



Guest

Vinay Sitapati returns to the Play to Potential Podcast on the back of his recently published book - Jugalbandi - The BJP before Modi. The book begins with the creation of Hindu nationalism as a response to British-induced elections in the 1920s and moves on to the formation of the BJP in 1980 and ends with its first national government, from 1998 to 2004. The book also traces the entangled lives of its founding leaders Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani. Vinay digs into various moments to really understand what made their six decade relationship tick. He teases out the secret recipe behind their cohesiveness despite twists and turns in their respective fortunes. He says that what kept them together was fraternal love, professional synergy and, above all, an ideology that stressed on unity. This podcast is for information and learning purposes only. All content and opinions expressed in this podcast are that of the guests and are not necessarily the opinions of Deepak Jayaraman or Transition Insight Private Limited (TIPL). Deepak Jayaraman and TIPL do not have any political affiliations or associations of any sort and this conversation is intended to be a non-partisan interaction.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 67th Conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast. I am your host Deepak Jayaraman and I work with leaders and Organizations and help them play to their unique potential. 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. To know more about my Leadership Advisory work, you can visit www.playtopotential.com and click on “About the host” section.

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 Vinay Sitapati. I must say that this is a third Sitapati conversation. The first one was with Vinay himself when he had written the book – Half Lion profiling Narasimha Rao and his leadership amidst extreme constraints. People often ask me which are my top 5 podcast conversations and I would rate that as one of my personal Top 5. The second Sitapati conversation was with Sudhir Sitapati, friend and a batch mate from IIMA who wrote the book – The CEO Factory – where he decodes the secret sauce behind Hindustan Unilever’s success. And now we have Vinay back again to talk about his recently published book – Jugalbandi – The BJP before Modi. In the book he traces the 100 year long history of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and delves into the 6 decade relationship between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani and provides a backstory to the current dominance of BJP in India.

There are interesting insights for Leaders in the context of how they handle dynamics when they have to lead or be led by people who they are close to. It also has interesting insights around how one could create a culture in an organization that rewards merit but also respects the sentiments that are rooted in tradition and religion.

At the outset, I should say that the objective of this podcast is to create thought provoking content that can enable people and organizations to play to their unique potential. Nothing more and nothing less. There is absolutely no political intent or motive behind publishing this conversation.

I guess you get the drift. Let's now dive into my conversation with Vinay.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Vinay, thanks for coming back to the Play to Potential podcast, excited to have you back.

Vinay Sitapati (VS): Thank you very much Deepak. I had a great time last time we did this and great to be back.

DJ: And congratulations on the recently published book Jugalbandi, the BJP before Modi. I would love to dive into the book Vinay, but before I go there the last time you were on the podcast, we spoke about your previous book Half Lion about Narasimha Rao. Talk to us about the arc of your curiosity from there to here, how did you end up here?

VS: Well, Deepak after Narasimha Rao, I was getting more and more interested in the BJP. Why did I work on Narasimha Rao because I am now 37 and I grew up with... the two big forces shaping India when I grew up were liberalisation and the rise of the BJP? So, I am a child of the 90s. And so, the book on Narasimha Rao was motivated by this idea of understanding liberalisation. My dad moved from a PSU job to a private sector job. What was happening? And at the same time the BJP was rising, you know, it moved from a famously 2-seat party in 1984 to roughly 85 seats 1989 and by 1996 it was the single largest party in India. And then, as everyone knows you had Prime Minister Vajpayee running India from 1998 to 2004. So, that was the other curiosity that I had. So, initially I was thinking of focusing on Vajpayee. But the lovely part about research is you go in with an idea and then frequently your ideas are challenged. And I realised that as I began doing research on the BJP that Vajpayee was only half the story hence the word jugalbandi. And jugalbandi Deepak means it's a musical concert typically where you have different musicians, this is the key, who normally play differently with different instruments, different voices, but somehow in a jugalbandi they are able to make music together. And I found that that was Advani for Vajpayee; they were two sides of the same coin, very different ideologies, very different personalities, but somehow, they managed to make it work. And then as I did more research, I realised that their relationship is actually emblematic of the story of the BJP and to answer the question why BJP wins you have to look at this phenomenon of jugalbandi.

DJ: Fascinating. And I guess there have been several books written about leaders and their lives including Half Lion, but in this case, you have chosen to focus on a relationship rather than a leader. So, in what ways is let's say researching a relationship different from researching a journey?

VS: Well, there were twin difficulties here compared to a single journey. One is, I was looking at relationship between two people, and two is, I was using that relationship as a mirror for the 100-year rise of the BJP. So, as I argue in the book Hindu nationalism is created in 1920s, and we are in 2020 right now. So, there were these twin difficulties that I had to not just focus on the ups and downs of this relationship, I also had to nestle them in the ups and downs of the creation of the RSS, the creation of Hindu Mahasabha, Jana Sangh created in late 1951, morphs into BJP in 1980 and the

end of the first bloom of the BJP in 2004. So, they were twin difficulties, and what added to the difficulty of a relationship is that not just are you looking at two different journeys, but you are looking at ups and downs in their interaction. When you, when you... you have read the book, I spent a lot of attention trying to focus on that that in the 1970s, what was the temperature of this relationship. In the 1980s had it changed? And there were three kinds of temperatures I was looking at when it came to this relationship. First of course was personal. Vajpayee and Advani were friends, that friendship frayed when they entered government between 1998 to 2004 but they were friends, they would talk about Bollywood, they would go watch films, they would cry when there was an emotional scene of a Bollywood film going on. So, they were friends, they enjoyed each other's company. The second thread of their relationship was that professional. The Hindu nationalism is based on the idea that it's both a governing ideology, it's a party that wants governing power as well as it's a movement. So right from its inception, it has needed somebody to handle the movement and someone to be the parliamentary face. So, in 1951, for example in the founding of the Jana Sangh you had Syama Prasad Mukherjee, who was the parliamentary face and whose sudden death spurred Vajpayee to take his place and you had Deendayal Upadhyaya from the RSS who was very much an organisational man and you see that even today. Amit Shah runs the party; Narendra Modi runs government as well as runs foreign policy. So, that was the second aspect of their relationship and that had its ups and downs. And then the third aspect was ideology that as the book argues what the glue that brought them together was also political ideology that emphasised teamwork and that too had its ups and downs. So, that made it a little more complex and a little more sprawling compared to a single biography, but I hope what the reader gets is one single book in which you know the 100-year history of this particular moment in India today. So, in that sense, the audience is far more general than the first book.

DJ: Got it. And maybe before we dive into the nuts and bolts of the book Vinay, I would love to set context right, in terms of why specifically in India this notion of teamwork is something that we should pay attention to. I think before we started recording this conversation you briefly spoke about the battle of Panipat as well. So, just set context for us more in the Indian context to why this is special in the context of teamwork.

VS: Well, Deepak all the Indians who are amongst your listeners I don't have to sell you this idea that Indians are terrible at teamwork and many of your listeners have also worked in a foreign setting and you not just see that the setting makes for very different aspects of teamwork but the same Indians who behave very badly in an Indian organisational setting driven by ego, factions, backbiting, being a nasty boss or insubordinate employee, these are all classic Indian traits. This is the HR manager's nightmare in any Indian firm. But you don't... it's not confined just to the corporate world. In political parties, for example, Indian parties are always splitting. The Congress right now is going through internal fighting. Every month or so some senior leader of the Congress splits and taking away 10 MLAs, 20 MLAs; this is a standard Congress story all the way from the 1960s. Other parties like the NCP recently almost split in Maharashtra, Shiv Sena has split several times, the Dravidian parties, which actually have the same ideology splits on the basis of personality. The Communist parties split again on the basis of ideology "lines" or this question of should we be part of democracy or should we be an underground movement. So, political parties this is endemic. In the midst of this the fact that the BJP is almost split proof, it doesn't split to me tells me something, something is going on here. That this is in some sense the secret sauce of the BJP and the book seeks to explore what is the answer to it. So, it's an Indian problem, it's there in all facets of Indian society, it's the HR manager's nightmare in any corporate firm and look Indians also realise how to manage it, but it's a feature. To give you another example Deepak, hierarchy in organisations are very important in India. In the bureaucracy, for example, in the senior bureaucracy in India you have to give an exam when you are in your early 20s, the UPSC exam, you get a rank in that exam and you are allotted a batch

based on when you got in. Almost 30 years later when you are for the top post in government you are becoming an empanelled secretary, you want to be foreign secretary, you want to be cabinet secretary, your rank in that exam and your batch in the exam still plays a hierarchical role. And even today if a foreign secretary is “promoted” out of turn right and when we mean out of turn it means that the rank that that person had 30 years ago has changed by the time the person becomes Foreign Secretary, others resign, his or her “seniors” resign; I am not joking this is truth. And in this soil, looking at a BJP where, you know, there are people in today’s BJP that don’t like Modi but they won’t say so publicly especially those with an RSS background and I give the example and we can talk about this Deepak in some detail, Vajpayee and Advani frequently switched roles and reported to each other and I think that’s unprecedented. So, what makes the BJP’s teamwork special is not just the non-teamwork in other political parties it was competing with but the soil of India which makes for very bad teamwork.

DJ: Got it. And the quick reference to battle of Panipat because you have made an interesting comment before we started recording.

VS: Yeah, so, I talk about in the book how the BJP is obsessed with a certain reading of Indian history and that reading of Indian history is the following, which is if India is so glorious why do Indians keep getting invaded, that’s the puzzle. And the answer to the BJP is because at key moments Indians and for them its Hindus fight with each other. And it’s not just one caste fighting another caste, you know, as he points here, Shivaji was betrayed by his own caste men, Maharana Pratap was betrayed by his own cast men, and so Indians generally try to stab each other in the back. Now again, the historical validity of this story is we can debate but that’s the reason that’s what the BJP takes out of this. So, for example in the late 18th century, the third battle of Panipat was fought between the Marathas under the Peshwas and Ahmad Shah Abdali who was coming from outside India. It’s a pivotal battle because the British have a tiny presence in India at that time but the reigning power in India are not the Mughals who are in decline, but the Marathas who are ascended. And in some sense the Marathas are now providing protection to the Mughals so they are the reigning power. And the Marathas are soundly defeated in this battle. And according to the BJP, according to the RSS had the Marathas not lost there wouldn’t have been this vacuum which the British would have exploited and came. I think last year itself Amit Shah said in reference to that battle that the Marathas had won 100 battles or something like that, but they lost this one battle and because of that India was enslaved for 200 years. And their reading for why the Marathas lost the third battle of Panipat was infighting. The Marathas wasn’t a centralised command, you had the Peshwas who were normally on top, but you had the Holkars, the Scindias, the Bhonsles, who were supplying armies so it was a confederacy, the Jats and the Rajputs of North India did not help the Marathas, and as a result of which there was no teamwork. Once again Deepak, my job is not to assess the historical validity of this narrative but is to show you that this narrative, this lesson of history has an organisational consequence. And that’s what’s remarkable about the BJP, it’s why it wins.

DJ: It’s a great point maybe we should talk about it later in the conversation. It’s also about the power of storytelling in the way you shape culture, in the way you shape believes, in the way you create glue. But going back to the piece you alluded to which is about Vajpayee and Advani switching places, I quote from your book in Page 297 you say what makes the Advani and Vajpayee relationship even more distinct was an ability to switch places and upturn hierarchies not once but twice. You say between 1957 and 1985 Vajpayee was plainly the leader but between 1986 and 1995 when the party moved in a more radical direction, Vajpayee served under Advani but in the decade after 1995 they switched places again and Vajpayee led the party. Put this in perspective for us in the context of relationships at the top, you know, towards the end of the book you talk about a few other relationships and just talk about how special this is and how unprecedented this is. So, before

we talk about how they navigated these transitions, I would love for you to place this dynamic in context of what we generally observe.

VS: Well, Deepak, take the Barack Obama-Joe Biden relationship; it's now in the news. Joe Biden loyally served Barack Obama for eight years, even though he was older and had more experience in politics, which is I would say quite remarkable. He was willing to put his ego in his pocket. Cut to now, where Biden has won the elections and has become President or at least everyone except Donald Trump thinks so. Imagine a situation in which now Obama is hired by Biden to serve on his cabinet and Obama has to report to Biden, that's the first switch. Imagine now eight years later a conceivable scenario in which Obama once again becomes President and Biden once again serves loyally under Obama, it sounds ridiculous. That's precisely what happened between Vajpayee and Advani that in 1968 after the death of Deendayal Upadhyaya, Vajpayee takes control of the Jana Sangh, which is a precursor to the BJP and all the way until 1986 he is in charge. He found the BJP in his own image in 1980, in 1986 the RSS orders him to step down and Advani becomes party president, he has a more radical or "hard line" image and from 1986 to 1995, Vajpayee serves under Advani. Advani is not just the party leader he's also the most popular face of the BJP, he stands on the rath yatra, the converted Toyota and that leads to the rise of the BJP not under Vajpayee but under Advani and in 1995, November 1995 in Bombay when they are having their convention, they are preparing for the elections to happen a few months later in May 1996 and everybody expects Advani to be the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP and everyone expects the BJP to be the single largest party. What does Advani do at that stage? He announces to the shock of the RSS that it is Vajpayee who will be the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP and there's almost a revolt saying that what has happened, but Vajpayee becomes the prime ministerial face and he does become Prime Minister for 13 days in 1996, for 13 months in 1998 and then for a full five-year term between 1999 and 2004 and during this entire period it's Advani who eventually becomes Deputy Prime Minister who serves under Vajpayee. I think it is just astonishing. When I asked, when I looked around and asked in politics certainly there is no Indian example. It is true that Subhash Chandra Bose served under Nehru, but never the other way round. I have been pointed out examples in sports where you do see a switching. For example, Virat Kohli served under Mahendra Singh Dhoni when Dhoni was captain and then Kohli becomes captain and Dhoni serves under him. But what you haven't seen is a second switch, which is Dhoni once again becoming captain and Kohli serving under him. If that happens, I would say that at least in the world of cricket there's an analogy to this. And Deepak, as I pointed out on the book, this is only a mirror for a larger ideological belief in teamwork no matter what that typifies the BJP.

DJ: Let's talk about the two transitions Vinay; you talk about the one in 1986 where Advani got the upper hand and subsequently in 1995 when Vajpayee started leading the party. If we just focused on let's say the first three, six, nine months post that transition, I am curious about how the two handled themselves, you know, every relationship needs a period of readjustment. So, talk to us about what that looked like in those two passages of play.

VS: Yeah, that's a good question Deepak, but I think we got to look six months after and six months prior, or even prior because it eases the blow. So, what are the mechanisms to ease that blow? Now if you look at 1985, I am sorry, I have to go a little bit into the historical reads for this, the why was the... why did the RSS force Vajpayee to step down because Vajpayee's analysis of what it took to defeat the Congress was that he felt that the BJP should join the non-Congress opposition by being secular and socialist, that was his idea. His sense was that if you wanted to... and the Congress was the 180-pound gorilla in the room from Indian independence up to the 1980s. So, he felt to defeat them you have to align with the socialists, you have to align with the regional parties, and therefore he felt that the BJP should have less to do with the RSS. He felt the BJP should portray a moderate image, that's why it's called the Bharatiya Janta Party. It uses the phrase Janta Party, which was the

1977 to 1980 party in India in government in India headed by Morarji Desai but under the tutelage of Jayaprakash Narayan, which was seen as a secular socialist grassroots alternative to the centralising tendency of Indira Gandhi. And in 1984 in the elections held the BJP gets destroyed. It gets reduced to two seats. The lowest Hindu nationalism has got in its history. Now, my sense is that at least a part of it was Indira Gandhi's death a few months ago, which give a sympathy wave to her son Rajiv Gandhi, but the RSS interpreted it and I think there's some truth to that also that it was a rejection of Vajpayee's attempt at secularism that the radical Hindu vote had gone to Rajiv Gandhi, in memory of Indira Gandhi who has stood against the breaking up of India's sacred geography. Now, so the puzzle in some sense is after late 1984 why does it take a year-and-a-half to kick out Vajpayee. That itself tells you something about the organisation. There's no sudden humiliating kicking out; Vajpayee knew his time was up, he had a year to try to find a successor and Advani's genius was he was personally loyal to Vajpayee while being ideologically loyal to the RSS, which was... so he was basically the right winger or the hardliner that Vajpayee could deal with. So, I think the first lesson of transition that you see then is don't make it sudden and humiliating. So, there are one-and-a-half years between the sacking order and the actual leaving and also consult the incumbent in who you want to replace her or him with and I think you see that there. In 1995, once again, Advani begins to realise after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the fact that the BJP actually begins to lose states after the demolition that maybe Hindus, the majority community in India are tired of radicalism and he begins to sense that. So, he begins to slowly make moves immediately after that, Vajpayee becomes the leader of opposition replacing Advani, so that's the first step He's now the parliamentary voice of the BJP, in I think around 1993 and it takes him another two years to basically announce Vajpayee not him, by which time it is reasonably obvious even to the RSS that the BJP is not going to get a single largest majority and needs allies and Vajpayee is a much more conducive figure to get allies compared to Advani. So, I think that's the first lesson Deepak from these transitions, which is that don't make it sudden because it's humiliating, it's insulting, you know, this Donald Trump, you are fired. In the Indian context people don't like it but do it nonetheless, but take your time, consult the... tell the incumbent that look your time is up, but consult him or her in who should be the replacement. So, you get a mix of someone that person likes and someone you like. I think these are the two things that I would say stand out and that help ensure that the relationship continue. To give you another example, which is you asked what happened after. Between 1986 and 1995 or I would say 1993, Vajpayee was completely distant from the party, nobody wanted to associate with him. He would sit in his house. I have these very colourful descriptions, he used to love eating prawn which for like a Hindu BJP party was considered an issue. He didn't care. He enjoyed his alcohol; he had his friends who would be drinking with him and Advani wasn't invited. He wouldn't come, Advani was a teetotaler, and he was also a vegetarian. So, he was socially very removed from Vajpayee but nonetheless they would meet for lunch once a week, they would exchange notes. So, when the professional relationship was torn, they had some kind of personal friendship and as we see later when the personal relationship frayed when they were Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, they continued having some kind of professional relationship. So, I think these are some of the insights on these two transitions that I see that were quite helpful for easing the blow as it were.

DJ: Very interesting and I love the point you make about the fact that it's not sudden but you warm up to the transition rather than a cold...

VS: But nonetheless you make it clear to the incumbent that it is final. So, there's no politics and...

DJ: It's a ticking clock.

VS: Yeah, it's a ticking clock so look, you are going to go, let's make it the smoothest for you, I think. And to be fair Vajpayee played that role.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. If this notion of how we should manage transitions is of interest, you might like the playlist – Settling into a new context. You can go to playtopotential.com and look at the Curated Playlists section and look at how different leaders dealt with this.

You might specifically like my conversation with Michael Watkins (MW), who has been studying Transition Acceleration for several years and has written the Bible of Transitions – First 90 days. One of the pieces he speaks about is when you get promoted to a new role and your peers now start reporting to you, how do you manage that awkward dynamic. In the Cafeteria, how do you think about seating yourself in the new table versus the old table?

MW: *“So it’s a fun little thought experiment to think about doing that and that thing is bad the answer almost certainly is if not immediately, pretty quickly you should be seating with your peers. But you need to manage that in a way that’s reasonably deft unless you want to be sending a different signal right intentionally in the organization. But you still want to acknowledge people or you don’t want to be perceived as disconnected or dismissive about a group of people and the process. But this is hard it’s just hard because I think that I mean I was speaking again a one of the set of stake holder interviews that do one of the CEO I’m working with I was talking to one of this person’s previous direct report who now obviously is you know one step removed and It was almost like he was going through a grieving process right he loved working with this leader and he is not gone have as much access as he used to have and the new person in the role you know as his past was an interim may be not the same necessarily quality or character person so it’s nothing easy about it you know it’s just really challenging. But the same time that new CEO can’t afford to give in to the impulse to stay as connected with that like before people is they used to. I end up coming conversation about this all the time right its real struggle.”*

DJ: For more, please visit the conversation with Michael Watkins. You can go to playtopotential.com and find him in the Guests section.

If you haven’t done already, do take a moment to rate and review the podcast on Apple Podcasts. It will help individuals access this content amidst the ocean of content out there and it will also help us raise the bar in terms of the guests we are able to get on the show. If you are deriving value from the podcast, do also consider contributing to Antarang Foundation, a not for profit I work with closely. For more, please visit playtopotential.com and go to the Pay it forward section. Let’s now get back to the conversation with Vinay Sitapati.

DJ: Let’s dig into the organisation a little bit Vinay. A big chunk of the book is also about the culture that gets created, the culture of teamwork apart from the two individuals who are doing the jugalbandi and in page 297, I quote where you say the genius of the RSS is to create a bond of family among non-family members that is deploying a traditional form of team building to a modern electoral context. Say more about how RSS does it.

VS: Right, thanks Deepak. First of all, I just want to make it clear to your listeners that this book is not a pro or an anti-RSS or BJP book. So many of you don’t like the RSS, all power to you; this book is not going to change your mind and some of you love the RSS and BJP and this book is not going to change your mind. But what it is going to do is answer the question why they win? Why are they successful and that’s an empirical fact? So, and the answer of which the RSS uses of modern family like ties to a non-family setting is part of their secret sauce of why they win. So, just I wanted to

make it clear to your listeners that you know keep it, that's the spirit in which this conversation is taking place.

DJ: I am glad you said it because this podcast has got nothing to do with politics and I am glad you just said that.

VS: So, it's just asking the empirical question why, you know, what happened to the older idea of India and how is the Narendra Modi idea of India so dominant. Even in a place like Bihar they are winning, they may win now in West Bengal very soon, what, what just happened to the old India. So that's the spirit in which this is taken. Now I as you know I am political scientist and if I asked your listeners and I just said the word Congress, what is the word that comes to your mind, associational word? Most people will say dynasty, right? That's an empirical fact that not just at the top the Nehru Gandhi's are a dynasty, Nehru himself was a dynasty, his father was a Congress President and he also encouraged dynasty; fact his own daughter became Congress President in his lifetime. So, Indira Gandhi in that sense was a creature of her father. So, this is a fact. But as I began looking at other political parties you find the same issue of dynasty and I realised that nepotism and dynasty aren't Congress problems, they are Indian problems and the reason why the Congress is nepotistic and dynastic is because it's an Indian organisation. If you look at the... look at most doctors in India, a majority of them will come from family backgrounds. Look at those who join business in India, majority of them that is the Indian nature that the son and daughter will follow the profession of the parents. Now, there are exceptions to that and those exceptions are growing larger and larger in a modern Indian economy, but it still remains more true than not. So, in this context the question was how would the RSS deal with the problem of dynasty and nepotism and to be fair to or to be in defence of dynasty and nepotism the family is a very powerful organisation in India? The parents teach children lots of tricks of the trade that universities, IITs, IIMs never will. I think Mukesh Ambani learnt about business more from his dad, rather than I think he went to Stanford or Wharton, I don't think that taught him business. So, it's a reality, I just don't want to mock it. So, the RSS is in this bind that if they focus on family ties it will become a nepotistic organisation and then talented people from outside and I think I am in a value neutral way I would consider Narendra Modi talented would not be drawn to an organisation where the only people who rise are the children of RSS leaders. On the other hand, you have to take family seriously because it actually is an intuitive bond that Indians understand. So, what's their solution? At one level they glorify family, they call themselves the Sangh Parivar, the family of organisations and the way they behave with each other are like brothers and sisters, they refer to each other that way, they are constantly in each other's house making tea, I show you that. The families of all the RSS fellows know each other; it's that kind of bonding. But if you do this then it will very quickly become the domain of one family. So, what's their solution to have a rule that no pracharak, the pracharaks are about 4,000 to 5,000 permanent functionaries of the RSS, the rule is they cannot marry, they cannot marry. It's remarkable because once you have that rule you don't have children. So, there's no question of RSS becoming a nepotistic organisation.

DJ: They have structurally solved the problem.

VS: It structurally solves the problem and it solves the problem by using a concept in Hinduism which is brahmacharya, which was meant to solve the problem of too many family bonds in India. And one story which is an exception to this rule Deepak tells you how powerful this rule is. There were, you know, as I mentioned earlier the pracharaks or the senior functionaries of the RSS by rule cannot be married because if you are married then you will favour your children and you will destroy the organisation. There are only two exceptions to this, one is a gentleman called MG Vaidya who I interviewed and he is I think now 95 or 96. So, when the rule came about in 1960s, he was already married. So, unless he got divorced, he continued to be married and he continued to rise up. So, that's exception one where you have a senior RSS functionary who also is married and has children.

The other is a gentleman called Madhukar Rao Bhagwat who went and told Golwalkar, the long-standing head of the RSS who instituted this rule that look my mother is very old and if I don't marry and I don't have a wife who is going to take care of my mother, so an exception was made. These are the only two functionaries in the RSS who have children and today their children are the number 1 and number 3 of the RSS and I am not kidding. There is Manmohan Vaidya, who is number 3 and Mohan Bhagwat who is number one. They don't have children. So, they are not, they are going to, there are no more Vaidyas and Bhagwats who are going to come in the RSS.

DJ: As they say in mathematics there is a QED, right? This is like theorem proved.

VS: It's 100 percent; like you have literally two exceptions and then they become the number 1 and number 3 of the RSS. So, in that sense my sympathy for the Congress became much more real that look if the Congress wants to reflect India how can it not be a dynastic party and in that sense the RSS is remarkable because it is both conventional, it understands at least certain aspects of Hinduism while being a radical departure from it. That's why they are so successful.

DJ: Fascinating. The other point you make about RSS in page 122, you compare it to McKinsey, an organisation that I spent some time with and I found just the connecting the dots across these two worlds truly intriguing and you say I quote, like McKinsey the RSS's most precious resource are its workers, it regularly farms out its middle-level managers, pracharaks, to lead groups that promote specific agendas. This creates a constellation of organisations around the RSS the Sangh Parivar that may move in distinctive circles while trying to keep Nagpur in the centre of their orbit. The RSS does not need to issue diktats to its pracharaks, the ideology is already hardwired and they already know what to do. Say more here?

VS: So, there's this whole conspiracy theory that Narendra Modi is a Manchurian candidate for the RSS, that every morning he wakes up early and he calls Nagpur and Nagpur tells him what to do that day, it is ridiculous. Firstly, it goes against the persona of Modi to state the obvious and second is you don't need to. He spent his whole life in the RSS, he knows exactly what to do and the RSS while it... and I am revealing no secrets by the fact that they don't like his solitary shall we put it that way style of governance, they admire the fact that he does implement RSS ideology, that the two are indistinguishable. So, in that sense the... and I just want to take a little bit of a digression Deepak to explain the idea of a pracharak and Narendra Modi spent all his life as a pracharak before becoming Chief Minister of Gujarat. So, it is important for all Indians to know this idea. The RSS at one level is a sprawling organisation, you have lakhs of part-time volunteers who join for an hour in the shakha, who do a marching and who do Baudhik, which is an intellectual discussion. They pay the money and there's no RSS bank account. The local bank account is created. So, the only organisation where you pay to join and it's totally sprawling. So, how do you ensure uniformity? You have, as I said, 4,000 to 5,000 pracharaks who are full-time employees of the RSS, they are, they are not, they are paid or let's put it this way, they are not paid a salary but lot of the swayamsevakas will be giving them money to live. They live above the shop literally and their whole life is spent that way. So, they are akin to missionaries, full-time missionaries and they spend their whole life doing this. And they go from shakha to shakha, in some sense they are like quality inspectors ensuring that the shakhas follow the same line and this is Narendra Modi's life, this was Advani's life from 1948 when he had to flee Sindh, Karachi for India up till 1957, where he was a pracharak in Rajasthan. So, this is the world they are very familiar with and pracharaks are extraordinarily focused on organisation because that's all they do, they cycle, they take camel, the pracharaks have internal competitions about memorising train timetables and bus timetables. So, this is who they are. Now, many of these pracharaks some of them sort of exactly like McKinsey, you have 5,000 pracharaks and you join as a pracharak and you go through officer training camp 1, 2 & 3 where you become a hard-boiled pracharak, but after that only a few become Mohan Bhagwat, only a few rise to the very top. What

happens to the others? They join a variety of organisations. So, for example, in 1987 or 1988, Narendra Modi, one such pracharak is farmed out from the RSS to the BJP, because they feel that the BJP under Vajpayee has gone down the wrong track and you need little more ideological conformity so literally Narendra Modi has been moved from RSS to the BJP to de-Vajpayee it. And others join the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. So, I think there are, I mean, I forget the numbers but maybe 60-70 organisations, which are officially, RSS officially farms people out. That's pretty much like McKinsey where some people make it to the top but McKinsey actively encourages you to join parallel organisations many of whom McKinsey was advising and then those people give McKinsey business. I mean, I am not revealing any state secrets when I say this. So, RSS likes it when its pracharaks go and, you know, it's not that the head of McKinsey has like a secret hotline to ex-McKinsey's though I do know that all of you have this WhatsApp group, right?

DJ: It's called the mafia...

VS: It's the mafia right and it's very powerful and you don't have to tell McKinsey people what to do; that's what McKinsey people have been trained for years in McKinsey to behave and to think like. And as a slightly joking aside Deepak, when I first met you it was at a retreat for ex-McKinsey people if you remember and this was in....

DJ: Correct

VS: ...in Chandigarh.

DJ: At ISB Chandigarh.

VS: At ISB Chandigarh and I had met many McKinsey people in my life, but that was the first time I was talking to a room of hundred ex-McKinsey and every single question sounded similar not the content which changes but the structure how you say it, you know, all of that and I was like, wait a minute it was like watching Mr. Smith from Matrix. And I see it even intellectually that you know McKinsey consultants are being paid so much, you know, if you are the Saudi Arabian King who wants to hire someone from McKinsey, if you are the Indian Government you want the same intellectual product, you don't want too much diversity, you don't want a luck of the draw whether you get a certain type of consultant or another kind of consultant. You need Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

DJ: It's like quality control, right, you want that QC'd product.

VS: It is like quality control, exactly. And pracharaks are very similar and look I can go on about this so if you want to, I can tell you a little more or we can go to some other...

DJ: Sure, no, no, let's stay with this for a couple of minutes because I think there is something to be said about how do you wire a person in a certain way, in a certain way of thinking, a certain way of behaving? So, I am curious about what else do you observe RSS doing, which wires up a person a certain way.

VS: So, I will give you one example, and again this is getting a little bit into the political weeds, but I think some of your listeners may enjoy that, which is that take Narendra Modi, he belongs... the RSS historically is an upper caste organisation, Modi is a what we call a middle cast or an OBC. So, he comes from a community called the Ghanchi Hindu community of Gujarat, which is an oil presser community, it's an OBC so he comes from a small cast. But he is in the RSS, so he's joined the RSS, So, there has been a diversification of cast even among the pracharaks, but nonetheless wherever whichever social stratum of Hinduism you come from they standardise you. And let me just put this

puzzle towards you. Narendra Modi is a Gujju bhai from Gujarat; he was contesting from Baroda to become an MP in 2014. He also contested from Banaras, as you all know, he chose to contest from Varanasi in 2014 and again in 2019 and he won. Now, when you hear him speak this Gujju Bhai whose first language is Gujarati, second language is Hindi, third language is English, when you hear him speak Hindi, he speaks Sanskritic Hindi with the exact register that works among high culture in Banaras. This Gujarati tea seller's son from an oil presser community in distant Gujarat who speaks Gujarati as a first language has been taught to speak this Sanskritic Hindi, which resonates perfectly among the intellectuals or the intelligence of Banaras. If you meet a pracharak from Madurai, he will speak Hindi in exactly the same register. Now, I don't have to tell you Deepak that nobody in India speaks that way, it's invented. The RSS, Maharashtrians who started the RSS also didn't speak Hindi in that way. It's a little like how Hebrew was brought back to India. But today all these pracharaks speak in this language whether you are from Kashmir, you are from Baroda, you are from this thing and it helps create this standardised product that then becomes recognisable among high culture whichever part of India you grow from. Because I don't know about you, but I found this remarkable that Narendra Modi whose idea of himself was as this lion of Gujarat was able to reinvent himself as this Banaras, Uttar Pradesh Sanskritic Hindi speaking person with such ease. And the answer to that is what the RSS does to standardise pracharaks into a certain vision of what they think India should look like. And again, this idea here is not to endorse that vision, the idea is to tell you that it's a very powerful organisational invention.

DJ: And that's an outstanding point you make and if I may relate it to how I experienced it at McKinsey, you know, even the way we think about communicating through a PowerPoint how we design a slide, what boxes go where, what font do we use, how much text goes into a slide and how we storyboard. If you moved from continent A to B to C you could plug and play and that couldn't happen if this wasn't drilled in. I mean it's communication in a different context but it's the same level of indoctrination.

VS: That's right.

DJ: And then you start breathing that language wherever you go 20 years later.

VS: But it's a very effective organisational tool and I am not saying this is the case for McKinsey but certainly in the case of Hindu nationalism the logic for doing this is to learn the lessons of Hindu disunity in history. That's for obvious reasons not why McKinsey does it but, you know, so they come at it from very different positions but nonetheless it's a very powerful organisational tool. Or even the various Chief Ministers that Narendra Modi is choosing or cabinet ministers who have a RSS background, they are very similar to... they talk similarly, even their body build I find is quite similar because they do certain kinds of yoga and they have pretty similar worldviews and look it's easy to make fun of that worldview because it's a limited worldview, but it's relentlessly deep. And again, as Deepak you said this is an apolitical programme, not my job at all to convey a certain political message, but to repeatedly point out that you know what in the Indian setting this seems to have worked in that limited sense. It could be victory at all costs and I am alive to that criticism, I think that's a fair criticism, but nonetheless, it is victory.

DJ: I want to move to a slightly different theme Vinay. In the book you talk about Advani and Vajpayee coming from very different contexts. You also speak about several other leaders coming from very different backgrounds. One of the things that struck me was RSS's ability to handle diversity of talent and letting them flourish while binding the unit together. So, talk to us a little bit about your insights around how they manage to do that.

VS: Well, so I mean straight up I have to be honest that it is an exclusive organisation on religion; there are no two ways about it. Muslims are not welcome to join the RSS and I have to repeat this. But on the other hand, 80 percent of India is Hindu, and the RSS has been able to a) move outside its upper caste original background, and also have a diversity when it comes to income and region. Take the four titans of the BJP, the two jugalbandis: Modi, Amit Shah, Vajpayee, and Advani. They come from very different backgrounds. And their reasons for joining the RSS were also very different. Let's take Vajpayee. He joined the RSS because he grew up in a Marathi speaking area Gwalior, which had a Marathi speaker as the head of Gwalior and he was also a UP Brahmin, even though he lived in Gwalior he was a UP Brahmin. So, he joined because of regional and cast reasons. Advani on the other hand is what we call an English-speaking type. He went to a missionary school in Karachi, St. Patrick's; he didn't speak a lick of Hindi until 1948 when he comes to India. He spoke English, some Sindhi, he reads English books, he was playing tennis when someone told him about the RSS and he joined. I think being the only person to join the RSS after a game of tennis. So, that's Advani for you. He joined RSS because of the catastrophe of partition. Because he sees India's geography being split and he says that there's no other party that supports me except the RSS. That's why he joins. If it hadn't... and because of partition a rich Sindhi family is reduced to near penury and his entire quest is to make India whole again. He learns Hindi, he never learns Marathi, and he goes works in a village. And this is a man who had, they had a horse-driven carriage, a Victoria carriage in Karachi, they had a house, a bungalow with a game room just for games, and he then moves to rural Rajasthan, that's why he joined. His motivation is very different. I think Modi joined because he came from a poor background, a low-caste background and this gave him a sense of fellow feeling. Amit Shah, who I interviewed for this book, I think joined for a different reason, which is that he comes from a wealthier family, his father used to have a PVC pipe business in Northern Gujarat and from an early age he read Hindu historical fiction in Gujarati, KM Munshi, Dhoomketu, all of whom gave him this particular vision of Indian history as being, as Indians failing and being invaded because they are disunited. So, he ironically seems the only one of the four to join the RSS because of ideology. So, you have these really different characters. And what does the RSS do, they push them through officer training camp 1, OTC 2, OTC 3, everybody sleeps together, you eat together. They have these organisational techniques for example that if you want to criticise someone else in the RSS the only person you can criticise that person to is somebody senior to both you and him so that there is no ghus-phas as they say that happens, you know, among the juniors; there's nothing like that. So, they are very... so these are all the techniques that they learn and the other thing that they learn especially in the period that I am writing about is that difference of opinion is okay. So, if you look at economics for example in the period, I am writing about there is a wide range of views within the BJP and Jana Sangh itself on economics, on foreign policy, that is tolerated. But the other thing that I think they are very good at is once a decision is made everybody falls in line. And I think that's something that when we talk about teamwork and we talk about diversity we tend to overlook that you must have diversity of ideas but once a decision is made through a legitimate process everyone has to fall in line. I think Indians do the opposite that when a decision is being made sometimes, you know, everybody is quiet, this that and then a decision is made and then the politicking begins.

DJ: But how do they enable that? How do they enable people owning the decision even if they disagreed with it?

VS: Well, you see so many examples of this. Like, for example, the Ayodhya movement, which Vajpayee opposed, he absolutely opposed it. When Advani got on top of this rath yatra to travel in 1990 from... in September 1990 from Somnath to Ayodhya, very famous movement, where the Gujarat leg of that journey was organised by a young Narendra Modi. Vajpayee said don't do it. He called Advani and I refer to the person who told me that, who heard Vajpayee saying that look you have got on top of a tiger, it will be eat you one day. And I think he was right and he... so he was

deeply critical of the movement but you know what when it was adopted in 1989 by the BJP, Vajpayee didn't leave the party, he kept quiet, he sulked, but he didn't leave. I think he had internalised the views of history. So, to answer your question, it's an indoctrination from a very early age, almost half the one-hour shakha that you attend every morning is telling you different scenes from Indian history where the lesson is Indians get defeated because they fight with each other and they just internalise that.

DJ: And I love the term you use he sulked on mute.

VS: Yes, he sulked on mute. And you know I give you enough examples of others within the Jana Sangh, within Hindu nationalism who lack this talent, I mean, famously Subramanian Swamy who was in competition with Vajpayee in the 1970s to become the voice of Hindu nationalism. The RSS loved him, here was a Harvard Professor coming back and joining Hindu nationalism. But when he was outmanoeuvred by Vajpayee, he didn't know how to keep his mouth shut. He protested, he gave public press conferences and those of you who follow Swami today would not shall we say be too surprised. And that is not acceptable with the RSS, that you wait for your time, you bide your time, and frankly Vajpayee turned out to be right, which is that he had a long period of what they call vanvaas where he left the party but didn't join any other party. But then the circumstances changed and after the demolition of Babri Masjid the BJP was looking for a pleasant moderate face and Vajpayee was back in demand. So, I think, Deepak I think about it in when it comes to my own career, that there's an uncle of mine who is in some sense my professional idol told me that twice in your career you will face failure, you will be kicked around, the organisation won't give you what you want to give. If you leave at that time that's what the organisation wants you to do. Instead stay, play tennis, hang around, don't irritate someone else, in one or two years the stars will change. And then your career may be back but you have to learn to do that. I think Indian politicians, the good ones understand this that look elections come elections go, you lose some, hang around, don't make too many mistakes, and then the voter changes, the stars change and you are back in business.

DJ: It's a good marital advice as well.

VS: Yeah, I think so, I think so.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I hope you are enjoying this conversation. If you are deriving value from the podcast episode or from the series, I urge you to contribute to Antarang Foundation, a Not for profit that I work closely with. Antarang works with young adults from challenging backgrounds and equips them with the tools, knowledge and the mindset required to access the world of formal employment. The two podcast editors that work with me, Akash and Arman happen to be Antarang alumni. It's just wonderful to see how hungry and open to learning they are. I genuinely believe that while the world of opportunity is skewed, the world of potential is flat!

Here is the founder of Antarang Foundation and an Ashoka Fellow, Priya Agrawal (PA) speaking about some of her alumni!

PA: *"Speaking of potential at Antarang Foundation we believe that potential is inherent in every young adult given the opportunity they all will take wing Like Shobha, Kausar, Rishi, Priyanka, Hassan and Mayuri who all got on an air plane for the very first time and flew all the way across the Atlantic to United States of America for a full funded year in a college in the US. They have come back with their diplomas, their aspiration and their abilities to match with the best in class. To hire young adults*

like them write in to Antarang Foundation. Not only will you be hiring an aspiring professional you'll be inspiring ambition in an entire low income community."

DJ: You can know more at the Pay it forward section at Play to Potential. Feel free to write to me if you need me to connect you to somebody to take the discussions forward. Let's now get back to the conversation with Vinay on Jugalbandi.

DJ: The other phrase that you use which I found appealing was not only was Vajpayee capable of being heard in multiple registers, he was capable of containing within himself multitudes.

VS: Yes.

DJ: I wanted to sort of explore that.

VS: Well, Deepak because I have studied Narasimha Rao for the previous book, in the previous Play to Potential that I was on, I realised that when you look at grand figures and I think Vajpayee was a grand figure, you see lot of contradictions within, a lot of them. So, Narasimha Rao for example was a visionary. He was also petty and corrupt and rather than have a linear view of understanding them as either or the answer is, they have a bit of both. So, Vajpayee was a careerist, he was an opportunist and he was ruthless to those within the party who he didn't agree with, ruthless, whether it was ML Sondhi, Balraj Madhok, Subramaniam Swamy, Nanaji Deshmukh, Govindacharya, list of people whose careers have been destroyed by Vajpayee within the party itself. On the other hand, Vajpayee was in some sense a liberal. He had extraordinarily good parliamentary etiquette, he had friends across the political aisle, his own critics said that he is half a congressman, there's a grain of truth to that in the sense that he cultivated these relationships. I talk about in the book in some detail, he had an unorthodox relationship, and he lived with this woman, a fascinating figure Rajkumari Kaul, who was an intellectual liberalising influence on him and her husband for 30 to 40 years. So, he was a complex figure. So, what I try to do in this book is to reduce this view of like the right man in the wrong party, which is what he was called like a liberal in the wrong party saying that he was as complicit or as opportunist as the rest of them, but he also had these moments of extraordinary greatness and as Prime Minister, he definitely had a grand view of India. He didn't have a petty view of India and I just have reconciled myself after studying Narasimha Rao that when you look at these kind of grand figures you have to be comfortable with their many contradictions, their pettiness as well as their large-heartedness. And the two of them coexist in figures such as this.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. Something similar comes up in the way we think about our identities as well and sometimes that comes in the way of new possibilities. We end up attaching narrow labels to ourselves and that constraint the choice set. Something similar came up in my conversation with James Clear (JC), the author of Atomic Habits.

JC: *"I think identity is a huge factor of life but also particularly tied to our habits. So, let's think about this from a big picture level first. So, you have identities that can build you up, for example, like I am a type of person who reads a lot or I am a type of person who finishes workouts or I am a type of person who finishes what I start and then you also have identities that hold you back. So, something like I am terrible with directions or I am bad at remembering people's names or I have a sweet tooth or I am bad at math and we are all a collection of identities like there are multiple things that are a part of you like you might say I am a dad, I am a brother and a neighbour and a volunteer, and a*

teacher or whatever and it's not just labels that are part of your identity like dad and teacher and friend and neighbour, it's also those internal beliefs, that narrative that you assign to yourself and the more that you let one of those beliefs take over your entire identity or occupy too large of a portion the more that you are fragile and brittle in that way because if you lose that one thing then it feels like you lose your whole self"

DJ: Being comfortable with the complexities of who we are and not reducing ourselves to a few adjectives might help us see ourselves in greater resolution and get to a meaningful place especially when we are in phases of transition.

If you like to dig in here, you might like the Nuggets on Identity across speakers that you can find in the Curated Playlists Section at playtopotential.com. Let's now get back to the conversation with Vinay Sitapati on Jugalbandi.

DJ: The other theme I wanted to explore coming back to the jugalbandi Vinay is how they balanced their friendship and hierarchy both in private and public life. If I sort of marry it to a corporate context, it's not a like to like example, but sometimes you are a part of a leadership team of 8-10 people, you become the CEO, you still have relationships. How do you assume power while keeping your friendship, while distancing yourself and a lot of people struggle with that tightrope of how do you manage the professional relationship and the private relationship? So, what can we learn from these two on how we manage that?

VS: So, I think that it is as difficult as well as everyone else. So, there is no magic potion here. Their relationship did suffer for example when they were in government between 1998 and 2004 and Vajpayee was Prime Minister and Advani naturally expected to be his number 2. But Vajpayee didn't think much of Advani as a minister. He thought a lot about Advani as a party leader, but he didn't think Advani had the chops to run government. So, he had his Principal Secretary, Brajesh Mishra who he considered in many ways his number 2. And that relationship frayed, the families also didn't get along especially during this period so there's a lot of tension there. So, I don't want to alight that, I don't want to say that doesn't exist. The puzzle for them is nonetheless they stay together and it does remind me since you use the marriage example of one of those marriages where the husband and wife absolutely don't like each other. They find it hard, there's tension, there's competition nonetheless they never divorce and you will find them if you go for a walk in a park, you will find some of these old couples snapping at each other. But nonetheless they are happy to go back home together hand in hand. I think Vajpayee and Advani were like that. And ultimately, I think, that glue that held them together despite the problems you mentioned was ideology, that both of them were Hindu nationalists and they felt that if they split it would go against everything, they learned in their either you can call it indoctrination or their socialisation. I think there is something to that.

DJ: The other piece I wanted to get to in the book you talk about the elections, 1984 elections. And it so turns out that I was living in Gwalior at that point in time. I spent four years 1984 to 1988 so I saw the election between Madhava Rao Scindia and Vajpayee live. So, the people going around in vans canvassing and the billboards and so on. And page 138 you say post losing that election you say that Advani was developing a reputation of being a hardliner, it was a reputation that Vajpayee was happy to nurture as a foil to his own moderation. They could play both the instruments that Hindu nationalism needed while still allowing him to pick the tune. So, I love the language I must say. [Say more here.](#)

VS: Well, what... I found... when you study personalities there are one or two deep desires that characters have and lot of their life is spent living up to that. So, the key to understanding Vajpayee

was that at the age of 34 he becomes a party MP in 1957 for the Jana Sangh, which is a precursor of the BJP, he also becomes a leader of his party in the Lok Sabha and from 1957 all the way till I think 2007, 2008, he was a constant presence in Parliament, it's like 50 years. What he loved more than anything else is speaking for his party in Parliament, and he was profoundly influenced by Nehru for being this... so his idea of India was parliament. And he had no problem and no competition with anyone who ran the party, he had no problem. He was very, very sensitive that nobody else should be the media face of the BJP, nobody else should be the parliamentary face. When that happened, he cut them aside. The reason why Vajpayee-Advani jugalbandi worked was that Advani was under-confident, he didn't consider himself a good speaker and all of you who have seen him on TV would agree with that view, he is a diffident character. He was much more comfortable letting Vajpayee steal the limelight, he didn't really want it. The only time he sort of crossed that Lakshman rekha in their relationship was during the rath yatra in September 1990. Other than that, he really didn't want the spotlight. And I think that's a very good reason why this relationship worked that there was professional compatibility. This is also the compatibility required for Hindu nationalism, which is both a movement on the ground where you need an Advani like figure or an Amit Shah like figure as well as a movement that needs to win elections where you need a Modi right now or you need a Vajpayee back then. So, in that sense there was a professional jugalbandi that was very happy. What Vajpayee does think is that ultimately, he will call the shots and we see very soon after between 1986 and 1995 that's not the case. And that's not the case because Advani realises that while he owes a loyalty to Vajpayee, he owes a higher loyalty to the Hindu nationalist cadre and that cadre is going in a very different direction during this period.

DJ: Got it. The other piece coming back to the organisation, the one piece that comes through is the pulls and pressures in the RSS and BJP at various points in time as the as the country evolves. What I was curious about Vinay was how do you drive an organisational culture when you have got several participants tugging at it from different directions. You have got choices to make in terms of what do you stay, what do you keep fixed and what do you evolve? So, can you talk a little bit about your analysis around how RSS thought about keeping the core while evolving as the sentiment changes?

VS: It's a good question Deepak, because one of the conclusions I come from this book is that the RSS doesn't always win. So, RSS is not always in command. There isn't a clear strategy through which they win every time. There were many aspects of what the BJP was doing when they were in power the first time that the RSS didn't like and they protested and they lost; Vajpayee was able to stare them down. There were some others for example, Vajpayee wanted to sack Narendra Modi in April 2002 after the riots, the RSS said no, the cadre said no, and Advani said no and Vajpayee had to back down. So, I would say that the way to think about that relationship of give and take is not linear and not based on these are the cores because there were some cores of... one would argue that sacking Modi was a core liberal belief on Vajpayee but he stood down on that. One could argue that not supporting the destruction of Babri Masjid was a core liberal belief of Vajpayee but he stood down on that. One could argue that when it came to the RSS building a Ram Temple at Ayodhya, which is what Modi has now been able to do is a core belief but Vajpayee refused to do it from 1998 to 2004. So, on that I would say it's a little more complex give and take. The puzzle as I keep coming to is why do they still not split? Why does the RSS not back some other party? Why doesn't Vajpayee leave and start another party, which is standard in any other political party in India. And the answer to that is a sense that that would mean breaking the family. So, to answer your question, I don't think there's a linear answer to that question. It's a messy give and take based on the conditions, the personalities, etc. etc.

DJ: Got it. Fair, point taken Vinay. Coming to the individual versus the collective, you know, the other piece that struck me as I read the book was at various points in time you speak about the organisation's desire to move in a certain direction, but that clashes with what that individual stands

for and what that individual believes in. What can we learn about how Vajpayee and Advani walked the tightrope of staying independent to their individual beliefs while conforming to the organisation beliefs? So, whenever that road diverged, you have touched upon it already in some of the pieces but I was curious about how do you stay independent yet loyal especially when they start pointing in slightly different directions.

VS: I think that in that to answer your question on that Deepak, Vajpayee and Advani may not be the best examples because when push came to shove, they were organisational men. At key moments when this precisely this question of your individual principles, your individual conscience versus ultimately what the movement decided, the movement tended to win, it tended to there were some exceptions, but I would say that... that yeah, so, I would. So, in that sense I don't know they are the best example of standing your ground while still working within an organisation.

DJ: And would you have a view on why that might be the case? Why they eventually sort of conceded to the organisational direction?

VS: I think it's not a... in a technical sense it is not a liberal worldview and when I use the word liberal, I mean focused on individual rights that the individual at the centre of the belief system, the RSS doesn't have that, Hinduism doesn't have that. Frankly, India doesn't have that. So, the RSS does not, in fact, in anything the RSS feels that the individual ego goes against organisational outcomes, group-based outcomes. So, you know, I mean in western cultures, in western organisations... more entrepreneurial start-up cultures you do see individuals as very important because they are a creative font, sometimes they make the right decisions. I don't think that was the RSS view that's the BJP view and I do think that's a failing but on the other hand they have stayed united. So, you can pick which one you want.

DJ: The other theme I wanted to pick up that you talk about in the book Vinay is this notion of decoding the Overton window, is it how you pronounce it?

VS: Yes.

DJ: In page 246 you speak about Vajpayee being in the central hall from 1957 onwards and decoding the political common sense of the time, the Overton window of what India would find acceptable. I find this notion intriguing, right? How do you make sense of a complex sentiment and that's a trait that a lot of leaders try to develop as they grow senior because a lot of us, let's say I come from an engineering background where you give me a problem $a + b$, I will solve it but as you grow into complex roles, you need to make sense of complexity which can't be described in equations.

VS: That's right.

DJ: So, talk to us about what can we learn from Vajpayee especially on how he did it?

VS: So, Deepak the definition of an Overton window is that the window of what is considered acceptable in any political discourse. So, there's something is considered unacceptable, something is considered acceptable and that shifts but at any point it's pretty clear. So, for example, until the arrival of Donald Trump, it was considered unacceptable in the U.S. to question the results of an election, it was considered unacceptable. He has shifted the Overton window where you could allege fraud, you could say this, you could question this, he has shifted that.

DJ: And what is the origin of this term?

VS: I actually don't know; I don't know it.

DJ: It's a curious term.

VS: So, your listeners should Google it because I don't know this and I did not Google this to find out, but that's the question. As I mentioned here politics has an Overton window.

Quick talk from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: "A quick clarification here since I had the benefit of Googling while editing this conversation. Joseph Paul Overton was a Senior Vice President at The Mackinaw Centre of Public Policy. This term came up in the 1990s. He unfortunately died piloting an Ultra-Light aircraft when he was just 43 in 2003. Let's get back to Vinay now."

VS: On economics, for example, in the 1950s and 1960s in India, it was outside the Overton window to say that India should have a free market, outside the Overton window; state had to play a role, and should it play no role, should it play some role, should it play a lot of role that was the debate. And I say that this was not confined just to the Congress but to all political parties and for the BJP, which was out of the Overton window when it came to religion, on every other aspect it wanted to be within the Overton window. And Vajpayee was very good at divining that. Now all leaders need this and I will give you an example within the corporate boardroom itself. Today, for example, the corporate, you know, in corporate boardrooms they are talking about gender quotas, for example. Ten years ago, you could criticise it, Today, if you do you lose your job. So, the Overton window has shifted. Again, this is just being descriptive there but it tells you something that is live that your listeners are thinking about it right now. Any smart CEO needs to know this because these are not his or her personal views but this is what is acceptable, what is unacceptable environment that is happening around you. Now, Vajpayee knew that enormously and he had to navigate that over a 60-70-year period when Indian Overton window is changing. I would say today that on social issues the Overton window has moved decisively right. But that takes some doing and I think Vajpayee was extraordinarily good at seeing the Jana Sangh and BJP through as the Overton window gently moved and his critics would argue that he played a big role in actually pushing that Overton window right.

DJ: And given that you spent a lot of time studying Narasimha Rao as well, and that was one thing I picked up about him as well, his ability to sort of decode complexity. Did you pick up any nuances or differences in the way they went about forming that nuanced view? Is there anything that we can learn?

VS: Well, I have to say that Rao was an intellectual; I don't think Vajpayee and Advani were intellectuals. I think Rao had a deep philosophical view of India. I don't think Vajpayee and Advani had it. What they were, were supreme tacticians and they understood the 50-year arc of India very well, which is by the way 10 times more than what any politician needs to know. A politician only needs to know a five-year history of India because that's when the next election is. They had a 50-year sense of India. But in... and of course Vajpayee was this charismatic leader, he was the best speaker parliamentary speaker in India's history. Rao, as I pointed out to you in our last session had the charisma of a dead fish unlike Advani who is a straightforward man, what you see is what you get. Narasimha Rao is absolutely the opposite. I also point out here that Advani and Rao never warmed up to each other, there was cold chemistry. On the other hand, Vajpayee and Rao were great friends, they got along hugely. And a source of mine who I will tell you offline told me that they used to meet once in a while to complain about their problems in life. Vajpayee would complain

about Advani and Rao would complain about Indira Gandhi at a particular moment. And it worked very well because they belonged to very different parties with very different trajectories.

DJ: Like there was an ad in Airtel which said “har ek friend zaroori hota hai”, you need a different type of friend for a different type of friend.

VS: Yeah, and Vajpayee’s greatest problem was other BJP people as is well known and as I have written that is the same with Rao where his biggest enemies were within the Congress. So, they got along very, very well.

DJ: Got it. Lovely Vinay, this has been a wonderful conversation. Just wrapping up if we just step away from the book and synthesise when you sort of look at it from a distance. What can the corporate world learn from the Jugalbandi, from your research around the RSS, from these two leaders. What are some of let’s say the key things that stand out for you in terms of what the corporate world can do to absorb from this journey?

VS: I think teamwork, teamwork and teamwork and especially take teamwork seriously because you are operating in an Indian problem. Alcoholics Anonymous famously says that admitting you have a problem is half the solution. So, if you are operating in India admit that this is a sensitive issue, and admit for example that you have to balance hierarchy with merit. You can’t be 100 percent meritorious in India, there will be a rebellion. If you are hierarchical you can’t create value, you have to do it. I will give you and let me end with just one way in which the RSS does it, which is that as you know, India has a huge sense of hierarchy. So, RSS has it too it’s called Sangh Aayu, translated as RSS, the Sangh Age. It’s based on the age in which you have joined the RSS. So, someone joins the RSS early has spent 40 years in the RSS.

DJ: It’s the tenure in the organisation or it’s...

VS: Yeah, it’s but the tenure is an informal thing. So, it just means the number of years spent in the organisation. Aayu is age so the number of years you have spent. Now, if I have spent 40 years and you have spent 20 years my Sangh Aayu is more than yours. So, you have to respect me, you should call me sir, you should say pranaam, there is that hierarchy. On the other hand, the operational responsibilities in the RSS have nothing to do with Sangh Aayu. And that’s very important because somebody may join the RSS earlier, but maybe more incompetent, somebody may join the RSS much later but maybe competent much earlier. And so, they and this is and so you have a lot of... Narendra Modi for example is Prime Minister of India, but if he meets somebody who has joined the RSS earlier than him, he will pay superficial respect, it’s superficial but it’s nonetheless respect. And I think this is a great mix of you maintain some superficial forms of hierarchy to keep the Indian ego happy, but you don’t let that interfere with operational creation of value.

DJ: That’s... it’s outstanding and if I reflect it back to McKinsey the fact that you connected RSS with McKinsey we have this notion called obligation to dissent and the point that would be made to us was when it comes to the process of client delivery, you know, somebody who’s been in the firm for 20 years, who is a Director and let’s say if you are one year an Associate you defer to the Partner for managing the process because he or she understands what the client wants, manages the process. But when it comes to problem solving you could go head-to-head; the hierarchy was flat. If you got into a room and you are saying how we do crack this problem about profitability, then you could disagree, you could say whatever you want and the Partner or Director would create that space for that conversation. So, to your point about Sangh Aayu and balancing this hierarchy and meritocracy is a tricky one indeed.

VS: You have to balance the two. Anybody who comes to India and says that I want a flat organisation doesn't know what she or he is talking about. At the same time if you create a hierarchical organisation why are you coming to India, you are doing what everyone has been doing here for a thousand years.

DJ: Correct, correct. Lovely Vinay, before we sort of wrap up anything that you have written that's of value that I might not have touched upon.

VS: No, no, I think you have read it very well, and I hope your listeners also read it and even if you don't read it, I at least hope they buy it.

DJ: Lovely. Pleasure Vinay, thank you so much for coming back to the podcast.

VS: Thanks Deepak, thank you very much.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for reading. Just to re-iterate, this is not a political show. This conversation is not supposed to glorify any particular, party, group or a belief. The sole objective of the podcast is to help individuals and organizations to play to their unique potential.

As a proud McKinsey alumnus, I should also clarify that the similarities between the two institutions that Vinay calls out in his book needs to be seen in perspective and in context. I feel awkward calling this out explicitly but, in this day, and age where statements and phrases get taken out of context, I felt I should spell this out in case people don't get it.

If this conversation is of interest, you might also like my conversation with Vinay Sitapati about Narasimha Rao. You might also like my conversation with Jay Panda where we spoke about Politics as a career. To know more about the Leadership Advisory work I do, you can go to "About the Host" section at www.playtopotential.com.

End of transcription

Nugget from Michael Watkins that is referenced: [Leading former peers](#).

Nugget from Vinay Sitapati EP1 that is referenced: [Making/Not making key decisions](#).

Nugget from James Clear that is referenced: [Keeping the identity small](#).

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Vinay Sitapati - Nuggets

- 66.00 Vinay Sitapati - The Full Conversation
- 66.01 Vinay Sitapati - The uniqueness of the Advani-Vajpayee relationship
- 66.02 Vinay Sitapati - Managing transitions when power flips
- 66.03 Vinay Sitapati - What binds the RSS together
- 66.04 Vinay Sitapati - RSS and McKinsey
- 66.05 Vinay Sitapati - Managing diversity and handling disagreements
- 66.06 Vinay Sitapati - Getting comfortable with contradictions
- 66.07 Vinay Sitapati - The dynamics of Jugalbandi
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About Deepak Jayaraman

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

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