transitions is which he fails is when he becomes chief minister he thinks he was rewarded by Indira Gandhi because he is the socialist he is going to be a socialist, he is going to bring about land reforms he doesn't realize that he is being made chief minister because he is a puppet because he doesn't have power because he is not going to threaten Indira Gandhi and he pushes radical land reforms there's a push back Indira Gandhi feel threatened and sacks him so I think that's the transition he gets wrong, luckily for him he has the ability to introspect and learn from that fail transition that he had to move from being a socialist politician to a supplicant of Indira Gandhi he fails to understand that and then he soon back and for the decade and the half he was the supplicant of the Nehru Gandhi first Indira Gandhi and then Rajeev Gandhi and he makes that transition very soon smoothly whereas people like Pranab Mukherji and PC Alexander they were very close to Indira Gandhi simply failed to be that close to Rajeev Gandhi, Narasimha Rao was able to do that and then his final transition which is that from being a Nehru Gandhi supplicant he has made prime minister of India he really comes to his own he really becomes his own man he really stops responding to Sonia Gandhi, stops listening to her that's why they don't like each other so I think his ability to understand political context was phenomenal many of his transitions was accurate he understands when he is moving from one ecosystem to the other where he failed to understand in 1973 for example which is why he sacked as chief minister for Andhra Pradesh he has the ability to introspect on it to create a new Avatar and then he is back in business.

DJ: And talking about new Avatar you also alluded to the cultural shift especially when we are talking about the Rajeev Gandhi era the ox bridge kind of culture that sort of existed in the core group and NR given his background from AP charisma of a dead face talk to us about how he was able to fit into different cultures.

VS: There is the very good story I have in the book on exactly this which is that, the Rajeev Gandhi era he was called Mr. Clean. Indians loved him they actually thought he was break from his mother so he surrounds himself with the people who are educated "in the modern sense" they have gone to Doon school they have gone to Oxford, they have gone to Cambridge they have private sector experience people like Arun Nehru or Arun Singh people who are his school buddies like Mani Shankar Iyer his pilot friends like Satish Sharma these are people who are far remove from the kind of vernacular deliberately in India we describe as Hindi speaking type world of NR as far as can be, NR wears a dhoti English is a fifth language he has learnt he likes basically when he is doing nothing

he will cross his legs and he will massage his toes in public these are things which happen in village they don't happen in Doon school or Oxbridge. NR was also 65 in 1985 Rajeev Gandhi looking for younger people and older people close to mummy or the way around and NR at this point he's defence minister but he realises his time is up he overhears Rajeev Gandhi to friend of his that we need to remove import restrictions on computer peripherals but the old fogies in my cabinet won't understand and to give you some context the personal computer revolution has come to the united states only in the late 1970 and this is 1985 this is a 65 years old dhoti clad man and this is India the next day after NR hears Rajeev Gandhi telling this to friend of his about old fogies are not understanding NR calls up his son in Hyderabad and says what is this computer piece send me a sample so next day Indian Airline flight from Hyderabad a computer sent to his house in 9 Motilal Nehru marg, NR goes to Dariyaganj in old Delhi to get books on Computer peripherals he hires a master to teach him and within that year and the next he learn Cobol basic two computer languages and can code in the operating system UNIX, its remarkable I mean imagine a 65 year old man doing that today and it's a perfect example of his curiosity and his political survival skill coming just together and not only that he learnt computer he then becomes very close to Rajeev Gandhi as close to Rajeev Gandhi as he was to Indira he becomes foreign minister again he is the first HRD minister the education minister of India and he is very close to Rajeev Gandhi and don't forget Rajeev Gandhi's widow Sonia who appoints him Prime Minister of India he gets that close so I think that it tell you something about that man who understands transitions and understands the context behind transition.

DJ: Is there anything to be said about the kind of portfolios he picks up and we speak about the various things he had done and sort of the political resume but is there anything to be said about the way in which he had made choices to sort of gaana those experiences?

VS: Well, left to himself the portfolios he like the best was welfare portfolios health education he was very good about it he cared about it he was health and education minister in Andhra Pradesh he was health and education minister in Delhi in the Union government, he really had a feel for it he understood and ideologically believed that the state had a role when it came to education the state had a role when it came to health many of the big schemes that we today are associated with like Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi like RTE, the right to work the first central schemes happened during NR's time which is why a lot of this argument that in 1991 with new liberalism the state resided is not true that Indian economy opening up precisely the same time when the Indian welfare schemes were opening up and for the pretty simple causal explanation that you can't have good welfare schemes unless the government generates revenue and while Indira Gandhi is called socialist prime minister she didn't have a central education scheme, she didn't have a central health scheme it was socialism of rhetoric, socialist countries are those that spend on education and health for its people and that takes place in India after quote unquote near liberalism so left to himself I think he would have liked the welfare portfolio but because he was the mister indispensable he ended up holding a very wide range of portfolios like I said Hindu endowment, law minister in AP in Delhi itself he was foreign minister twice, he was home minister he was defence minister and as you know in India you are not given because you are an expert you are given portfolios because it signals your status in a pecking order so I think left to himself he would have been a welfare, that was where his heart lay but because he was also a politician he like the fact that he could pick more important ministries.

DJ: I wanted to talk about how NR picked his teams? How Rao mastered this notion of getting the right team to work with him?

VS: I think the first most important quality that NR brought to team building and team choosing was he personally not an insecure person, that's really important, now there's a law in India Arun Shourie

told me it was called the Indersan law named after this IIT professor saying that in India first rate people hire first rate people, second rate people hire third rate people and so on because second rate people are also insecure about their abilities so they want to hire someone who is first rate and then in India you end up with 9th rate people so that's how institutional mediocrity takes place in India. NR was a first rate guy so when it came to for example foreign policy he knew it really well, he had academic friends in NY university who would send him the latest edition of top academic articles he knew the history of China he spoke Spanish he knew Persian he knew Urdu and he was the rank one in Persian and Urdu in Nizam state in Nizam's Hyderabad and he could talk to Pakistani President in Urdu and most Pakistani said that NR's Urdu was better so he was extremely confident so he was not insecure in selecting diplomats who were very good, he also was confident enough that when he didn't know something, he didn't pretend to know it, he knew nothing about economics, he had an instinct but he didn't know anything about economics so he had the confidence to first ask for the hiring of IG Patel former RBI governor who was at that time London School of Eco head, IG Patel says no arguably the most famous no in Indian history saying that look I have a mother in Baroda she is old I have to take care of her, so then he asked PC Alexander who should I select and he said look there is this guy called Manmohan Singh and he says fine get Manmohan Singh he seems to me the man who has the ideas which will get us out of this hole, he didn't know anything about economics, Manmohan Singh did know that and he was not insecure that MS knew more economics than he did he constantly consulted R Venkatraman who was the president at that time a former finance minister, saying that look help me out and he understood very clearly that look the ideas that Manmohan Singh, IG Patel are talking about are ideas that we need to implement in India but those ideas have been going around in India for decades my job is to get it politically off the ground he understood that very clearly so I think that, that core ability to not be insecure meant that he could hire first rate talent around him, he had no problem with people walking to his office and saying Mr. Rao I completely disagree with you because he was confident, not only he was a scholar if District Magistrate called him up and told him something he could tell a DM what to do because he knew Districts better than DM very often so he was not afraid of talent I think that is very important and in Indian context it's very rare, it's very rare.

Second is he had no personal friends as I told you he was not a faction leader. Dr. Manmohan Singh who I interviewed for this book likes NR but he wasn't a crony of NR he didn't know NR very well before he became PM so second quality NR was not looking for Chamchas he was not looking for yes-man he was not looking for people who would enhance his power he was looking for people who would get the job done and he has the second very rare quality especially in the Indian context.

Third is NR had this you can call it ancient Indian philosophy, Hindu philosophy you can call it what you want that all parts had to be represented that change in continuity are the two sides of the same coin that yes capitalism is good but you know what socialism is good too it's a classic Indian trait, Philosophically you call it as a gujju thali everything is there so NR's cabinet was a little like a Gujrati thali there was a little bit of sweet there's a little bit of Sour there was little bit of Papad there was everything so in his economic ministry he had people like MS, Montek Singh Ahluwalia who were quote unquote free marketers in right wing but running his welfare schemes were socialists like KR Venugopal and BN Yugan Dhar incidentally the father and the father in law of Satya Nadella who runs Microsoft so he had leftist, he had right wing people he got along very well which scheduled caste he got along very well with Brahmins, he would speak to Sharad Pawar in Marathi he would speak to SB Chavan in Marathi and Telegu he would speak to someone in clipped English, he could speak to Salman Haider his foreign secretary for a while in clipped Urdu and Salman Haider told me that his Urdu was kind of Urdu spoken in those aristocratic Muslim households in UP so that was his ability to build teams that he realize that you need all kinds to make a team he wasn't looking for yes-man at all and he was confident enough in his own ability that he was never insecure

when team member outshone him or knew more about a particular subject than he did and I think that is very rare.

DJ: Even when I look at leadership in organizations in the corporate world, you often have people reporting to you who know much more about that topic of function than you do so in those situations when it comes to decision making where you are not as informed as the person reporting to you so how did NR make key decisions? What's the mechanism to make good decisions?

VS: I will give you NR's view he trusted people around him but he also realised that the expert knows only one thing but the problem may have multiple components, Manmohan Singh understands tariff reductions very well, MS doesn't know how to get it through the Lok Sabha, MS doesn't know how to get it through the Rajya Sabha, the IFS offices, diplomats tell you that we need to make overtures to Israel the diplomat doesn't know that you need the political signing of hugging Yasser Arafat so I think NR's remarkable ability was that he relied on experts but he knew that he alone had the 360 degree view and the how part. And the how part requires a 360 degree view, in fact I don't know where this is relevant to this conversation but my former boss Shekar Gupta would always tell me that the difference between Indian leadership and Pakistani leadership is that democratic politicians are forced to take the 360 degree view whereas Pakistani leaders typically military dictators are all looking at the Army view, and the Army view is just one view Mushrraf knows how to attack Kargil he doesn't know how to be a diplomat, he doesn't know how the economy works so in any organization we are going for specialist, specialist and specialist but the ultimate decision maker has to realise what is good for the entire organization and that was NR and that's another reason why he felt that even though MS knew more about him than in finance, AN Verma who was the former industry secretary, understood industries very well KN Venugopal, Yugan Dhar understood welfare schemes, he was the only person who had the keys to all kingdoms and decisions required that.

DJ: Sometimes even in the book you talk about the fact that not making a decision is a decision itself and NR in a lot of ways mastered the art of not making the decision in a strategic way so talk to us a little bit about that notion in the context of NR?

VS: NR has made a lot of fun off because the typical view of the NR was he was a scholar but he doesn't act and that's just a straight untruth as I show in the book yes he was a scholar but at heart he was a man of action, what he also was, he was acutely aware of his political vulnerabilities so when he didn't act it was not because he didn't want to act and not because not acting was important but because he just lack the political ability sometimes it was that not acting is important, not making a decision is important but very often he just lack the political ability that he could have made the decision he could have made the decision to privatise Air India which today we are trying to do but at that time he would have lost his job so he didn't make a decision on that matter so the stereo type of NR which comes from that idea, analysis until paralysis that was be that joke and the joke was NR knew that how to be silent in 10 languages and I think that misses something at the core of NR that he was the man of action but he was also acutely aware that as the book points out he lack power so his genius was where to act under which political cover and when he lack political cover he would withdraw and it's a fine art because most politicians you would argue only care about survival NR cared about survival but he also cared about other things.

DJ: The other thing Vinay especially in politics is often leaders have to take decisions where there's short term pain but there's gain over the long term but people often don't see that people often experience the short term pain with greater intensity than they see the upside over the longer term so what can we learn from NR about moving on those kinds of situations

VS: Its important before I answer this that just to get to the fact that what you have said like its indisputable today so many years after liberalization that the changes that NR brought about were unpopular in the short term but have brought long term gain to India and that's a fact on the economy for example real income across percentiles have increased the poorest Indian is less poor thanks to NR and the policies that followed after it's not just NR it's also the Deve Gowda, Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh but the shift that he made the same you can say about foreign policy India has a greater power today that it was in the 80s that's the fact you can say that about welfare schemes India has better welfare schemes today, it has better schemes at health education it has certainly more money to deal with these problems that it had before 1991 so the fact of the matter is that the policies of NR were unpopular in the short term but have proven beneficial especially to India's poor in the long term, there is the debate on whether inequality has increased I think the answer is yes certain kinds of inequalities has increased, it's not alarming at the global level I think that's a just conversation to have but we have moved from the situation in which broadly everybody had nothing to eat when today there is inequality in what people have to eat and I think that's a fair criticism but to just talking about that without focusing on the fact that there have been long term benefits was one of the points of this book because I think there's a lot of misinformation which is not based on looking at evidence, the question was how did he get buy in? The short answer is he didn't. NR felt and I think he was right in this judgement that in the short term India voters would punish him so he chose to lie he chose to be a fox, he would do economic reforms while pretending he was doing nothing he would say what am I doing is just the IMF like he is the only politician I can think of who did something good but went to extraordinary efforts to hide his finger prints because it was unpopular in the short term. In congress working committee after meeting after meeting, when congress man would be shouting at him saying you are going away from socialist Nehru he would say don't look at me look at Dr. Saheb, Dr. Manmohan Singh he is the man with PhD so he would make what was fundamentally an ideological choice sound like medicine that has to be administered in a clinical non-political way by a doctor to a patient I think that is genius so the simple answer to your question is he didn't buy in he didn't trust the Indian voter to try to sell this to them instead he lied he pretended that nothing has changed and the 1996 elections he campaigned on the basis of his welfare schemes not of the basis of economic reforms and he lost so the Indian voter has not bought in or did not buy in to NR's changes if they had he would have been re-elected, I think that what he did was arguably correct at that point because it was unpopular and he was too weak to attempt to build a constituency over something that was short term unpopular, given how little power he had but I think the tragedy has been that many politicians have learnt from NR that make changes in India do economic reform do foreign policy changes but don't talk about it. Keep it quiet and I think that, that has been one of the negative consequence that the lack of getting popular buy in to something that has so obviously brought long term benefits, I am not saying that liberalization has solved all problems in India but it has now created a qualitatively different set of problem than what we had before 1991 but I think that that's a mistake that NR made inevitable and necessary perhaps at the time gut something that has left a poisonous legacy.

DJ: But that's where the benefit of hindsight may be just to pressure test that when you are at the point of making the decision how do you convey the 20 year upside on day zero?

VS: I can think of so many politicians Churchill being that most classic example, Park Chung Hee in south Korea being the other big example, Lee Kuan Yew being the other example who say that look I am taking a poor country on this modernising journey, they're going to be short term pains but I can assure you this with some guarantee that your children will have better life than you do it takes a certain kind of politician it has been done but that politician has to have the mandate, he has to have the trust of the people and only then can the voters say I will undergo some pain for you because I know my child's life will be better, NR was an unknown he had a charisma of as repeatedly say of a

dead fish, nobody had heard of him even after he became prime minister, few people had heard of him, I can tell you that when I went to Hyderabad to meet the NR's family for the first time, around 2015 and I asked my Taxi guy have you heard of NR I am going to his family's house he said oh yes he is the guy after him that flyover is named, he didn't know who he was? So a man like this I don't think would have been able to take the Indian people along and I think that he was well aware of his weakness of this that he would not be remembered I can tell you that before my book came out I remember talking to a friend of mine who was doing a PhD on India in an Ivy league university and he was doing a PhD in political science and I said look am writing this book on NR, my friend said who is he? And this is an academic working on contemporary India so a man like that is not going to lead Indians into saying that Modi is trying it lets see whether it works or not but NR no way he would have succeeded and I think he was realistic enough to know that so on hindsight I think he made the right judgement calls for his survival at the time.

DJ: In summary for our listeners about playing to potential.

VS: Well I think the NR knew what but he also knew the how, that's really important, I am at the beginning of my career so I am asking myself what do I learnt from NR and that is if you want to do something how do you go about it? You have got to know your ecosystem, you have got to know the DNA of your organization, when your boss changes you have got to know the DNA of the new boss you have got to realize that when you have a mandate and when you don't, you have got to realize that when your boss is saying something is the boss actually giving you the power to do what you want or not? And within that realm of the real how do you put through what you want to do? Am I thinking the key lesson on NR?

DJ: And may be just to add to that what I found find fascinating is, he seemed like a reasonably introverted kind of a man given the way you describe him so to be so perceptive despite being introverted is just a fascinating paradox for me as I think about him.

VS: in fact in the book there is this famous essay by Russian writer who says that the two great figures in modern fiction is Don Quixote and Hamlet, Hamlet is somebody he thinks so much and he can't act, Don Quixote who's someone who acts without thinking and NR at his best merged both he was somebody who was thinking and somebody who was acting and that's what remarkable about him, he was a scholar as well as he was a politician so he was an introvert but he also knew how to act, he was somebody who was not very comfortable spending time with people but here we have it, he was a politician who would met hundreds of people every day and I think that essential contradiction of being half a lion is what made him work and he was exactly the kind of contradictory figure that India needed in 90s and this mix of being Don Quixote and Hamlet in the best sense of the word is what caused India to change.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Hope you found the conversation as purposeful as I did. It is just fascinating to see the journey of Narasimha Rao from Vangara a village in Telangana to becoming the Prime Minister of the Country

There were three big takeaways for me in this conversation.

1) First is the Unfettered Curiosity of Narasimha Rao – If we take languages, his mother tongue was Telugu and he spoke good Marathi. He spoke 8 other Indian languages and on top of that he also spoke English, French, Arabic, Spanish, German and Persian. I just want to pause here for a minute. This is just mind-boggling by any standards. Vinay talks about him learning COBOL, Basic and

UNIX when he discovers the world is changing. This attitude to learning in a lot of ways represents the mindset with which CEOs of today need to approach how they spend time. What I also found interesting was the insight from Vinay that these learning habits kept Narasimha Rao occupied when he was not in power and kept him away from doing selling things that would damage the long-term outcomes. It kept him out of trouble. That was an interesting perspective

2) Second is the notion of staying agile in the context of the situation. Couple of situations that come to mind from what Vinay says

a. First instance is that Narasimha Rao almost becoming a monk in Kutrallam but when he hears the news about Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, he realizes that he might have a future in Delhi and he is there the next day

b. The second instance is Narasimha Rao changing from his protectionist stance to reconsidering his view towards opening up the economy given the Balance of Payments crisis we faced at that time

c. What I also liked about the notion of agility is the nuance that Vinay brings about by distinguishing between intellectual agility and implementation agility and the fact that Narasimha Rao was great at both

3) The third piece that struck me was the extent to which Narasimha Rao thought through the HOW, not just the WHAT when it came to problem solving around a situation and coming up with an approach. More specifically, really knowing the constraints around you and coming up with a solution that is realistically plausible given the limited control and mandate you have. And that sense of judgment is a fine art indeed.

Thank you for listening. If you find the content purposeful, please share with those that could find this valuable and do take a moment to rate and leave a review on iTunes. For more content from leaders like Nandan Nilekani, Zia Mody, Vinita Bali, Jay Panda, Vishy Anand, Atul Kasbekar, Amish Tripathi and more, do visit playtopotential.com and sign up on the website to be intimated when we upload new content. You could access a full conversation, or access content that is curated by key themes that might be of interest to you. Some of the Curated Playlists include topics such as Resilience, Reinventing yourself, Mindfulness, Redefining the notion of success and more.

I look forward to having you at one of the subsequent conversations of the playtopotential podcast.

Signing off. This is DJ. To know more about the Transition advisory work I do see www.transitioninsight.com. Bye now.

End of transcription

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Inflection points: Inflection points are when the notion of “what got you here won’t get you there” hold. Whether it is a company moving from a start-up to a scale-up or a leader moving from a CXO to

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Reinventing self: “How do I stay relevant” is a question that all of us have to grapple with as we go through our respective journeys. Careers aren’t linear any more. Some of the leaders talk about how they managed to pivot during their journeys and significantly change trajectories. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Law: What questions should we ask ourselves before we consider a career in law? What is that one distinctive trait that people should have for them to flourish as a lawyer. What are the options that open up when you start out with a career in law? Perspectives on some of the questions above. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Academics: Insight from the world of academics on the realities of the path and the nature of questions individuals should ask themselves before they pursue a career in that direction. It is interesting to notice that excellence in academics in schooling and under graduation is not necessarily a predictor of excellence in the world of academia. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Judgment: Judgment is a key trait that differentiates the great leaders from the average ones. How do you make decisions and exercise choices in a world full of options and grey areas with multiple stakeholders around you. In addition, the playlist has nuggets that discuss how one creates a climate for the people around you to exercise good judgment. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Lessons from another domain: What can the world of business learn about communicating intent from the Army? How is handling customer feedback similar to how a standup comedian handles heckling? What are the parallels between business strategy and chess? What can the world of business learn from other worlds? You can access the playlist [here](#).

Self-awareness: Insights around what it takes to build a better understanding of self. This includes perspectives around how we can deepen our picture of ourselves through a combination of inner work, mindfulness practices and by gathering meaningful feedback from the world around us. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Listening: When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new”. This is a quote by Dalai Lama. Several leaders talk about their experiences with listening and how they have grown with it. More specifically, leaders also reflect on the criticality of listening when transitioning into a new context. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Habits: Habits are routine behaviours done on a regular basis. They are recurrent and often unconscious patterns of behaviour and are acquired through frequent repetition. Guests on the podcast share their experiences in baking habits in their lives. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Context based Leadership: You can access the playlist [here](#).

Politics: Insight into the realities of the political journey and the challenges when one transitions from the world of. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Leadership Development: “How do I grow” is a question that all of us grapple with. The recipe for success is also changing as we move from an Industrial paradigm to a Digital paradigm. This is all the more pronounced in a start-up context where the job outgrows you very quickly. Successful leaders

talk about the role of mentors, coaching, listening and more in scaling up one's capability. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Managing time: Money is a renewable resource, time is not. Leaders share their wisdom around how they have thought about their time and gravitated towards initiatives that yield the maximum Return on Time Invested (ROTI). They also discuss how the pie chart of time has evolved with changes in context. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Resilience: Research by Angela Lee Duckworth (of Wharton) talks about a special blend of passion and commitment that she calls Grit. Leaders from various fields (Armed Forces, Writing, Sport, Entrepreneurship and more) talk about their experiences in cultivating resilience. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Curiosity: "A Curious Mind" by Brian Grazer (Oscar winning Producer of movies like A Beautiful Mind and Apollo 13) was the inspiration behind the Play to Potential Podcast. In this playlist, Leaders reflect about the role of curiosity and how it has helped them in their journeys. As Alvin Toffler says, the Illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Leadership Transitions: Perspectives around moving from one role from another especially while moving from Functional Leadership to General Management; Leaders also talk about how they thought about inter-generational transition as business owners. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Spotting potential: As we move towards a world where intrinsic capabilities count for more and more, how we spot diamonds in the rough is a capability that will begin to matter more and more. This is as relevant for hiring as for investing. Leaders across disciplines share their insights on how they look for raw potential that can then be honed. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Effective hiring: Staffing up your leadership team thoughtfully is one of the key roles of a leader. However, the paradigm for hiring in the digital world is changing as we move towards a world where intrinsic are beginning to matter more and more. Leaders across domains share their insights on how one could hire effectively. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Driving change: Ability to drive change in an organization is one of the critical Leadership Competencies for a CEO today, given more and more is getting done at the intersection of different ecosystems, and a large portion of value add is not directly under the leader's control but in the wider realm of influence. In this segment, leaders talk about how they drove change through a complex system/organization. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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Vinay Sitapati - Nuggets

- 30.00 Vinay Sitapati - The Full Conversation
- 30.01 Vinay Sitapati - Early career choices - Law, Journalism, Teaching and Writing
- 30.02 Vinay Sitapati - Delivering good judgments
- 30.03 Vinay Sitapati - The reflection habit - decoding signal from the noise
- 30.04 Vinay Sitapati - Managing time, unfettered curiosity and resilience
- 30.05 Vinay Sitapati - Leadership under extreme constraints - Lion, Fox and Mouse
- 30.06 Vinay Sitapati - Staying relevant through transitions
- 30.07 Vinay Sitapati - Assembling an effective team
- 30.08 Vinay Sitapati - Making/Not making key decisions
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- 30.10 Vinay Sitapati - 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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