



Guest

Atul Khatri is one of the top Stand-up comedians in the country. In his previous avatar, he used to run a successful IT Business with his brother for several years. When he got tired of the business routine, he tried his hand at DJing and Bar-tending before trying his hand at comedy in Feb 2012 as part of his New Year resolution in 2012. 7 years later, he had a Netflix special featuring 47 comedians from 13 countries around the world.

We speak about his journey, mid-life reflections and how he rode two horses (IT Business and Stand-up comedy) for a period of time before he took the call to do Stand-up full time. He also speaks about how he had to balance passion and pragmatism as he transitioned from the world of Business to the world of Stand-up.

We also spent time talking about his response to COVID-19. He had a series of shows lined up in US and Canada from 13 March to 13 April. He speaks about how he was in Canada on 10 March and the world started falling victim to Corona and started shutting its borders. He speaks about how he had to adapt to the context to survive and thrive in these challenging times. Something, all of us could learn from.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 61st conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast. I am your host Deepak Jayaraman and I work with leaders as an Executive Coach, Sounding Board or as a Transition Advisor as they navigate their journeys. The two questions I try and help leaders with are “Where to go” and “how to grow”. I find that these two questions are quite parallel to the two questions businesses need to ask in the context of their strategy – where to play and how to win. In this podcast series, we feature conversations from leaders from different walks of life on three themes - leadership, transitions and careers.

Our guest this time is Atul Khatri, an accomplished Stand-up Comedian. Atul used to run his own Tech business with his brother and within a span of 7 years, has moved from trying out at an open mic for the first time in his life in Feb 2012 to recording a Netflix special in Jan 2019. We speak about his journey, his mid-life musings and how he transitioned into his new trajectory. We specifically speak about how he has adapted to what life has thrown at him in the last few months.

Just as a heads up, we have a couple of interesting conversations lined up at the podcast in the coming weeks.

- We have Whitney Johnson, a leading thinker and the author of the book Disrupt yourself. She worked closely with Prof Clay Christiansen (CC), who passed away recently, and took his principles of disruptive innovation and applied that to careers

CC: *"And so that was the theory of disruption as we applied it to products and services but the big discovery then I had been that personal disruption is how you take all these ideas and make them meaningful to you. You start at the bottom of a ladder; you climb to the top and then you jump to the bottom of a new ladder like the children's game Snakes and Ladders. The big difference with personal disruption is that you are Netflix and you are Blockbuster, you are Uber and Cabs, you are the silly little thing and you take over the world. You're the disruptor and the incumbent because you are disrupting you. So that's personal disruption"*

- We also have Ashish Dhawan (AD), a leading philanthropist who speaks about transitioning from a successful career in Private Equity at ChrysCapital to founding Ashoka University and a career in Social Impact

AD: *"and I am fairly achievement-oriented, and so, I was finishing business school when I was about 28-years-old. So, 30 was the natural first marker because I had worked a couple of jobs before business school, I was going to work one more but I was very clear that I wanted to be an entrepreneur. So, by setting a marker at 30, it forced me while I was at Harvard Business School to start actually working on my new venture which was a private equity fund and doing things, I found my partner there, I started preparing, building the network etc. And then because I had a marker at 45, even though I was in a corporate job, I was running this private equity fund, I started cultivating these other interests, I started sitting on a couple of other non-profit boards when I was in my mid-30s and then by the time I was 40, I had already started thinking very seriously and made the decision and then actually by 42-43, I managed to exit the corporate world. So, I think, having this big role model but also having a sense that it takes at least 10-15 years to make a meaningful contribution, that's how I came up with these markers in a sense."*

DJ: But now, let us dive into my conversation with Atul Khatri.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Atul, thanks for your time, excited to have you at the Play to Potential podcast.

Atul Khatri (AK): Thank you, Deepak, thank you so much for this opportunity.

DJ: And I must say we are starting a new series on the podcast called "The Next Mountain" where we wanted to talk to people who have achieved a certain level of success or accomplishment in a certain field, but then paused and took a turn in a different direction and climbed a new mountain and have been marching on it for a while and have reached a meaningful point and in a way wanted to spend the bulk of the time in this conversation talking about your transition from running a business to a career in comedy. But maybe just to set context for the listeners, Atul could you give us a sense of where you come from and your journey up to the point where you were running a business? What sort of business was it, size, scale, people, just so that viewers get a sense of the world you were operating in?

AK: Okay, so actually I am basically based in Mumbai in India, and I did my engineering in 1989, I finished my engineering and soon out of engineering I worked in an IT company because... okay so let me tell you, I used to always love... I was a student of Science and before getting back then there were two options to get into medicine or engineering. That was mostly the, you know, mostly that

were the two streams most people would follow up being in the science background. So even though I got into medicine, but I used to hate cutting cockroaches in my 12th grade in the biology class, so I chose to get into engineering. So yeah, so I got into engineering in 1989, I cleared engineering and somehow IT always excited me and I did my computer engineering and 1989 to 1990, even though my course was basically very software-oriented, but I should not... honestly I used to hate coding, I felt it was a very, very boring job, I still consider it as a boring job but... so I used to like the... so, I worked as a marketing executive in a company in Nariman Point in Mumbai, which is a business district in Mumbai. I worked there for close to one to one-and-a-half year selling computers. At that time, we used to sell computers.... each computer used to cost like 1.5 lakh rupees and I used to sell computers go on and on like a cold calling and sell, you know, hard-core selling going office to office, knocking doors and trying to sell a computer. So, I did that for one-and-a-half year and around the same time in 1989, my elder brother had started this computer company. So my brother also is from IT field, he is an engineer and he went to the U.S. and he came back I think in 1987-88, that time it was Rajiv Gandhi government and with the thing to... Sam Pitroda was at that time the IT minister and he was boosting that come back and start your own thing, get into IT. My brother came back from the U.S. and started his own IT Company called Kaytek Computer Services Private Limited. He started in 1988 actually. So, when I finished my job in 1990, I felt I should join hands with my brother. So, I joined my brother and I used to from that day I used to sort of look after the sales and servicing part of the computers, and the networking and that used to really impress me. And my brother was... he used to love coding and he was more into the software processes side. So, we had, on the same floor in a building we had two offices and he used to look after the software and consultancy part, I used to look after the hardware and networking because both those things sort of went together. At that time there were lot of companies who wanted to buy hardware plus required consulting in what software to go and services and things like that. So I did that for close to like till 2016 actually yeah, so more than I think 26 years, 25-26 years I spent doing that and it was actually fairly, yeah, the business was doing pretty well and I think maximum I think we were at one time we had like 80 people under us but you know IT these things keep on fluctuating, how many people you have, but I think on an average we used to have close to 50-60 people and we were doing fairly well. We were somewhere early and we realized that in IT field either you have to be too big or you have to be a boutique player in our thing. So, we chose obviously the boutique player because to grow big you would require too much funding and it was too much of a hassle. So, we always believed and you know high margins but maybe low turnover but higher margins, boutique player, still there are a lot of customers in India who want those kind of very, very high-end services, who want you, know to pick up the phone and somebody should be there and they are willing to pay a price for it. So, it was not always the price game. So, I always right from the beginning, me and my brother had his ideology that we should not go for the price game but always go for the quality game and take a good margin and let the client know he is paying extra for good services. So, we always went through that and to a large extent that also was because we worked a lot with Wipro at that time and Wipro as a company at that time also had more or less the same kind of ethics and policies of not running after... so at that time there was always the race between Ceva, HCL, Wipro, Zenith and Wipro used to always be last because Wipro always believed in high margins but volumes were not high, when I am talking about PC sales or just sales. And we worked actually very closely for Wipro, I think we were one of Wipro's first national partners and we worked with Wipro for like till Wipro shut down their PC business we were with them.

DJ: So, you clearly had a good run in this business with your brother? Boutique business with good margins and profitability. Give us a sense of the nature of the inner angst you were going through after about 2 decades in the business?

AK: So, this was going on very well and it was in actually 2012, after running a business for like that was 22 years into the business, so I felt that it was getting very... I would not say boring because IT field as such is a fairly exciting thing, every six months there is a new Intel processor, which is doubling its capacity, there is a new Cisco technology, so there's something new happening, some new printer. Technology at that time was moving very, very fast. I saw Wi-Fi coming in front of me, we saw the PC coming in front of me, we saw PCs with two floppy drives getting into right now the supercomputer kind of technology which we get into laptops and palmtops and mobile so, I saw that entire phase. So it was very, very exciting but still it was very, very boring like I felt that there was some element other than you may call it midlife crisis also I don't know but there was something that you are missing something in your life by just not exploring a second part, it was just... and IT field you are more or less working like 24/7 because at that time and probably in 2012, we were maintaining like very, very high critical networks of customers here and from abroad and sometimes get a call at 2:30-3:00 in the morning, the server is down, some this problem has come, this error has popped up, you are coordinating in the morning and sending engineers to that place plus we were also representing a very, very American company in India who was into support of very high-end servers and critical network systems. So, we were their support partners in India. So, for them also we used to do lot of high-end support work. And this means like you have to send an engineer in like 45 minutes anywhere in Bombay or a one hour in Bombay and that was really, really, you know, you get a call at 2:30, you had to wake up an engineer somewhere, one engineer is not picking his call, call up the other engineers, if nothing helps, I used to go there personally because I am an engineer. So, I knew... I was always abreast of what's happening in technology. So that 2012 I felt that... and honestly my wife also said, I can see you just burning every day, you leave home at 9:30, come home at 9:00 in the night and I felt this crazy burning happening like what am I doing, like you are only making money, you are happy, but still there is something else. So, my wife said why don't you try something different in your life? So, I said, okay, so I set out a task in 2011, in mid-2011, I said, I want to be a DJ because I used to love music. So, I went for this DJing course somewhere in suburban Bombay. So, that time there was no course, you had to know a DJ, a friend knew a DJ who used to teach people over the weekend. So that dude told me, that time I was 44, he said sir come on Saturday at 12 o'clock to my house, I will teach you how to be a DJ, get 25,000 rupees. I am on a corporate background, I reached at 11:45 sharp, 15 minutes before the meeting and I was outside his house 12:00, 12:30, 1:00, 1:30, 2:00 this bugger just didn't open his door. I was calling on his phone, he was not picking up his phone, so I said shit this guy is unprofessional. So, I left from that place and I think after an hour he called, so sorry sir, I had a gig last night, I had overslept, please come back. I said no dude you are unprofessional; I hate dealing with unprofessional people; I am a stickler for time. So, my DJ career ended there, and I said I should become a bartender and another thing I used to love at home on Sundays to mix drinks, to experiment with drinks and I bought this cocktail set at home to just experiment and things like that. So, I said I should become a bartender. So, I signed up for a bartending course next on some two Sundays later on. It was on a Sunday at 3 o'clock again in some bar somewhere 3 o'clock in the afternoon in a bar somewhere again in Mumbai and it was a...

DJ: So, it was conscious effort to learn something new and start something new?

AK: Yeah, I somehow, I always felt, I don't know... I am a marketing guy, I am a sales guy, I always felt that I should be always in a B2C kind of a role, I hated like a B2B, I hate backend stuff, be customer-facing. So, both these even DJing and this was you get instant gratification both these things. So, I said, okay, let me be a bartender. So, then this course was at 3 o'clock and I am a Sindhi and we had a very, very heavy lunch on that Sunday. Sunday lunch used to be always very heavy and after that I used to always believe in that 25-26 years of corporate life Sunday that sleep in the afternoon for 3-4 hours is like the battery for the entire week. So, I overslept and I didn't go for that course. So, my

bartending career ended there only. So that was this. I was not really disappointed but I felt there was something I should do more.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I really like what Atul says towards the end of that piece in terms of how he saw himself. I am going to play it again just to reiterate.

(REPLAY)

AK: Yeah, I somehow, I always felt, I don't know... I am a marketing guy, I am a sales guy, I always felt that I should be always in a B2C kind of a role, I hated like a B2B, I hate backend stuff, be customer-facing. So, both these even DJing and this was you get instant gratification both these things. So, I said, okay, let me be a bartender.

DJ: While he makes this point in a matter of fact way, I find that this a profound point which several people miss out on. We often see ourselves with specific labels which can be constraining. How do we abstract the key elements of what gives us energy without getting caught up in the specifics of what we have been upto is not as easy as it sounds.

Here is a snippet from Nandan Nilekani, he had the opposite insight, that he was more of a B2B person than a B2C person. He speaks about this in the context of his experience as a politician transitioning from Rajya Sabha to participating in the election to get into the Lok Sabha.

NN: I think that was one transition where I step too far in some sense, it was way out of my comfort zone, so after the election campaign and after that I realize that this was not where I want to be, that I didn't have the leverage, I didn't have competitive advantage in that area I didn't think I would be very effective so I realize actually my effectiveness comes from being what I am good at which is a technology lead transformation agent and use my talents and abilities to solve large intractable problems and make that available to anybody who wants to use it, so that was my shift and then of course I explained to you that I was looking for something to do and this except happened and then the whole portfolio approach.

I said if I am going to be in this game I should win an election that's the rights of passage if that business but then it becomes very retail intensive, because in every constituency there are millions of people, it's a B to C business, its B to C kind of thing and everybody wants real time attention, you can't say send me an email or call centre or something, so it's very time intensive it's also lots of pressure groups, different caste, religions this that all that stuff and also I was hampered by the fact that I was not a good public speaker in any Indian language, and I don't think you can win an Indian politics unless you are very good at it being a public speaker in Hindi or Kannada or Marathi or whatever, so I didn't have leverage so they quickly realize that I was not going to be effective in this.

DJ: Having this self-awareness of who you are and the environments where you thrive in at an abstracted level without being caught up in the specifics of what you are doing can act as a steering wheel in helping you experiment new pathways as in the case of Atul or cut your losses as in the case of Nandan who moved away from politics after his experience there.

If you find the podcast purposeful, do take a moment and rate and review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you consume this. This small action of yours will help more people access the podcast and also help us attract high quality guests who often look at some of these metrics to decide if this is worth their time. Now let's get back to the conversation with Atul Khatri.

DJ: Atul you were getting a little worn down by the IT Business. You tried your hand at a couple of B2C spaces DJing and Bartending that didn't quite work out. Talk to us about where the seeds of a career in Stand-up Comedy were sown?

AK: Now what happened I just like go back, in 2010 is when I joined Facebook, okay, when Facebook just came in, there was Orkut, I never got onto Orkut bandwagon fortunately, but I got straight onto the Facebook and Facebook gave opportunities to express your opinion through those posts or status updates or whatever you call them and you get instant gratification from friends, from your family or whoever is connected to you on Facebook. And I loved that because I used to put up some, I still do that every day, I put up some three-four posts every day; it's an observation on Bollywood, on politics, satire, life, family, what's happening around, I used to put up these posts on Facebook and I used to get lot of good feedback from there. And I used to do always original; I used to always put very humorous kind of updates or satire or whatever you call it. And that's where a lot of people used to tell me, hey dude you are very funny, you are very funny, you are very original, people used to get, I used to get calls from my NRI friends saying that we only log in to Facebook to see what's happening in India through your posts because you make a comment, political comment or some satire on it, and we get to know about and then again after four hours we again log in *ki* what have you posted, just to know what's happening in India, just to know what's happening around. And there lot of people say hey, you are very funny, you are very original, why don't you try your hand at stand-up comedy, and this is 2011. At that time, you had to realize that stand-up comedy was very, very new, I didn't... I just used to see some posts happening, comedian Vir Das, Papa CJ, they had started some things; they used to do these comedy shows. And I never knew that what stand-up comedy was, I mean generally I was not... I was a fan of comedy, if you reflect back, I used to love Kishore Kumar and Mehmood and the Padosan and Bombay to Goa and if given a choice I would always love to go for a funny movie than a serious play. I mean, I will choose my movie or choose... it has to be funny; I just don't want to go for a boring or some epic historical movie, I always go for the fun stuff. So that's when I said, okay, let me go. So there were some shows happening around in Bombay and I went there and that was the time also there was this comedy club in Bombay called the Comedy Store which later on became the Canvas Laugh Club and now as we speak it has shut down in 2018... 2017-18 it shut down because of some financial reasons.

DJ: And I found it amazing, I have been to The Comedy Store in London. And I was amazed that I think they had one in London, one in Manchester and the third one they opened in Bombay if I am not mistaken?

AK: Yes, correct, correct, correct. So it was in fact... and honestly I generally give them all the credit for being the very, very big catalyst for the rise of stand-up comedy in India because at that time... so I'll come to The Comedy Store later because to let you know how they really helped a lot of the careers, a lot of the comedians. So, what happened was that I started going and watching some shows that The Comedy Store and some other bars and open mics which used to happen, and I said, hey, I think I can give this a try, you know, it seems this and that was also a time there was this very popular Russell Peters video which went viral on YouTube, these are times when YouTube was sort of coming and not everybody had access to YouTube, not many people knew what YouTube, you know talking about time, I think there was 1G or 2G technology, so there was not enough streaming and things like that. So that Russell Peter's video came and I said *chalo*, let me give it a try. So, it was

actually a New Year resolution 1st Jan 2012 or 31st December 2011 however you look at it? I said, now this year I have to change my life, I have to give it a shot. So, I said I will sign up for the first comedy open mic which comes and the first comedy open mic was on 2nd Feb 2012 after a month and I didn't know what stand-up comedy was, honestly, I didn't, but I wrote something because I used to write these funny posts, I knew what satire was, so I wrote a big piece, I memorized it and went and did my first open mic and it went off very well. We didn't tell our children about it, my wife asked me, do you want me to come along with you? I said, yeah, please come because I don't want to jump off the bridge if I bomb, it would be a bit too embarrassing at this age, 45-year-old man going and trying comedy and uncle coming on stage and doing. So, I said no, please come. We didn't tell our children about it, we just told them we are going out for dinner, because children would have thought dad's gone mad trying to do comedy at this age. And that time my elder daughter was 17, younger one was 15. So yeah, it started from that open mic, and I did very well at the open mic, I met a lot of the other comedians who said, hey, you are very original, you have a very good voice; voice means you have an opinionated voice. So don't leave this because a lot of people they do it like a bucket list, they do it only once and because generally this graph is so, going up on stage, writing jokes, making people laugh I think is a very, very difficult job, it looks very easy, but it's generally, I know the craft so I know how difficult it is. So, I went and actually it is from that open mic it started, I started doing more open mics, started doing there and for four years from 2012 to 2016, I did both my *CEO'giri* as well as stand-up comedy and 2016 when I saw that, you know, that was a time the market was booming, the stand-up comedy scene in India, because comedy clubs, more comedy clubs were opening in different parts and comedians were coming, we were getting a lot of corporate gigs. Comedy as an art form started getting accepted in India. And 2016, then I finally took the call and I resigned from my CEO Job, and I got full-time into comedy, yeah. So, this is my sort of journey in I think 15 minutes.

DJ: No, it's quite incredible Atul, because in a way you been very honest that comedy was the third thing you tried, you spoke about DJing and mixing drinks. It looked like a concerted effort to move out of the current...

AK: Genuinely, it was not really to move out, it was more to have one more aspect to be very honest with you, it was not that, when I started it was not that *ki chalo*, I have to stop this and get into that. Leaving my CEO Job and getting into comedy was a call which is... I saw that opportunity that this line was growing very fast, I had a good name in it, and because of my age and because of my material I get lot of corporate shows. I still I am think very humbly I will think, I am one of the few comedians in India who can handle a corporate show very well because not all comedians can handle a corporate show because of the material, because of the sensitivities of just reading the audience. So, I could see I was doing well and it would be foolish of me not to ride this faster horse to be honest with you. And it was not that I was not doing well here or the company was not, till the last day like... and also let me tell you one thing when I shut down the company it was done very, very methodically. So *haan*, so we didn't shut down the company, I shut down my division because my brother never wanted to get into hardware and sales because that's like a plumbing business, honestly. So, he didn't want to get into that, he was very happy doing his consultancy work, the margins are much higher there and PC sales are all very thin margins, high volumes but thin margins. So, he didn't want to get into that game, he was never, he didn't like that business at all. So, we decided to shut that division and I took one year to shut it down. It was not like one day I come and say *chalo, bandh ho raha hai company*. It was like I took one year to shut it down, I met every client of mine because we were, you know, I was the face of the company, these were the clients who we had relations for 25-26 years and I went up to them and told them that hey guys, many of them some of them knew I was doing comedy because four years I was into it, some of them didn't know and you would be surprised to know 6 out of 10 CEOs I met after the meeting used to tell me, Mr

Khatri we want to spend two minutes alone with you in my cabin, they used to take me into the cabin, shut the door, and they said, how the hell did you do it, *humko bhi nikalna hai yahan se, ki* tell me what is the mantra, I said, I don't know yaar, go for it whatever you like, go for it.

DJ: And you are right, everybody deals with midlife in the closet, right? Nobody wants to come out of that?

AK: I think it was very okay because when sometimes when I think of it Deepak that morning of 2nd Feb 2012 when I went for that comedy, generally I was not sleeping I think three nights before because just the thought of going on stage because... also one more thing at school I was never the guy who was into elocution and debates that over-smart kid who wanted to take part in every play. I was that studious kind of a guy who will probably just introduce the chief guest and run away. So, getting on stage was a very, very frightful experience. So, I was just thinking that particular morning I could have bailed out, it was just telling me telling myself, hey I have this important presentation to make tomorrow, I have this important proposal to make, forget it, *chalo* next month I will do. And that next month if I had done, I would have never done it because then I would have chickened out of it, because see other than bartending or learning DJing it's sitting with somebody in a room and learning something but this was going up on stage, throwing yourself in front of 30-40 people and trying to make them laugh and believe me when you go on stage 100 people, 200 people, sometimes I have performed for even my maximum crowd has been 3,500 people where they look at you, okay now make us laugh, like snap and make us laugh. We have paid you, now *chalo kaam shuru karo*, so... Show me what you have got, show me why I have paid 1,000 rupees for your ticket. So there is a lot of pressure on you and that pressure sometimes can get on you but it's very, very scary, till today whenever I go on stage and most comedians, most of us whenever we go on stage even though I have been doing it for eight years now one hour before the show like I have got rats running in my stomach, butterflies in my stomach, I am pacing up and down, I stop eating, stop, just keep on sipping water. So, all these things happen, which is I think a part and parcel of this.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Atul speaking about him nervously approaching the first open mic reminds me of how this podcast started about 4 years back. I knew I wanted to start doing a Podcast series on Leadership, Transitions and Careers but was struggling to figure out where to start. I remember waiting in the Mumbai airport waiting to board my flight and I happened to see the Tennis Legend, Vijay Amritraj from the corner of my eye and walked up to him and said I would like to interview him on his journey. He looked at me quizzically saying "Who are you again". Somehow, I managed to convince him of my intent, and he asked me to come to Bangalore to his hotel room to record this conversation which I did. Sometimes, I need to pinch myself on the journey till date after about 60 conversations over 4 years. But like Atul says, there was a bit of "I need to put myself out of my comfort zone" that kicked the ball in motion.

What is interesting is that Atul says that he had no prior background in Public Speaking / Stand up. But he felt he had the intrinsic for it. Often we constrain our world of possibilities by looking at our skills. One of the pieces to watch out for is "what is the one piece of feedback that people give you that you take for granted about yourself"; that is often a super-power that we are sitting on that could open up a new pathway for the future. And that pathway could be in an orthogonal plane. Now let's get back to the conversation with Atul Khatri.

DJ: Maybe just to take stock of the journey Atul, Feb 2012 and seven years later Jan 2019 you were part of a Netflix special featuring 47 comedians around the world and of course you continue to march on. But for a minute if you had to write a book around these seven years, what would the different phases be in your journey in stand-up? How would you sort of categorize the different elements of these seven years?

AK: So, see first of all, you have to realize that stand-up comedy in 2012 was as an industry itself it was growing. So, when we started doing and The Comedy Store, yes, I wanted to come back to The Comedy Store. As I said The Comedy Store was a catalyst in getting stand-up comedy. Like, till today whenever I go to London, I go and meet Don Ward and sort of, you know, rather than not touching his feet like I always say Namaste and tell him always thank you for getting stand-up comedy in India. So initially when The Comedy Store started in India, there were no Indian comedians except probably Vir and Papa CJ who had also at that time just come that time or a year before from the U.S. So, there were no comedians, so they used to actually fly down comedians from UK, Australia or visiting comedians who are visiting India on a tour and tell them why you don't do a gig at our Comedy Store here because there were no comedians. So, it started with we doing opening acts for many of these comedians from these foreign comedians used to come and these were comedians who had been doing stand-up comedy for like 35 years, 20 years, just stand-up comedy, because the stand-up comedy scene in the UK is like a 80 or a 100-year-old art form. So, I remember performing to this guy, I think his name was Simon, very, very famous comedian and I just asked him before the show sir, how many years, he said 35 years. Imagine the kind of experience that guy would have.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Just to pause the conversation here, it turns out that Papa CJ, the individual Atul alludes to here happened to be on the podcast many moons back. He speaks about the notion of refining the craft which sometimes takes years.

PapaCJ: The best pieces of advice that I got when I was starting out was, it's very important for you to grow in the dark because the second you hit the limelight, you don't have the freedom to screw up, so I find that nowadays people are too much in a hurry to get famous or to get rich or to get opportunities, but if you get an opportunity that is too big for you and fail, it might be awhile before people look at you again, so for me what I love doing is, going away back into the dark, experimenting, growing, trying to come up with something new and then coming out to present that. I find nowadays people are trying to learn the tricks of the trade before they learn the trade.

DJ: Like Atul says, in every profession, we often have people self-proclaiming themselves as experts or conducting Master classes on topics with a few months of dabbling in it and so on. But in any field, excellence possibly takes decades, not years. Let's get back to Atul now

AK: So yeah, so initially we started out opening for them because there were no Indian comedians. So, between the foreign comedians we used to do like a five-minute thing and then what happened as soon as we started building our own material and the Indian audiences obviously liked our material more than theirs because they are coming from a much more advanced society. I remember once doing a show in The Comedy Store, they were like some... it was bought over by the Rotary Club of some South Bombay and there were all these old uncles and aunties sitting over there and this Brit comedian goes up and he talks about stuff, which should everybody in the audience was squirming, because for them talking about sex and this and that was very, very casual, I mean they don't even think twice about it because that's a society. But here even today if you just mention the

word sex in a corporate show people start giggling, people start squirming in their seats, even though we are the highest population in the world, I think we have more sex than anybody else anywhere in the world. So, sometimes they couldn't relate, they couldn't understand their accents, the Scottish accent or the Welsh accent. So when we started getting more and more, the Indian audiences started coming more for us than for them and then slowly and steadily obviously it made commercial sense to not fly in comedians from UK and that's how we sort of... so I remember like doing my first open mic at The Comedy Store, it was in March 2012, and I started getting my own spot at The Comedy Store in like in October the same year. So it took me like whatever six to seven months to sort of get there, but that was a time when you know you were really learning the ropes and The Comedy Store genuinely helped us a lot, how to respect time on stage, how to respect other artists, how to respect the audience, how to respect the staff members of a comedy club because see The Comedy Club doesn't make money on your tickets, sometimes they make money on the alcohol which they sell inside, so you can't be... there are a lot of rules of comedy in terms of... so, I think first was the learning phase, second phase was learning very, very fast and that way I still say till this day that Indian comedians even though we have started in the scene late, we are like probably right now a 10-year-old industry, if you look at it 2010 is when The Comedy Store came in and the comedy scene and now it is 2020, so I think it is 10 years of Indian stand-up comedy scene, but as an art form we have done extremely well in terms of learning very fast because it's like I remember when Nokia came in with their technology here India adopted it very fast, Europe had a different technology, but the Nokia technology, I forgot the name, I think this 2G only. Because we got it late, but we got the best, so we entered late but we are very educated people, we are smart people Indians, we are intelligent people. So, we followed the craft very fast, learned what people... we know how to read the room, we know how to perform internationally and the professionals here.

DJ: And six months Atul let's say March 2012 to October 2012 and clearly you had a business to run and here you tasted let's call it tasted blood in a way, you know, you had a good time, people responded to you, you felt this would be your...

AK: I would say I tasted drugs because honestly going on stage, making people laugh is a drug on a different level let me tell you. So yeah, please go ahead, sorry.

DJ: I was just saying so talk to us about what those six months looked and felt like. In terms of your time and attention you had a business to run. So how did you... I am curious about how do you water a new plant where you are sitting under a tree, right?

AK: It was actually not even six months, I would say because from 2012 to 2016, I did both my job as well as this but yes the initial six months were very, very exciting, because I am telling you the first open mic I did, the laughter which you get and the claps which you get, you don't get sleep for sometimes 3-3 days, those resonate in your ears, I am generally telling you. So, suddenly from that first open mic I became damn energetic, I used to probably wake up earlier, do my job even better than my IT job, because I knew in the evening I had to go for a gig or attend a gig because I started liking this. Now I started knowing which are the other open mics happening, where comedy shows are happening, other comedians started knowing me, they used to say hey, I have a gig in Bandra next Thursday, do you want to come and do 10 ten minutes, I said, yeah, sure man, thank you so much for the opportunity. Then that next gig you are preparing for it, obviously not during your work time but when you are driving to work, when you are coming back from work or when you are exercising or you are going to the gym, when you are on the treadmill that 45 minutes to 1 hour what you get. I used my walking time or my jogging time a lot of for my thoughts or my cycling. I used to go for cycling also a lot. So yeah, so it's a different kind of a drug altogether and so that really kept me going, just the excitement of going again on stage, maybe bombing, maybe not doing

well, coming back again. So that really kept me this and as I said right from the beginning thanks to also again I am saying to Wipro and now again why I am going to Wipro is because at that time Wipro in 2010 started this Six Sigma quality project, this was a Motorola-driven quality, I am sure you and some of the... so it's like I think finding six defects or I think 3.67 defects in every 1 million operations that six. Yeah it was a Japanese thing, a Motorola or some Japanese company... Yeah, but I think now they have said it is a failed concept, it doesn't work any longer, I don't know whatever. So I used to take part in a lot of Six Sigma projects and one of the projects which I took on was on time also like how quickly you respond to mails, how quickly you respond to an inquiry for, so you do a lot of these projects and as channel partners of Wipro we were also told to take projects because we were more or less the extended arm of Wipro. So, for me time was always very, very and like till today every meeting of mine everything or the... I think time is the biggest resource, it is the most expensive resource we have; we should not waste it. So, like I really look down on people who come late on their appointments, or who don't call up, or I'll call you back in 15 minutes, they never call you back I like I judge them telling you. So, and because I am stickler for time. So thanks to this stickling for time and probably right from an initial age, I used to do a lot of I would say I used to run both the horses, ride both the horses so... like I remember initially I used to get gigs like in Delhi, for example, initially when you are starting out you get a corporate gig in Delhi on a Friday, but hey, I have a job, I run the company, how can I leave on a Friday morning? So, I remember I used to take the 4 o'clock flight out of Bombay to Delhi, reach Delhi at 6:00- 6:30 and then rush to the show, then wake up early morning next day at 5:30, take the early morning flight from Delhi back to Bombay straight into office and work there whole day and again in the evening probably go for some other gig in Bombay. I remember, I mean those were the days where I used to not see my children for like four-five days altogether because by the time you come back late, they are already sleeping because they have school or college the next day. So all these things used to... so I think time really helped me, I used to really manage time well and when you look at it honestly even in comedy when you look at it, time is very, very important as I said earlier that... so, people who don't know stand-up comedy, when you go to watch a comedy show, there are three artists. Each of us is given a time, *ki* okay you have got 30 minutes on stage. Now, believe me if you go from 30 to 31st minute also, if you overrun your time by one minute also a professional comedy club will reprimand you, will scold you that why the hell did you go for one minute extra, because they said dude they were enjoying one minute doesn't make it... no dude one minute makes it difficult because your one minute somebody else adds a 2 minutes, it's a 10-minute extension to a show, people have plans, they have come with a plan, the show must start on time, must end on time. It's not about you; it's about the entire show. So, time is very, very crucial in comedy which lot of unfortunately some of the junior comedians till today don't appreciate or don't understand the value of that. So, I think time played an important role. So the six minutes... the earliest... coming back to your question the first six months from April to I would say October were a lot of excitement, it's like a new baby and you are so excited you want to, it's a new car you have bought and you want to ride it every day, drive it every day, sorry. So it was that kind of a drugs or *nasha* what you call it, waking up, writing new material, going and performing, seeing it's not working, working, it's a different life I saw. Because 25 years you have your own set of ecosystem, your orbit as you call it, your orbit of your suppliers, your vendors, you're Wipro, your principal, your chartered accountant, your income tax, your employees, that's the thing. Now, I was getting into a different orbit or different ecosystem where there are comedians, there are comedy club owners, there is an audience who is paying you, there is... yeah, there are the light man, the sound guy, those suddenly become very important to you than anybody else. So that was a... also you have to realize that most of the comedians even today, the average age I think of the stand-up comedians in India must be I think 24-25, but they were half my age... at that time they were even younger so I mean I used to work with comedian sometimes as old as my children's age like. So hanging around with them, going for dinner after a show with them and the night before I have this joke which I say the one night before I am having dinner with my 40+

CEO friends and when the bill comes, we are having a fight, take my card, let me pay, let me pay, we are all throwing our credit card and so on. Next day I am having dinner with all these young comedians and the bill comes and we have a different kind of a fight *ki*, no, sir, I had only two rotis, this is my 60 rupees, I had one scoop of dal, this is my 10 rupees, so I won't pay GST, why should I pay GST, why should I pay service charge so all these things used to happen. It was a very funny riding both things... but I am so glad, it gave me a new life, I started, I probably... my wife started feeling I am becoming more a happier person because I used to wake up with a lot of excitement.

DJ: I am also curious what the bad days look like Atul if you... I am sure you had your moments, talk to us about maybe the bad days that you had to battle through. Yeah, in those six months and beyond I mean, I am sure you had your high of being great on stage but in any new endeavour I find that there's no new path without obstacles right, so I am curious about what those looked like in your path?

AK: So, first of all, one of the biggest obstacles was this constant thought process, I mean, thought behind me that I should not... because for four years I was riding two horses, I used to feel like none of the horse should complain, it's not my office should never complain hey dude you are not, you know, because I had other directors also, they should not complain that hey you are not spending enough time on this, business is suffering because of your passion or my passion saying because sometimes you have a meeting because most of the other comedians that time were all young kids, half of them were dropouts, or they are having or they have got full time into comedy. A lot of the comedians that time they stopped their education, they stopped their job and got full time into comedy and that was the option to me and they would say hey we are having a meeting, it's a new show we are writing, would you be a part of it? I said, yeah, dude, I am willing to be a part of it because at that time, I remember we used to like some of these IIFA Awards and these Filmfare awards, we used to write for them. Even today most of these people who don't know, some of the listeners who don't know, most of these award shows are written by comedians as like, you know, Shah Rukh Khan is funny but finally he requires jokes. So, we write, most of the comedians write, even I think this year or last year's IIFA Awards by written by some fellow comedians of... so, I have also helped in the writing process of some of these. So, when you have a... and they would say, hey dude, we are meeting at one o'clock in this coffee shop on a Wednesday afternoon, and I said, hey shit, I can't leave that because I have a meeting, so I used to just... so they should not complain that hey, you have taken this writing project but you are not contributing, you are not coming for the meeting, and also they should not say, hey dude, he is working in a company, he is the CEO of a company, how the hell would he come, let's not take him. So, I didn't want both to suffer. So that was initially the challenging part to be honest with you. Second challenging part obviously was time, managing time, and I think also seeing that because when you are running a company and there are some small and because I was an SME, most SME people who are probably listening to this call, the buck stops at you man, you are responsible for your employees' salary, you are responsible for answering your CA your income tax query, for paying your vendors on time. So, everything sort of comes on to you at the end of it. So, I didn't want any of these things to suffer but fortunately we have technology, you have your phone today which is as smart as your laptop and that time you had all this. So, I think, those were really the challenging part in terms of managing both the things and yes you do have sometimes a bad gig, bad gigs are a part of parcel of every... no comedian can say that I never had a bad day, I have had my share of bad gigs and that sort of sometimes throws you out but I still tell people that I am just 8 years, I have worked with comedians who have performed for 35 years, I am still in the learning phase. So if I bomb, genuinely I look at it as a learning experience *ki* what did I do wrong, because I have this clear theory you can't blame the audience for anything, whatever the bad show good show you have to take the blame or the credit for it because there are ways and because I have seen other comedians who are better at their craft who even

they are bombing how they recover from that bad show to make it a super hit show. So, I am still learning those crafts, some craft I have got it but still you are learning, you are learning every day in this. So, yeah I think you just pick it up, you just pick up your boots and you start next day again thinking why you did you do it maybe talking to other comedians why did my set bomb, what happened, it worked the previous day, why it didn't work this day. And I think it's... I think one thing which really helped me to be very honest is my age also because you see I am not a 22-year-old kid or a 19-year-old kid who will see failure and say, oh shit, my life has ended. I have seen enough failure, I have seen days where like the client has told me hey, come to my office, your order of 50 lakhs is ready, come I want to give it to you, I want to hand it over to you personally and I am can you imagine that journey I am leaving office in Andheri going to somewhere in Lower Parel to collect an order of 50 lakhs and this time I have already called my wife, hey, we have got a new order of 50 lakh rupees. And by the time you reach there, the guy says, hey dude, sorry, our MD said *ki yaar uska koi cousin brother hai usko bhi opportunity dena hai*, so maybe we are relooking at it. Hey, I am sorry, I was trying to call you up but I thought you would be driving so not to disturb you so... you reach the place and have those kinds of rejections. I have handled rejections, you have not had payments from your vendors, but you still have to pay your employees, so arranging money in two days to pay your employees' salaries on time. So, I have had those my ups and downs of life usually and also married for 20 odd years that time, so I have been *woh kya bolte hai* hardened by life, I was hardened by life.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I just want to pause here and talk about perspective here. In a lot of ways, we have an opportunity to look at things from our wider frame and that can help us see failure in the right way. Vijay Amritraj, the very first guest on this podcast, spoke about Richard Williams who coached his daughters Serena and Venus Williams despite the challenging background they came from.

VA: I think in Richard Williams case, where the fact that they had the single minded devotions to those two children who were meant to be tennis players which is the way they were literally born to be number one, number two is he was almost fighting an uphill battle in the fact that he wanted these two African American to play a white sport and literally show the world that we can do it and the fact that these girls and boys are making so much money and he thought that this is the way to come out of an economic difficulty which they were in and the biggest risk for them as he always said oh was there a big risk at thirty forty five if you asked him that question he would always tell you that, oh there is no pressure on that at all because the biggest pressure for us was to be able to walk out of home to the tennis court make sure you don't get shot on the way, that was the high risk venture for us. So I think you are coming from two different perspectives of the way people thought and Richard was very clear in the way he was able to actually have that belief and work ethic to get these girls to be able to become what they are.

DJ: There are some lessons that you learn only from the School of Hard knocks! Now let's get back to the conversation Atul Khatri. If you are deriving value from the podcast, do consider paying it forward to Antarang Foundation, a not for profit I work with closely that works with children from challenging backgrounds and helps them with accessing the world of opportunity. You can get more details at playtopotential.com/payitforward. Now let's get back to the conversation with Atul Khatri.

AK: So these were not really... it didn't sort of, but yeah, obviously it throws you off because as a creative person you want each and every show to go very well, but sometimes shows bomb, you don't do well, it could be one wrong word thing you had said right in the beginning of the show

which could just turn the audience against you and after that they just switch off, they just start hating you, could be anything, could be they have entered the auditorium and the floors were not clean and they look at you, they don't look at the housekeeping, they say this Atul Khatri show experience was not good. So, it's all about all those things. But I think you just learn to pick up and you just go along.

DJ: In the early years Atul, I am also curious about the role of the family and especially the spouse. Could you talk a little... I mean you spoke about not telling your children for the first show that you went the open mic, but in the first few months, first few years, could you talk a little bit about the criticality of support from the family in enabling you to make this transition?

AK: Oh, I got great support from my family. My wife was very, very supportive. In fact, she sort of pushed me *ki* no, no do something and her pushing helped me to explore something else and she used to really push me like, you know, *ki* what are you doing, why don't you do something else, look at it, just so that little... because she could see the stress on my face and I had already had blood pressure since then, I still have blood pressure. So she used to say *ki* no, no just... but she was very, very supportive because that's the time my daughter was 17, that was the time they kind of getting into college, getting into professional college, so there was a lot of hand-holding required there, but she sort of pushed me and said, no no, I will take care of this, you just handle it. My parents live with me, sorry, I live with my parents and we are from a very conservative Sindhi family. My dad started seeing this son of his who is running the company suddenly in the evening going out doing some stage shows, obviously he knew a little bit about it. I told him I am doing comedy, he didn't understand comedy, he said is it like Kapil Sharma, I said yeah it is something like Kapil Sharma because that's a show both my mom dad love to watch. So, I said, yeah, it's something like that where we go to a stage but he used to not understand. In fact, it was such a funny story that once he used to see me going in and out in the night, coming back late, again going back again next night going and watching a show somewhere. One day he called up my wife and said listen, you know keep an eye on your husband, he is going out every day, this is a glamour line, this is Bollywood, he could go astray. So, keep an eye and collar on your husband and we laughed about it, I and my wife, but I got a lot of support from them and genuinely I again got a lot of support from my office also. Because I know there are a lot of comedians out there who have dropped their stand-up comedy career in the initial stage only because their office didn't allow it. They had an idiot boss who knew that the guy is going out for a show, he has already told him, at 7:30 he is leaving and at 7:00 o'clock hey dude, we have a con call at 7:30, he is saying sir but I told you, but dude this con call is and you decide you want to go for your comedy or you do this con call. And a lot of these cases were there and I know I have met these comedians in my past where they forego comedy to pursue their professional career and they said don't worry, your example is there, we will also do it when we are 44.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I feel a lot of us abandon our dreams because of the constraints in our current organization. But I realize the smart ones do a good job of problem solving this two horse problem and selling that solution internally to strike the sweet spot of cash generation and possibility creation.

Here is what Papa CJ; one of the early entrants in the Stand-up business had to say about this when he found himself at the cross-roads of a career transition as a Management Consultant in the UK after an MBA from Oxford.

PapaCJ: this was the year 2000 so a lot of people will losing jobs but purely because I was good with people, I kept getting deployed in the different parts of the company then eventually I figured out a way to get a sabbatical on 35% pay, in fact I went to my boss, listen I want to take a year off and he said no you can't take a year off, so I spoke to a HR partner who was the friend of mine, I figured out a deal, where you could get one year off on 35% pay, went to my boss, sold him the idea and both of us left the company on sabbatical now that was the year when I tried lots of things, I set up some schools fund underprivileged kids, I learnt how to fly Para gliders, I trekked up to Mount Everest base camp, and that's when I went to the Edinburgh festival and I saw stand-up comedy for the first time and I just thought this is amazing, I mean here is a guy on stage talking rubbish, he has got a drink in one hand and a microphone in the other hand and he is just having fun and that's his job, I thought to myself I am going to try this, so three months later I got up on stage did 250 shows in my first 10 months and didn't look back.

DJ: The key is not to fall victim of the organizational constraints but to construct a pathway that works for you and for the organization. When I left EgonZehnder to start my own practice about 4.5 years back, I was initially going to do an abrupt exit. But one of my friends said, why don't you figure out a 6-12 runway where you can be of value to the company and water your plant a little bit on the other side. So, I worked on an internal knowledge project where I had to curate insights from within the firm on some topics around leadership. Something that no one inside was willing to do because they were busy billing clients. But in a way, that was the test pilot for my podcast idea. And to be honest, that was the best piece of advice I got and that head start of a few months which I got, made all the difference in my journey till date. I guess, we all need to solve for that interim phase where we need to balance the head and heart and keep the two horses going for a bit. Now let's get back to Atul.

DJ: Actually, on that note Atul is one of the things in the start-up world we say right there a lot of start-ups but very few scale-ups. Similarly, here, I am curious about your observations about I am sure a number of people start out strong, right like winning an open mic and so on but not everybody runs the marathon. If you really looked at what are the kinds of people that struggle to sustain a long-term goal? What does it take to move from winning the sprint to running the marathon?

AK: See first of all generally, again I am saying this but this is a very, very difficult industry, writing jokes and today what has happened and thanks to WhatsApp and internet and this plethora of social media, since last I think four-five years, today any incident happens, within half an hour you get 200 jokes and memes on it, okay? Every day you must be still getting, every day... we are in the Covid period right now, I don't know when this thing will get beamed but in this Covid period every day you open your phone, there are some 300 jokes on Covid on Corona something or these. Now when I go on stage and make jokes supposing I have to start talking about Corona my jokes have to rise above that, as is people will say, hey dude, we have heard this on WhatsApp, why the hell are we paying you 1,000 rupees, these are all WhatsApp jokes or these are all internet jokes. So, one of the first things which I want to tell you about the listeners over here that stand-up comedy we have some very few very golden rules. Number one, we don't take jokes from other comedians, we don't take jokes from internet, we don't take jokes from WhatsApp, and it's looked down upon. If any comedian is found stealing jokes or from other fellow comedians or stealing a joke from suppose a comedian in Japan, doing in Japanese you like his routine, you translate it and say, okay, I will make it India and *chipkao* it in India, if anybody is caught doing that, you are thrown out of the line, it's as you will stop getting jobs, the word will spread very quickly that this dude has stolen a comedy routine and people will start treating you like a pariah, they won't touch you. Comedy clubs don't touch you; organizers will not touch you *ki* no, he is the thief. So, writing original jokes is very, very

difficult and today it has become even more difficult. So, because there's so many comedians and everybody may have the same thought, that could happen, everybody's thought about the same joke. So, like that it has become very difficult. So, I think writing jokes is extremely difficult and I think that really is the most challenging part of this job and it's a very hard, it's a rigorous thing, you write jokes, go for an open mic, try it out because that's the only way you can try it out. My wife may like it, your children may like it but the audience may not like it, you may like it but not the audience. So, you go write your jokes, try it out. It may work, it may not work. If it doesn't work come back to the drawing board, again rewrite those jokes, change your joke, and again try it. Again, but you know... so it's a... and going to a comedy club you have to take an Uber, dress up, go there, do your five minutes, come back, it's a very rigorous process. And a lot of people I think fall out there. Initially, a lot of the young people came in thinking and said hey, it's a very cool job, we will come there, we will get, we will get women, we will get... no, no, no, all that doesn't happen. It's as tough as any other job in fact, I think tougher also, so I think...

DJ: Also, it has become quite... apart from the fact that there are millions of jokes flooding the WhatsApp, even the number of competitors or number of people who are entering has also increased.

AK: Absolutely, and what has really happened and a good thing for the industry in the last two three years thanks to actually Jio and 4G coming reaching everywhere, earlier it was a very elite English urban city kind of a thing. Now there are comedians coming from like Meerut and from Jamshedpur and Jharkhand and those voices, those stories are coming out and they are extremely funny and they are coming out in Hindi, Punjabi, Marathi, Sindhi, Telugu, in different languages they are coming and that's typically what happens. And in India, we are so fortunate to live in such a rich, culturally rich country like India where you have so many languages, you have cultures, you have communities, plus obviously you have your Bollywood, politicians always giving you humour every day, mainly the politicians who, you know, you open... people ask me where do you get your jokes, my standard answer is open Times of India, open any newspaper, you will get four hours of jokes every day, you don't have to work hard. We are such a... compared to many flatter countries in terms of or controlled where everything is controlled like Singapore or China, how do you write jokes over there. Absolutely and when you look out of your window and look inside your house you will get 10 hours of material. So, I think those are really the challenges... I think that's where people lose the steam and it's a long run, genuinely it's a marathon, it's not a 100-meter race.

DJ: And in what ways is the high or in terms of what drives you if you compare your journey today as a stand-up comedian compared to let's say the first six months where you were to use your words you were on drugs, what gives you a high these days?

AK: To be honest, even today a good show gives you a high. I remember just, I think, I had a show just four days back for an audience from Africa. Thanks to now Zoom, I am doing shows on Zoom, so we are getting a lot global audience. So, I did like a private event for a company in Ghana in Africa and it was like the show was at 2:30 in the morning here because of time difference, it was 9 o'clock there, it was 2:30 here in the morning. So, I didn't sleep obviously because sleeping at 12 and waking up at 2:30 didn't make sense. So, I didn't sleep till 2:30, I did my show and I thought after the show I will be exhausted and I will just go to sleep because I had a long day earlier. But genuinely the show went off so well, I am telling you I didn't get sleep till 6 o'clock in the morning. And I was remembering every joke, I was remembering every laughter, I was remembering every interaction I did with the audience and the laughter which I got and then after the show a lot of the people who watched me sent me personal messages through social media, hey sir, we were there at your Ghana show, amazing, this that. So all that just... that high is still get there, that *nasha* is still there, the drugs are still there, but I think what keeps you going now that you enjoy and now you have sort of a

responsibility, you have earned a name so you have keep it up, still there is no pressure, I know that we may be the... I may be the flavour of the day today; tomorrow I may not be the flavour of the day. So, that also I think little bit and again because I am old, I have friends in Bollywood, I have had friends who have made movies in Bollywood, who have been like super hits and after two years they have to sell their house because next two movies didn't do well. So, I have seen that, so I have tried to keep myself as close to the ground so not to fly because I know this could be there today, it could not be there tomorrow, this is a part and parcel of showbiz, everybody knows it.

DJ: Atul, picking up from one of the things you said finding your voice, you know, you spoke about some of the comedians telling you that you have a unique voice and this phrase comes up in the stand-up world, but I am curious about the term in general. What does that term mean in the stand-up world and talk to us a little bit about finding your own voice in this space?

AK: So, you know, obviously the stand-up first of all means that you are standing up for an opinion, for your views, standing up maybe for a cause, I think that stand-up comes more from that, number one and what has happened I think in the last few years all over the world comedians are making better sense than most of the politicians because honestly as... because we have a voice, we have a platform and because any country like today in India politics is a very, very big thing. Today, I think in terms of a topic and especially since 2014 but it has really become it has become the talk of the town. I mean, you can't get on stage without making some political reference at least. And audiences like that because also as an audience we are very, very politically aware, we have opinions, we have this and thanks to WhatsApp and things now everybody is getting so much political news. Earlier politics was only restricted to people who read newspapers, but today now our children who don't read newspaper they are getting on their WhatsApp, they are getting on their social media, they are looking at memes and things like that. So, I think it's very, very important for comedians to have a voice, to raise a voice and to talk about topics, their opinion, it's their opinion, obviously it's not the final word, it's their opinion like in your opinion, but their opinion on what they feel and I think that is very, very important, because you will see comedians around the world especially in the U.S., in the UK and even in India, I always say that and now I am getting slightly political here, but in the absence of a clear majority it becomes the responsibility of everybody, the media, poets, authors, comedians and even people as a society should question everything, you should not just take it as it comes, at least question it because otherwise somebody will have a free run and you don't want somebody to have a free run honestly and take your country for a ride because we all know what politicians do, it's not that everybody's good or everybody's bad. So, I think, it becomes very, very important for comedians also to have an opinion on whatever subject they are comfortable talking about. It's not that you have to talk about politics; you have to talk about Bollywood. Like, I don't do some of the jokes because I don't relate to it, for example... I may not like those jokes, it's my individual thing but yeah, I think it's important for comedians to have a voice for sure.

DJ: And I guess I am also linking it back to the point you made earlier where you said the average age of the industry in terms of performers is probably, you know, people are probably 15-20 years younger to you. So, did that mean that you had to be a little more thoughtful about who your target segment is or is that something that evolved naturally depending on the material you had?

AK: No, that actually, it evolved actually. So, honestly whenever you write jokes and that I think for many comedians like if you... you have to write what you find funny, what you find comfortable, what you have an opinion on, you just can't write because the audiences are liking it. For example, last two years the biggest rise in comedy in terms of volume, in terms of money has been Hindi stand-up comedy, the same kind of genre of like satire comedy, but done in Hindi because of Jio and I know there were sort of comedians initially who used to do in English, but now have switched

purposely to Hindi because they feel they can ride on that. But it doesn't come naturally to it because if you are not from... if you are at home, you are speaking English, your parents speak English to you, you speak to your children in English and suddenly you switch to a different craft and start doing Hindi and you don't know half the words, you don't know half their meanings and you start doing Hindi comedy just because it is a trend, that's ridiculous. So, you have to find your voice in terms of what suits you, what suits your personality, what suits your age, not really age, it's not that I am not saying that a 19-year-old guy cannot or a 24-year-old guy can't talk about politics, no nothing like that. Today's kids are so smart and we have a lot of these young comedians who have great political opinions and jokes. So, I think, finally it's a question of finding your voice, finding what your comfort level is and also I think I always tell a lot of the younger comedians, don't go for what the audience likes, go for what you like, what your voice is and that's audience will automatically, you will find your audience, you will find your niche audience or people who like you. And as far as me, I don't really say, okay, this I should write because I should get a younger audience, but for some reason I have a lot of young audience. I think 70% of my audience is below the age of 24 or 25. The reason is I don't know; I think they look *ki* this is how my dad should be. Because I used to get this, you are so cool, we want our dad to be like you. So that's where that came in because the kinds of topics which I talk about are fairly I would say cool as what these young kids call it. And what happens is me what happens when I am dealing with a joke, the kids are listening to it from a parents' perspective and when I... sorry from their perspective when I deliver a joke the parents are sort of interpreting it from their perspective. So sometimes it works both ways.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This notion of finding your voice is quite a profound point that Atul makes that shows up in different ways in the context of what we do in our life and the products and services we offer to the people around us.

Here is another take on the same topic from Amish Tripathi (AT) who transitioned from the world of Financial Services after a degree in IIM Calcutta to becoming a writer. When I asked him about how he thought about tailoring his writing to his audiences, this is what he said.

AT: "It was just for me, look I was a banker man, no one wants to listen the banker let's be honest and a banker going with the philosophical thesis 'what is Evil?' they will say, yes, you bankers are Evil. So, I was just writing it for my family and myself that's it. And it was a day addition to my job as a banker. And then of course that thesis got converted into an action adventure book the idea being through hopefully engaging story I will communicating at the wrote of it is the philosophy of a 'what is Evil' and I am trying to communicate that through this adventure through this story and yes that's how it panned out.

DJ: From writing for yourself to writing a book that gets published what was that journey like?

AT: When I write I don't even care, even now when I write am not really thinking about how it will be received by the readers, critics, publishers or anyone else frankly. This is how I wrote my first book and this is how I write today as well, I can't say it was a conscious choice when I was writing my first book because I wasn't thinking that it would get published. I guess without realizing it I was following what lord Krishna tells us in Bhagwat Geetha "karmanaye vadhika raste, Maa Phaleshu kadachana" - that you have a right to your Karma, not to the fruits of your Karma and we in the modern world have interpreted this wonderful philosophy to mean something fatalistic which is wrong, what lord Krishna was telling us, what he was telling is actually if you detached from the results of your Karma, if you are detached form success or failure then actually you are unstoppable, if you are doing

something simply because you love doing it, simply because you enjoy your Karma so much who can stop you? Failure can of course be demotivating because it feels sadness, grief, demotivation in your heart and it stops you but success can be as dangerous, you will find so many people that are one eight wonders because success filled pride in their head and they lose their way but if you are detached from success or failure then actually you are unstoppable because you will just keep doing what you love doing and I am not saying that I am a great philosopher and I consciously figured this out it's just that I loved doing anything with my books so much that I genuinely didn't care whether it succeeded or not, I wasn't really thinking whether it get published or not I just love doing anything associated with my books."

DJ: The other perspective about being authentic is from Sudhir Sitapati (SS) – the author of The CEO Factory. He talks about how Brands have to stay authentic to what they stand for.

SS: "one of the things that great brands have is that people who love the brand and people who hate the brand must say the same thing about it. That is the mark of a true outstanding brand. So, you may not like the things that... people who like and people who hate it may not like the same thing but they say the same thing. So, a brand as I have written in the book is..."

DJ: Give me an example just for me to get a sense of what you are saying.

SS: So, let's take a strong brand that I worked on, let's say Lifebuoy. People who love it will say it's got the strong smell which is really disinfectant and I love it, it makes me feel really clean and hygienic and guys who hate it will say it's the strong smell and it is disinfectant and I really feel like I'm in a hospital.

DJ: They'll align on the attribute.

SS: They will align on the attribute. So, they will say the same things about it, but they may like it or they may not like it, right. So, that's the characteristic of really, really powerful. It's a good way to judge brands and I suspect that's the same about personal brands as well. You cannot be different things to different people. That's the principle of branding, you have to be the same thing to everybody whether they like you or not and therefore you got to choose those few attributes or those few associations you want to own, close your eyes whether it's a personal brand or a real brand you'll be able to identify people in three four words then their strong brands. They have to be authentic. They have to be true also to their... you know, one of the things I do a lot when I do brand work DJ is we do something called brand archaeology, which is go into the deep history and many of our brands are very old, the deep history of the brand, the founder and what was the vision with which it was founded, what was the birthing qualities of the brand because they tend to be the true qualities of the brand that 70 or 80 or 100 years later and you got to kind of rediscover it. And I think that's the truth about personal brands. I'm not an expert as I tell you but as I am talking about it, I guess you've just got to go within... you can't game it and say what will that person like and what will this person like and how can I be... you've got to understand what it is that you are and whatever it is that you are if you are true to it, people ends up liking you and that's true about brands, the sharper they are you will always have people respecting you."

DJ: I like the point Sudhir makes about studying the brand archaeology and staying true to it. In the work I do, I find it helpful to understand an individual through their journey and understand their archaeology. Just like Sudhir talks about the birthing qualities of the brand, I find that staying true to our past and our history can provide us helpful perspective in the way we make choices. Bob Keegan, who has done a lot of work in adult development, talks about the transition from a

socialized mind to a self-authoring mind. When we do that, it is helpful for us to understand our core and stay true to it.

If this topic is of interest, tune into my conversation with Jennifer Garvey Berger, an earlier guest where we talk about some of these transition points. If you like this topic, you might also like the Playlist Authenticity, in the Curated Playlists section at the Podcast. Now let's get back to our conversation with Atul Khatri.

DJ: And the other piece I am curious about is like in the entertainment industry, I guess at some level stand-up is part of the entertainment industry. It can be a low odds profession right, out of every 100 people who start maybe five or two or 10, a handful of people are able to make it a commercially sustainable career. So, given that, what's the kind of advice you give to people that approach you saying should I consider a career in stand-up? What are some of the things and what are some of the mistakes you see people making in jumping onto this career?

AK: See, first of all I think obviously it is very, very difficult but I think even Bollywood is very, very difficult in India. I think there the success it is even more I think badly compared to stand-up comedy. But I think the biggest advice I will give people first of all don't leave your job. I tell them, don't leave your job, continue to do your time management, because I have had people who have asked me sir, I did this open mic, I did very well, the audience laughed, I didn't get sleep for four days, I am leaving my job. I said, okay and what if you don't do well then, I mean, you have a rich father then it's okay, then go ahead, leave your job, tell your dad to pay your bills, otherwise you have to pay your bills at the end of it. So, advice I give, three or four advice I give everybody first of all, it's a hard, it's a difficult job, come to it just for the long haul, don't come to it for, don't waste your time, don't... I know comedians who after doing comedy for like 8-9 years have now started seeing some success, that's the amount of time it took them for whatever reason. So, first of all it is hard work; number two, don't leave your job, try to do it like how I did it, at one time when you see that you are making as much money or more money in comedy and you have a support system back. I will be very honest with you when I got into comedy; I had this long discussion with my wife. Hey, should I... I feel that there is a thing that I should get into full-time, I can see the market potential, and I can see that I am doing well, I am getting shows, if I spend more time I will get more shows, I can write more, I can perform more and she is also a hair stylist, she has a salon in Bombay so she said, yeah go for it, and I am there. So, in case some days, some months you don't make money, I will make money. Initially to be honest my wife is also a professional sourdough baker since last 3-4 years, home baker and honestly in this pandemic first 15-20 days, she was selling bread, her bread sales increased through the roof and I have had no shows. So, she was actually the bread winner of the house. So, yeah, we are each supporting each other and I think that support system is very, very important before you take this leap of faith and say *chalo haan*; it's a creative thing I will find my thing. Yeah, unless you are willing to share a room with four guys in a room and not eat three times because this honestly like now in this pandemic I know many, many comedians and forget comedians across Bollywood lot of artists, technicians and all who have probably have difficulty finding two meals a day maybe because of suddenly the income just plugged, the tap just stopped, it just went away.

DJ: And then back to 2016, Atul, the moment where you decided... you said it was a one-year process, so maybe it was some time in 2015. What was the trigger for you to say okay, I am shutting down the hardware business and moving to comedy full-time? Was it that commercially it became as lucrative or more lucrative or was there any other trigger at which you took a final call?

AK: No, I think it was. I was enjoying it much better. My wife felt I was a much happier person. I suddenly became a more positive person, I would say. I was really enjoying this process because this phase was new for me, it was like, I am starting a new life to be honest with you, rather than dealing with vendors and principals, now I am dealing with comedy clubs, I am dealing with comedians, this is a cool job, it is a cool job, sitting with 4-5 comedians writing jokes for may be a film award show or maybe writing new jokes for a new show you are writing. It's a very, very, creatively a very, very satisfying job. And obviously I was enjoying it because it was my, I don't know whether you could it my passion but was a hobby turned passion, which I studied enjoying it. So, I think that really kept me going in 2016 and I think economics was also a reason, I was doing well in it and I could... here I want to talk about something else, I don't know if this is the right time to get it but actually I am a Sindhi, and this is what I have learnt, I have been reading books on our Sindhi culture and I am a very, very proud Sindhi and one of the things about Sindhis is we don't sort of... we look at opportunities, new opportunities and jump into it as soon as you got to get sort of the to get the advantage or to, sort of, once we smell an opportunity we like to get into it. So just to give you an example like the Sindhis in Hong Kong. They went there in the 1920s, 1930s before the partition to do trade; they should do trade in cloth, and then they opened those tailoring suits in Hong Kong. Hong Kong was known for these tailoring suits, you go there they will give you three suits in 24 hours, they were all owned by Sindhis; even today most of the shops owned by Sindhis. Then when the television sort of boom started coming in the world, they were the first ones to get into television trade, all those Jumbo Electronics and Esquire and all those guys and then the VCR business. Like I have friends, my Sindhi friends in Hong Kong who were cloth merchants, they moved to TV, they moved to VCR, they moved to CD, LD, DVD, computers, laptops, mobile phones, CCTV cameras, and now many of them are selling hardware for Bitcoin churning, you know, you require apparently some crazy hardware to churn out these Bitcoin coins or something. So many of them... these guys have started selling those now. So, it's not that no, no, no, we are traditionally a cloth company, we will stick to it for 100 years, we may die in it, we may sink with it, but we will do it. So, we jump, we look at and that is traditionally because we have always been traders, you now, Sindhis because I think Sindhis they get into any country or anything they learn first the local language because to do business you need to know the local language. So Sindhis around the world I met thanks to comedy, they will talk fluent Mandarin or Cantonese or Swahili or Spanish as if it's their first language because to get into the trade you have to know the language. So, I think that was really... I don't even think, oh, what will people say, a CEO of a 25-year-old company IT company doing very well and doing comedy now, I used to... I remember friends would tell me *accha tu kitne saal tak karega*, how many years will you do comedy for? I said dude this is lifelong. What are you saying, you will do only comedy? I said, yeah. *Arre*, you were running such a big company, I said, yeah but I want to do this and I see the opportunity over here and I think it's a new life for me, I think live it and I really don't, even in this pandemic, I don't regret that decision. May be in this pandemic, I would have more... if I was running a company with 80 people, I would have more problems than now, right now I am just alone, just responsible for myself, not responsible for 80 people's salaries, not even 80, now when you.. I used to always tell people it's not 80 employees, you look after may be 320 or 400 people because there is a family behind it also which you have to support and their ecosystem.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I do think we need to study the odds of success in a certain field and take the plunge only when we have solved the basic questions around money and sustainability. When I asked Amish Tripathi, when he moved the Banking industry to Writing full time, here is what he said.

AT: *"It was a pragmatic decision, look I come from middle class family so I always joke "Bhai mere pass baap dada ka ashirvad hai jaaydat kuch nahi" so I have to be pragmatic and practical in my career decisions, I have responsibilities you know I am blessed with the child, I have a wife so I resigned only after second book when my royalty cheque became greater than my salary cheque."*

DJ: Especially in a creative pursuit, if you have other concerns playing in your head, I feel it will fundamentally come in the way of you unlocking your creative potential and might set you off on a negative spiral. It is good to have solved for the commercial issues or at-least have a stop loss point in your head before you take the plunge.

The other time this urge to follow your passion often comes up much earlier and often we are at the mercy of parents at this phase of life.

Celebrated photographer and Producer Atul Kasbekar speaks about how he was pursuing a Chemicals degree in UDCT, a reputed college in Mumbai but really wanted to pursue photography. He speaks about his father's approach to the situation.

AK: *"In the first year I realize "yaar ye main nahi kar sakta" this I really should not do, so I spoke to 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 and he said 5% of makes their living at what they enjoy. So Pralhad said just ask yourself what is it that nobody need to tell you to do and if you are doing that to make a living then you never really working there is no concept of, you are never getting up on a Monday morning and going to work, weekend comes and wasn't a big deal, 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 passion otherwise it will be a work very soon, so I said OK no body needs to tell me to take pictures, it was a very serious hobby and I took some rubbish photos of dogs and cats and horses and sunset and my sister and whatever but I enjoyed that, so when I started talking to my parents then we met a couple of people I met Gautam which is a very interesting story used to, how I met Gautam Rajadhyaksh but when I spoke to my parents they were freaking out because and you can't blame then because from the background my dad was eldest of five brothers and he as a master in Mathematics the second one is the Architect and thirds Doctor, the fourths Chemical Engineer and the fifth one is a Chartered Accountant, what would be called as respected profession 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 has flipped I captained in my school for cricket, in debates, I represented Maharashtra state 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 the way, so as they see it be fairly seriously about whatever so I have to say it was a very big decision for them and hats off, they tried all this 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, 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 and I was like but you can't afford it right now," and he was saying "shut up that none of your business" but this is your long rope because the education is everything the receipt I want for it, he always had this thing about degree, so I said photography I don't really need a degree I can assist people and like I will learn, he said "no, I want a degree to make myself happy that the 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 is up to you but I am giving you that long rope and after I have taken care of your education and your sisters education etc. 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 use with my kids "kya padhna hai*

bataao, you get there 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 it's you go on your journey now, then that safety net right now that right under your arks for my kids I will move that now thirty feet below and then further below and then take it away."

DJ: I guess passion versus pragmatism calls are not easy. Very often, we end up swinging to the extremes— one extreme is climbing a mountain where there is no money and the other extreme is that we make a lot of money but we end up selling our souls! I guess the key is how we find a middle path so that we don't swing to the extremes when we are confronted with this fork in the road.

If this is of interest, you might like the Playlist "Pursuing your passion" in the Curated Playlists section of the podcast at playtopotential.com.

If you are finding the podcast purposeful, do take a moment to rate and review on apple podcasts or wherever else you consume this content. It will help other listeners discover this content and also enable us to get good quality guests who often look at these metrics to choose where they spend their time. Now let's get back to the conversation with Atul Khatri.

DJ: And the other thing about stand-up... I want to sort of wrap up talking about Covid in a couple of minutes Atul, but maybe before going there, one of the things I respect about stand-up is just the amount of refining that you have to do of material for it to find its way on stage, right. It's almost like you take some two hours of material and then in five minutes makes its way to the stage. So maybe to make it specific, if we took the Netflix special you had early 2019, give us a sense of the lifecycle of a joke for it to find its way into the stage. What is the extent of refining that one has to do?

AK: So just to let you know, to write I would say, if you have seen most of the comedy specials or comedians across the world, the big ones, like a Dave Chappelle, so they have a special every 1-1.5 year, okay. So, 1-1.5 is typically each special is around an hour. So, it takes them one-and-a-half year to write one hour of material, which if you break it down would mean like 3-4 minutes a month of jokes. And you will say oh, 3-4 minutes for just one joke, sorry one-month *mai* you will just get three 3-4 minutes of jokes. I said, yes, so that's a problem. So, what happens is, in India, what happens is that like you have a show, you do very well and a fan watches you for the first time and probably he is watching comedy, he or she is watching comedy for the first time. He said wow, she's blown away, and she's blown away by Atul Khatri. Then next week also you have a show, they again buy tickets and they come there and say... and after the show they are very disappointed. Sir, we are very disappointed, we feel cheated. I say what happened. Sir you repeated the same jokes. I said ma'am, if you see Dangal today, you see Dangal tomorrow, Amir Khan will still have two daughters, so he doesn't have a third daughter in the next week. So, it's like that. So, people don't understand the... sometimes to write a special would take like people two years to write one... so I will tell you journey of a joke. In my case, everybody has a different process. I have thoughts in my head, thought which I expand in my head, I keep on expanding in my head. The process which I use for me is I love to, as I told you earlier, I go for long walks alone, I keep my phone off and that is my time me time and I stay in Juhu in Mumbai which is close to the beach. So typically, you will see me on a non-monsoon day I will be on the beach, I mean, obviously not in the Covid because the beach was not allowed but now, they have opened up. But you will see me on the beach alone and talking to myself and so a person who doesn't know anything, this dude's gone mad, talking to himself without any headphone. But I sort of rehearse my own jokes there, I build up my set, then one day I will probably sit in on a laptop and I will put everything down because when you put it on your laptop you tend to get more jokes out of it or more tags out of it. And then the only way to try out comedy is on a stage. So, I will

probably go to a comedy open mic or within my main show I will try five minutes of new material and whether it will work or not work, it depends, and a lot of people have different procedures, processes. And that's how you build five minutes, you will take that 5 to 7 to 8 to 10 to finally 60 minutes, so you build up a new set. So typically, you have an old set, you keep on adding new jokes, try removing your old jokes out, add new jokes, remove old jokes, and finally after a year or year-and-a-half you have an entire one hour of new jokes. So, it's a very, very tedious process and in that time period it may happen that some topical jokes may just die. You had a joke on X guy and that guy just passed away, the entire five minutes joke routine goes away or something could change which could that joke could totally you have to throw away that joke or that entire five-minute routine. So, yeah, it's all that thing and you write some new material or... so typically I tend to not write very topical jokes, if you have a topical thing, so if you have to write about, I don't know about anything like demonetization...

DJ: The shelf life becomes limited, right?

AK: Yeah, yeah so which maximum like people will remember it for like four or five months, even though it's a hot topic people will remember fine after that people themselves will say please move on *yaar*. You know, we have moved on, you have moved on. Like in the Covid now, I am sure when I go up on stage; I have not written one Covid joke. First of all a lot of jokes are already there and I don't want because I think once you get out, you don't want to hear Covid, I think you are sick and tired of Covid, you have heard all the jokes, it's not a positive experience that you want to hear about it again. So, I think, yeah so topicality I try to avoid. I always compare people like the old Anand Bakshi lyrics or Kishore Kumar songs, even today they sound so good because they were so well written. So I tell all comedians write your every joke should be like a Anand Bakshi lyric or a Kishore Kumar like a song with some other good like, who were the other good lyricist verbal are... Javed Akhtar or write your songs so... write your material so that after 10 years also people should listen to it, laugh at that joke and it should not get topical, it should still be fresh, it should still be may be relevant or not be relevant but it should still be funny.

DJ: That's a great insight and maybe that's a good segue to Atul to talk about the current times we are in Covid-19 and your industry especially has been among many others quite severely affected. How are you grappling with what's going on?

AK: So, first of all, to be honest I am grappling pretty well. The thing is that I don't know maybe it was the... like I know a lot of comedians who I have been talking to in this pandemic and some of them are not doing anything because generally this is a time people are not getting any new thoughts about comedy because people are going through anxious times and it's okay to be anxious at this time because the entire world is going through this. So, I don't think any comedian has churned out a new one hour of material in the three months sitting at home because the thought process is not coming. And I think so the reason I am doing it because I have two kids now grown up, where one is in the college in the UK, so I have to pay her bills. So, there was a survival for me to sort of do something. So yeah, actually 13th March to 13th April, I had a tour of my new show Daddy Cool, which I just mentioned. It was an 18-city tour in the U.S. and Canada. So, I reached Toronto on 10th of March with assurance by Mr Donald Trump who said, hey it's just a flu, it will go away in five days. I reached on 10th March and the entire, in front of my eyes the entire world collapsed, Tom Hanks got the virus and the President or Prime Minister of Canada, his wife got the virus and the countries were just shutting down in front of my eyes. And I knew my entire one month tour got cancelled, I mean, I postponed it, I myself cancelled/postponed it and I took the first flight and 14th March I was back in India and I knew that I was going to be sitting at home for a long time because... you know you always... initially when the pandemic started I always told people you had this Wuhan's case which is 76 days they killed the virus, I mean the virus went away with they sort of...

again it came back there but 76 days. So, we knew at least for 76 days to 90 days and I know in a country like India, which is obviously we are not a first-world country, if this pandemic came to India, we would have a long haul and that sort of is coming out true. And so right on 15th March, I started something called as Only Positive News. So what happened from 10th of March till 14th of March, I consider myself to be a very emotionally strong person, mentally strong person but I started feeling anxious, I started feeling nervous, I had my breakdown saying that shit what is happening, never has this... it's like somebody has taken our voice away, of comedians, somebody has cut our vocal cord, I will not be going on stage, what will I do, how will I support for a comedian who has been so busy in the last eight years, I used to have typically shows every... two-three shows every week, in the pre-Covid period. And I was very excited about this new tour, which I had worked on it for a close to one year because when you go for a tour to America it's like the Visas, and the new material, the posters, the public, the promotion, it's a one-year process and that just collapsed in like three days.

DJ: And are these insured Atul, just out of curiosity?

AK: No, they are not insured, they are not insured. So you like... and what happens typically when you are going there you try to buy the cheapest flydubai and go to Priceline and buy the cheapest flight, cheapest non-refundable thing because your tour is, your dates are fixed, this date you are in New York, this date you are in New Jersey, this date you are in San Jose, your dates, your tour, everything is sort of planned, chalked out, which hotels, you intend to buy the cheapest tickets, the non-refundable tickets. I lost a lot of money, let's not talk about that. So, forget the money part but more it was now the emotional part of and I started searching the news so I said, you know, let me find some positive news and there was nothing. So, I said, now I should find some positive news and start this series called Only Positive News. So, I came back to India on 14th March, 15th March I did my first video six-seven minutes and there were some stupid positive stories like a leopard in Bihar has given birth to two baby cubs, I said it is a positive story, let's put that. So, I started doing this on my social media and it became a big hit where people really enjoying it because just like me there were a lot of other people out there going through the same kind of emotions feeling open the TV, get your WhatsApp, open the newspaper or everything is, so many there, this is going to happen, this business shutting down, this is happening, this airline shut down, this company shut down and you are going to lose your job, you are going to this, this is going to happen and it's all happened also. So, it was right for them to get anxious. So, I said, let me let me come out with Only.... so, since then I have been doing this Only Positive News, I think just day before yesterday was my 81st episode of Only Positive. I tried to start it with a daily, then I have made it like twice-thrice a week, I do it. So, I now do it at least thrice a week I do it, twice or thrice a week. So, I did like 81 episodes of this and...

DJ: And where can people find it?

AK: People can find it on my social media, on my Instagram, on Facebook, on my YouTube, I even post it on my LinkedIn profile, I post it everywhere, wherever I am there on social media I put a link to it, so people can go and watch it. It's just telling positive news from around the world and I was enjoying it because first of all it gave me a routine to myself, so I knew for the next... I want to do it so previous night I sit and research, I go through CNN, I go through Al Jazeera, I go through some of the Indian TV channels. Then next morning newspaper I read, I scan through it, collate the news, sort of put a structure to it and then I... I learnt editing because of that because when you put out a video it has to be edited well. So, I learnt editing, I had never known editing before. So, thanks to that I learnt a new skill called how to edit your own videos. I have downloaded editing software, it took me three-four days to understand it, learn it and now I have become fairly expert on it. So, I learned editing. So I churn out the video, I have put it out and I mean I used to... now the viewership has slightly fallen because people have got used to it but initially I used to get viewership every day of

like close to one-and-a-half lakh viewers across. And I got so many new fans, followers, people... people are saying that this keeps me awake; this keeps me alive because I am here, my wife is somewhere else, and I am there. The only positive thing is your Only Positive News and please don't stop it, do it after the pandemic also, and keep it as a lifelong series, news funny, funny; they should shut down all TV channels and only put you on every TV channel for 10 minutes every day just to calm people down. Because I possibly more than the physical thing of this is the mental health of people which is getting affected. People are saying we will become fat sitting at home and things like that. I think it is the mental health which is really going to.... because people are generally losing jobs, people are... the situation is not sort of improving as of now also as I speak, okay few countries here and there have sort of lifted lockdown but still the virus has not gone, till the vaccine doesn't come we have to be extremely careful. So, I started making money out of it, I got sponsorship out of it plus out of this I started doing my shows on Zoom, I started doing my live shows on Zoom. In fact, tonight, we are on 10th July today; I don't know can I say this?

DJ: Yeah, please

AK: So today, 10th July, I have a show today; I have like 125 tickets I have sold today. So, we have a show at 10. So, I started this 10pm adults only, no children allowed show. The reason I did it because anyway children don't understand comedy. So, I tried to make it sound it very it's like sharing my bedroom secrets with them, but it's a regular comedy show and I have done like close to like 10 of these public ticketed shows where I have sold tickets, I have done lot of corporate shows. So thanks to because I had my experience of corporate, I have done corporate shows, I have done lot of private party, I have done people's... and you will be surprised people are celebrating their 40th birthday party, their 50th birthday party, their 25th anniversary on Zoom and people are really enjoying it, people are looking forward to come and laugh for that one hour. So, I have made money out of that and I mean I would say I have not made great money, but I have made decent money to sort of survive this pandemic and keep my two daughters and wife happy.

DJ: And from a performer's perspective how is it, in what ways is it different performing on Zoom versus performing on a stage?

AK: Oh, it's very different. So initially when I started doing Zoom show it was like actually honestly going back to 2012 doing my open mic because it's technology used there, technology there could be internet issues, there could be people... because as a performer you want their mics and videos to be on because you want to hear laughter, you know?

But some people are not comfortable starting their mics and their videos or whatever. So I beg people, give me like a 25 out of 100 hundred tickets, at least 25-30 people should have their mics and videos on which typically happens and then you could have somebody eating food and talking to *arrey, mera do roti lao*, and that entire voice gets caught, somebody burping on the phone, loudly on his mic. So, all those things which you have, you remove jokes out of those also but those are the challenges but I think I am quite happy that I got into it fast into it. So, I think I had my first show, I think at the end of March only I had my first show, I think 1st April. So, within like 15 days, I had my first show to sort of understand how it is because going ahead and that has also helped me because it just got me a lot of newer audience also because you know earlier you had those one fan sir, I am staying in Jabalpur, when will you come to Jabalpur and I said, dude I am not going to come to Jabalpur to perform for you, if it was a big show I will come for it but now that guy in Jabalpur can watch my show on Zoom, you know, forget... people are... I have got fans from Argentina, Australia, from some West Indies islands obviously Indians who have... that has opened up, so this has opened up and I think just like how work from home is sort of becoming the new norm, I am sure its... so the experience is I would say 60% of performing on live because nothing can replace a live audience, the

laughter, the experience, it's a four dimensional experience, this is still I would say two dimensional and I think that cannot never replace it. And I am sure, I am very, very again positive that this pandemic will get over soon or we will find a cure for it or work around and we will be back on stage soon. But we will come very late because first they will have to open up Bollywood, malls, much bigger industry which got affected because of this, they have to keep them happy. We are anyway a much smaller community and also the government doesn't like us very much so they will say you bloody open last.

DJ: So Atul, this has been a wonderful conversation, a mindful of time as well. We could keep going but maybe just as we wrap up as I said, this is first in the series called The Next Mountain, where I talk to people who climbed to a meaningful place in one career, and have had the courage to pursue another career. So, as we wrap up, what would you say to people that are looking for the next orbit in their journeys? What would your advice be?

AK: Before I start that, this is the second reference you made about mountain and climbing and actually I am a Capricorn and the Capricorn the sign is a mountain goat.

So, I think. So, thanks for that, so the mountain goat reference is good. But I think first of all, one thing which sort of drove me from leaving my well-cushioned CEO job where I used to get salary on the 2nd of the month, whether you bloody do your job or don't do your job to now a freelancer where my money comes if I have a show, I don't have money if I don't have a show. This one thing which sort of really drove me because I was clear that I don't want to like... at that tipping point when I was 44 and I started doing it, I didn't want to, when I am 55 or 60 and I said no, no, no, it's too late, I wish I could have done that, I wish.... And that used to really bother, I said, I don't want to at 60 talk to myself and slap myself that why didn't you try this at least, at least give it a try, didn't work out no problem, failure happens, but at least I should have given a try, I didn't want that to happen. So that was a leap of faith, and I also believed that we live only one life. I know Hindus are supposed to live seven lives or eight lives or seven lives, I think cats live nine lives, we live seven lives. We will try it next time, you know and that next time will never come. I am saying that if you have a passion, follow it, and yes, you have to obviously work around things. I am not saying drop your job tomorrow and become a drummer in an old school band or something or open a shack and go do whatever you want, don't do all that. Obviously look at the pros and cons, see whether you are comfortable with your money because you have to finally pay your electricity bills which right now are coming very, very high even the pandemic is going back. But yeah, I mean you have to pay your bills. So, keep... once you have that kind of a thing I am saying, please follow your passion because one thing you know and I will tell you this. This is... and when I reflect back even in my job, I used to tell all my employees every morning when I used to have a meeting, I said, did you wake up in the morning and said, yes, I have got to go to work or was it like, damn I got to go to work? If it's damn I want to go to work then I would honestly tell them please leave my job, find a job where you actually feel happy. Maybe it's the distance which is bothering you, maybe you are staying far away, it takes you two hours to commute that's hurting you, find a job in your neighbourhood if you get it. If the job profile is not doing, if you are just doing it for the money I said don't do it, sit one month at home, find the job, which will this but don't come to my office everyone, with a face, which is that shit, I don't want to work here, or I am just doing it for the heck of, for the money or whatever. I used to always tell my people and I used to tell them I will help you find a job which you know... so I think do what you love because once you put your 100 percent to it, it's really so simple, you can see you start enjoying it, you will do it and you will 100 percent succeed, there is no... it will take time, the hurdles will come but you definitely you will succeed. So, I think that's really, I would tell people that, just go and do it and follow your passion.

DJ: Atul, pleasure talking to you on the podcast. Thank you so much for your time.

AK: Thank you, Deepak, thank you so much, all the best, stay safe, stay positive. Bye take care.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I hope you found the conversation purposeful. We all think that people's journeys are an overnight success but when we examine the details we realise that its years of hard work, jumping into the unknown, polishing the craftsmanship, support of the family and much more that leads to an individual rise to the top of a field.

I specifically loved the points Atul makes in terms of how he has strived to stay relevant in these times. Three stand out for me.

- First - I guess there is a lot of negativity around us. At some level, we all need to take ownership of looking for positivity amidst the doom and gloom amongst us. That is not happening by default. If we left it to natural forces, it's a free fall
- Second – Show up every day! This is one thing they speak about in entrepreneurship or in leadership. You just need to show up day after day. On 10th of March, he was in Toronto, and saw the world crumble in front of him and headed back home. 5 days later, 15th March – he started only positive news and has been at it since then.
- We all need to adapt and learn new skills and experiment our way into the future. I love what Atul says about trying something new, learning editing skills and putting himself out there. Slowly, that has opened up the opportunity to perform on Zoom and other opportunities.

I guess, we all need to find our own response to the situation but some of the principles here around accepting what is not in control, showing up every day, experimenting around adjacencies, keeping a positive mind are a few things that are worth bearing in mind.

Management thinker Jim Collins speaks about the notion of a 20-mile march. It's a bit like the tortoise and the hare story. He speaks about the benefit of having a steady march in a certain direction, whether it is rain or shine and he says that this approach beats the approach of sprinting when excited and resting when exhausted approach. If this is of interest, do visit jimcollins.com and look up the concept of a 20 mile march. There is also something to be said about steadily marching somewhere versus resting. Like Albert Einstein, once said, life is like a bicycle. To keep balance, you need to keep moving.

If you enjoyed this conversation, you might also like a couple of other conversations at the podcast.

- First is with Papa CJ - who speaks about his transition from management consulting in the UK to stand-up comedy
- Second is with Amish Tripathi who transitioned from the world of Financial Services after a degree in IIM Calcutta to becoming an author

Just as we wrap up, a couple of requests.

- Do take a moment to rate and review on the show on Apple Podcasts or wherever else you consume the content. It will help others discover this podcast and for guests to find it worth their time.

- There is a lot of work that goes into this podcast. Figuring out who to talk to, getting access to them, researching for the conversation, and recording it and the post-production edits. We go the extra mile in miniaturizing the content into nuggets so that you can access what you want in the most effective and time efficient manner. The podcast is not being any paywall and is freely accessible. The only request I make is if you are deriving value from it, consider paying it forward to Antarang foundation, a not for profit that works with kids from challenging backgrounds and helps them play to their potential. You can know more at the Pay it forward section at www.playtopotential.com.

The next guest at the podcast is Whitney Johnson, the author of Disrupt Yourself. She has worked closely with late Clay Christensen and used some of his thinking around Disruptive Innovation and applied that to our careers.

To know more about my advisory work, you could visit, about the Host section at playtopotential.com. Bye for now and Stay safe and healthy.

End of transcription

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Pursuing your passion: “Follow your heart” is an advice that is commonly doled out to individuals that are trying to make career choices. However, the reality is little more nuanced. People who have followed their heart talk about how they have weaved it into their lives or in some cases, how they have been pragmatic about taking the plunge. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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Atul Khatri - Nuggets

- 61.00 Atul Khatri - The Full Conversation
- 61.01 Atul Khatri - The mid-life angst
- 61.02 Atul Khatri - Seeds of a career in Stand up
- 61.03 Atul Khatri - Fertilizing a new possibility
- 61.04 Atul Khatri - Riding two horses
- 61.05 Atul Khatri - Finding your voice
- 61.06 Atul Khatri - Passion versus Pragmatism
- 61.07 Atul Khatri - Writing evergreen material
- 61.08 Atul Khatri - Coping with Covid-19

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the 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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