



Guest

Pradeep Chakravarthy is a behaviourist who uses Indian models of L&D to alter behaviour. He has recently published the book - Leadership Shastra which looks at some of the rulers of the past and culls out lessons in leadership and culture. He has written a book - Thanjavur - a Cultural History (2010) and A Road Less Travelled - A Historian's Guide to lesser known temples in Tamil Nadu (2012).

In our conversation, we speak about how Kings and Queens were groomed for their roles, how they thought about expansion and consolidation at various times, Jahanara's political savviness, Decline of the Mughal Empire and the role of the Corporate Office and more.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 88th conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast, a series of reflective conversations from leading people from various domains on three broad themes – Leadership, Transitions and Careers. Just like businesses think about where to play and how to win in the context of their strategy, we all think about the two questions – where to go and how to grow at various points in our lives. These questions become that much harder in a world of abundance and multiplicity of options. Through this podcast, I hope to share some insights that might help you navigate these questions effectively.

When I am not podcasting, I am working with leaders and organizations with a growth mindset and helping them play to their unique potential. You can learn more about the podcast and my work at www.playtopotential.com.

My guest this time is somebody I have known for more than a decade. It is Pradeep Chakravarthy, author of the recently published book – Leadership Shastra. Pradeep is like the Character Maria of Sound of Music. He is like a cloud that is hard to pin down. He has an undergrad in Political Science, Masters in International Relations and an MSc in Industrial Relations and Personnel Management from the London School of Economics. He has done work in Leadership and Organizational Development at Infosys and he subsequently was a Fellow at the McKinsey Leadership Institute. He has written a book – Thanjavur – a cultural history in 2010 and A road less travelled – a historian's guide to lesser known temples of Tamil Nadu. He brings some of these deep insights from history in the context of leadership in today's context. It is fascinating to see how he connects some of the dots here.

Without further ado, let us dive into the conversation with Pradeep Chakravarthy on his book – Leadership Shastra.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Pradeep, good morning, excited to have you at the Play To Potential Podcast, thank you so much for making the time.

Pradeep Chakravarthy (PC): My pleasure Deepak, very happy to do this.

DJ: And congratulations on your newly published book, Leadership Shastra, how is it doing?

PC: I think it is doing very well. Well, the people who read it should be telling me more about it, but it has been something that has been in the making for about 15-20 years Deepak, so I am very excited about this.

DJ: Wow. In this show Pradeep, we also talk about journeys and choices. So, before we dive into the insights from the book, talk to us a little bit about your journey, which straddles history and leadership development, two very disparate things that normally I would not have connected, but I would love to understand how you got here.

PC: True, which is why I said 10 to 15 years in the making. Deepak, many many people have a very different perspective on history. All of us have learned history in school, and most people I speak to find it very very boring. And they find it boring because they were laboured into memorizing dates and the names of kings and when they fought battles, which is actually quite useless. I mean why do I need to know that X king lived in so and so year and he fought these five battles in these years and then died in this year. Do not really need to know it in the scheme and purpose of my life. There is a second set of people I have spoken to who also found history irrelevant, but they have found it interesting because the teacher made it interesting for them by telling stories. So there, it is more to the credit of the teacher telling a good story rather than the subject itself. So, on the whole, I have had people come up to me and say, look, I found history boring or I find it irrelevant, both of them are very very different from the way I have looked at history. As a child, I used to spend summer vacations in my maternal grandparents' place. And very fortunately, I lived in a home that had been in our family for six generations. It is a 10,000 square feet home, starts at one end of the street, finishes at the other end, and the upstairs part, yes, it truly, I mean it is good, even if I was not doing an audio podcast of this Deepak, even if I showed pictures, it is very difficult for today's people to even understand what I am saying, and it becomes even better. The upstairs is about 5,000-6,000 square feet, which is much larger than most of our apartments.

DJ: You are talking to somebody in Bombay.

PC: Yeah, absolutely. So, you can understand the sense of space, I guess even better, with rooms which had about 20-foot high ceilings, and all of the space was crammed with junk that belonged to these six generations. And you must remember that in those days, people just did not have one or two children like we have today, they had tons of kids. So, imagine the permutations and combinations of everything, of clothes, of luggage, of vessels, of newspapers, magazines. And as I saw these, especially history textbooks and maths books, and I very vividly remember this, some ancestors, cousins' child, something, he had scribbled down things in his old, you know that fountain pen, ink pen in the notebooks, I hate maths, I do not like maths, I hate numbers, and it was very similar to what I was going through in my school. So, in that memory cache of six generations, I saw many things that I could connect with. And I also saw many things that I could not connect with. Clothes for example, very different from the kind of clothes that we wore. I still remember these

gorgeous caps that boys used to wear with a lot of embroidery that they went to school, very different from what we see. So, I grew up with a very different understanding of history, of personal family history of looking at how, hey, here are some things in history that are very similar to what I go through in terms of needs and fears, and some things that are very different in terms of needs and fears. So, that understanding of history, of looking not just at the dates, in fact, moving beyond the dates and the names of the kings and the queens and all that, to look at what was the essential human nature aspect of it, what were the needs and the fears that people had in the past, how can I connect with those today, that aspect was something that was different. And all my work in history has been based on the fundamental premise that human nature has not changed. And if we look at human nature from the perspective of history, there are many things that we can learn for today for us to be able to work well in the present and for us to work well in the future.

DJ: And back to your journey Pradeep, how was that, for the purpose of listeners, could you talk a little bit about the key choices you have made, a little bit about your journey so that they get a sense of where your insights come from?

PC: Sure. So apart from this maternal grandparents' place, school was a very important inspiration. And in school, we had this unique method of learning, where I learnt history and geography together or we learnt economics and history and geography together. So, I had, at an early age, a very lucky perspective of looking at things that normally do not connect with each other to be able to connect them together.

DJ: Which school is this, Pradeep?

PC: The School KFI, Krishnamurti Foundation of India, and much later on today, in hindsight, I realize that many people struggle to connect two things like you yourself, history and leadership, putting them together would not come normally for many people, but it comes easily for me because of these early experiences in school. And I have made tough choices in my own life in terms of coming back to live in India, did not want to come back at all, I wanted to live in the UK, I certainly did not want to live in Chennai, I wanted to live in Bombay and work in Bombay. But I have seen that in all of these choices, they come with a lot of pros and they come with a lot of cons. Some of these pros and cons change over a period of time. So, I have also realized that when I look back at history and I think if we go back to the chapter that I have written on Serfoji II or on Marthanda Varma, you look at the choices that they made. And there is no one right answer for a choice being right or wrong, it is really in a context of time. Over a period of time, the good and the bad also changes. And I think, that is an important point that I want to bring it to the book as well. So, in the book, the two things that I have been very conscious about. One is I have not attempted to judge any king or queen as good or bad because I think those qualities are very very biased, they change over a period of time. The second thing that I have done is I have studiously avoided discussions on how should history be taught in schools and colleges because the purpose of the book is to look at, in this case, examples from medieval Indian history, but at a broader sense from our own history, the readers' own history on how we can alter performance at work and at home.

DJ: Hmm. And why did you write the book Pradeep? One of the things I have been curious about is, one is the arc of curiosity for people, and second is, why they choose to write a book at a certain point in time. In your case, can you talk a little bit about the why behind the book?

PC: Sure. So, for the last five years, I have been giving many talks on how can we make history more applicable for our daily lives. I have done workshops based on this; I have done coaching based on this. So, over a period of time, I have been able to see a sense of deeper understanding of how people tend to relate with this. And now, I think, I was ready in a way to go into sharing more

scholarly anecdotes about this in the form of a book. And fundamentally, I feel Deepak I write to communicate and I write to express my deeper thoughts and my dreams for the future and the way I think life should be lived in. And most important, if there is a way in which people can live into their fullest potential, I would be very happy to serve that because I feel I have been extraordinarily gifted with these experiences in childhood, in school, or at home to be able to see history in a very different perspective. And if I can do my little bit of, my own might, to look at how people can look at history differently in their own lives so that they can live to their fullest potential, I think my job would have been done. And then for that, I think a book is essential. So that is how it came. And in fact, this book has been on the cards for a very long period of time, about five-six years, finally got around to doing it because I was busy with my PhD and other books as well. But I am glad it happened today and it looks like it is doing well so far.

DJ: Lovely Pradeep. Let us dive into the book. I must say I fall in that bucket of learning history through dates and events, and probably not absorbing some of the deeper lessons from history, but of late over the last few years, I have been intrigued by history and I am sort of making up for lost time, if you will. For example, recently, during the Christmas break, we went to Hampi, and, you know, as a family, we were just blown away by just the magnificence of the city, the vision of the king, how much got done, the architectural beauty, and so on. We will talk about some of that along the way, but I, sort of, developed a late newfound respect for history I must say in terms of my journey. One of the things I wanted to talk about Pradeep, diving in, you talk about multiple kings and queens in the book. As a coach and as a leadership development practitioner, I was curious about how some of these kings and queens were developed, you know. What can we learn from some of the practices that were in place in those days to ensure that a king or a queen was ready to take on the responsibility?

PC: Right. So, this is a very ancient tradition Deepak, Hitopadesha is something we may be very familiar with from our Amar Chitra Katha days. The Hitopadesha was a text that was written for princes to be great kings. So, in India, we have had a long tradition of kings being groomed to take on higher positions and in a way queens as well because women were also educated, they were also expected to live to a certain position and to certain things. But I want to take the specific example of somebody like Tipu Sultan. Tipu was somebody who was definitely in some way groomed by his father because at a very young age, he saw battle, and I think that was one of the important reasons why he understood the need to fight, the need to emerge victorious, the need to work with his troops and above all, the need to build alliances. And he built a very, I think he had a very strong respect towards the French, but later on, if you look at Tipu, his number one aim in a way was to drive the British out. So, he should be feat to today, he should be one of our biggest heroes, but he is a very controversial character. And the essay delves a little bit into that. So, if you look at what he has done in Kerala for example, there are many good things that he has done in terms of the administration. He purely worked hard because that was a time when the Kerala's spice growers were harassed by the Portuguese and the Dutch, and Tipu really set the administrative system right, but he has also come in for a lot of flak for the religious aspect. And if you look deeply for Tipu, and I have deliberately taken the bull by the horns as it were to pick up controversial characters like Babur and Aurangzeb and Tipu because it gives us a sense of how nuanced these characters were. Nobody is a good person or a bad person. There is a lot of shades of colours for each of them just like each one of us are. And I do not think any of us can claim to be completely 100% good or completely 100% bad, there is always a little bit of both and there is that grey matter in between. And with Tipu, there are many things that were in his favour in terms of his ability to expand the empire, his ability to wage war in different fronts, but the one thing that he realized and probably realized too late in life was the vital importance of building alliances. And by the time he realized that he was not going to win the battle with the East India Company sheerly because of their superior military technology,

he had actually lost the battle because he had fought with all his neighbours and he would become very unpopular in his own region because of his fighting with his neighbours, and by the time he wanted to build connections with Afghanistan or with the French, it was a little too late. So, the way I have taken that insight is, sure, we can have a conversation about was he a good king or a bad king, did he do the right thing or the wrong thing, but there is no point in that in terms of me improving my performance. Tipu is dead and gone for many years, but what becomes a useful conversation is, hey, I want to leave a legacy in the way Tipu wanted to leave a legacy. I might not want to drive the British out, I might want to partner with them today, but I certainly want my name to be there, I want to expand my geographical spread, I want more books to sell, I want my writing to reach more people. For that, one lesson that I can learn not to do, is to build alliances. And unlike Tipu, I need to know how I can go out and build alliances with people, give and take a little bit so that my geographical spread becomes larger. So, you see, in a way, I have sidestepped in a way, I have avoided this, I think, futile conversation of good and bad leaders from the historical perspective to look at what is a need that they operated from, were they able to achieve their need, why did they not achieve it, why did they achieve it, what insight do I have from that for driving my own performance.

DJ: Going back to Tipu, Pradeep, I want to sort of come back to the making of the king, right. If you want to shine the light on, you mentioned Hitopadesha as a manual for making of the kings and queens, I am sure these are large pieces of work, so I do not want to sort of oversimplify it, but are there, let us say, elements that we have forgotten on we could, you know, we could be well-served to focus on some of the elements that have been covered even in the Hitopadesha?

PC: Not just the Hitopadesha but even if you look at Raya Vachakam, which is a book that Krishna Deva Raya wrote about statecraft, or if you look at Babur's accounts of his life, one thing that comes across Deepak, that is a very relevant lesson for us today, is the potential rulers were encouraged to patronize the arts and the humanities. And I think it was because in the arts and the humanities, unlike in stem or in science and math and technology, you do not have one right answer. There are many ways in which you can view a painting, there are many ways in which you can cook something, there are many ways in which you can understand history. And when it comes to the heart and the words, there is a lot of bias involved in it. So, it is important as we read these old writings that there are different accounts of it, immediately, it springs to us that there are different perspectives. And I think that that sense of openness of different perspectives, the willingness to accommodate different perspectives is a very important training that comes across in all the statecraft lessons that we have from the text of the past. And I think that is something that we do not have too much today. I think engineers are wonderful people and highly qualified people, but at the end of the day, we know emotional intelligence is much more important today to succeed in the long term.

DJ: Almost like a liberal arts mindset, if you will, right.

PC: Absolutely, the old adage, right, the IQ can get you a job, it is EQ that gets you your promotion.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. This reminds me of an insight from Ashish Dhawan (AD), founder of ChrysCapital, a PE fund. When I asked him about what it takes to be an effective investor, he speaks about the role of Humanities!

AD: *"Yeah, so, I think, there are a few and I would say by the way I think Liberal Arts education is good training for a PE business because I don't think you can be unidimensional. A lot of people think*

to be a PE investor you got to be good at say economics and analysis, just data crunching, reading balance sheets, etc., etc. But I think it's much more than that. I think at different levels you need to be fairly skilled. The first is I think at an emotional level and psychological level. I think a deep ability to somewhere be a critical thinker, to have confidence in your own thinking but yet keeping an ear to the ground and being able to listen but being able to filter out what you are hearing and to be able to control your emotions I think is absolutely critical. When you are an investor, you are surrounded by a lot of market noise, and I think the easiest thing to do is to be wallowing in other people's thoughts or dancing to the rhythm of the market. And in fact, the best investors are contrarians. Be a contrarian, you have to have that in your DNA to be able to think independently, to almost stand up to the crowd. But in this case, you can't do it, you can't remove yourself from the crowd because then you stop listening because you can get things wrong and sometimes do need to pivot. So, I think that's one essential trait is know thyself and think deeply about yourself, be a little bit of a psychologist also at one level. I think at a second level you have to be a big picture person, almost a macroeconomist and a historian. Macro because you got to understand how the economy works, different sectors, what the drivers are and at a very fundamental level have a sense of that. But historian because you have to understand how industries have developed over time, how market cycles have played out, having that perspective of how it has happened before, how bubbles were created, what were the best times to invest. So, I think having historical perspective I believe is absolutely critical and being a little bit of a big picture thinker is important. You can't just say oh, I am looking at this company and doing due diligence, you get too narrow and you are... you lose the forest for the trees in a sense. So, I think, having that trait is important."

DJ: We just came back from a trip to Agra and Fatehpur Sikri over the spring break and some of the Mughal architecture and history is top of mind. Talking about liberal mindset, I was personally blown away by Akbar and his spiritual programme titled Din Ilahi. intending to merge some of the elements of the religions of his empire, and thereby reconcile the differences that divided his subjects. The elements were primarily drawn from Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Jainism and Buddhism. I discovered that Akbar was a first principles thinker and was deeply curious about many things and was willing to let his beliefs evolve rather than sticking to any one strong belief.

Deeply inspiring how some of these kings led their lives and how relevant some of those traits are today.

If you are finding this conversation with Pradeep interesting, you might like some of the other conversations at the podcast with Devdutt Pattanaik, Dr Ramachandra Guha and Vinay Sitapati. You can find them in the Guests section at www.playtopotential.com. Now let's get back to Pradeep.

DJ: Moving to a different theme Pradeep, staying with Krishna Deva Raya for a couple of minutes, I was reading a book on him recently, the other thing that struck me was, lot of these successful kings and queens had a good sounding board around them. In the case of Krishna Deva Raya, there was Timmarusu, similarly, we know a lot of kings and, let us say, a wise minister or a council of ministers, so can you talk a little bit about what you have learnt about how successful kings assembled, for lack of a better term, a board of advisors around them?

PC: Yes. I think the example that I would like to take up here is Malik Ambar. Malik Ambar was an Ethiopian slave who came from Ethiopia, all the way to Deccan which is Maharashtra region, Ahmednagar is where he ruled from, and that region, Deccan, is roughly Maharashtra, northern Karnataka and northern Andhra Pradesh as we know it today which is far more international in the 16th century than it is today. We had people from Turkey, we had people from Africa who came in

there searching for a better life. And Malik Ambar came in as a slave, he got his freedom, and then, he worked his way through from being a remarkable strategist in a military commander to literally be the power behind the throne. And in fact, he was so powerful that he was able to displace the Ahmednagar king and place another new king as a puppet king and ruled from the back. And Malik Ambar as we should know him today as the founder of Aurangabad. So, Malik Ambar was somebody who was very careful about having a group of advisors and military commanders next to him, and in fact he was so grateful to them that when he planned this new city, many parts were actually named after them. So, it is not a new thing that we have politicians naming places after them even today, it was there in the past as well. And one of the people that Malik Ambar supported was a person called Maloji who was a very powerful commander and we know Maloji today as an ancestor of Shivaji, the great. And it is even said that Shivaji's ability to do this bargir-giri as Mughals called it the guerrilla warfare tactics, which gave great grief to the Mughals, was something that he was inspired from the techniques of Malik Ambar, and Malik Ambar himself seems to have learnt this ability to do this bargir-giri from his days in Ethiopia when he was hunting animals. So, you can see that across, and Ahilyabai Holkar has also done this, Serfoji II had this, all the kings you can see have had some set of council of ministers, they have had wise people who have advised them, and they have not been worried about whether they are Hindu or Muslim or anything. Aurangzeb, for example, some of his finest commanders were actually Hindu. So, you will see that there is definitely merit plays a role, it is important, and kings have worked very well with the council of ministers, and you see this in our mythology as well Deepak, everywhere you see that kings have never functioned alone or at least it is recommended that kings do not function alone, they always have an internal board of directors as it were to advice and counsel them.

DJ: Hmm. And from a decision-making perspective Pradeep, are there instances or stories that come to mind, where a king or a queen set the right climate for the right decision to be made rather than just going with what they thought was the right answer?

PC: I think we have had examples like say Marthanda Varma who had this ability to really fight hard and establish his kingdom in Kerala earlier on. And then, we do not know whether it came because of the advice of somebody or he had this idea or it is a deeper spiritual tradition always of, the king always looking at how do I limit my ego, that he dedicated the entire revenue and kingdom to Lord Padmanabhaswamy and a temple, which is why that temple is today one of the wealthiest temples in the world, we all know about the gold and the diamonds that were found there a couple years back in those vaults. So, we have definitely had this one Deepak, but there will be, unfortunately, a lot of this has not been recorded as well. I think what we can come back to Deepak is to say that look at the end of the day, what were the needs the king could have possibly had, what could have been the fears, how did they act on it, how can me for my performance look at what I can learn to do or not to do.

DJ: You touched upon Chhatrapati Shivaji and I speak from the land of Chhatrapati Shivaji, right, in Mumbai. In the book, of the various virtues or, let us say, characteristics, one of the pieces that caught my attention was you speak about this notion of strategic patience, right, you describe the story of Shivaji and you say that while he was a great warrior, the fact that he could be patient, stood out, can you expand on that?

PC: Yeah. I think that is a good point that you have raised and it is not just with Shivaji, you find this with all the leaders who have been truly great, they have built large empires, they have known when to strike and when not to strike. And you find this with Shivaji, consistently, who was a remarkable survivor. He knew when to fight the Mughals and when not to fight the Mughals. And there were times when he could quietly build an alliance with them and allow them to rule their part and him rule his own part. And even in the way, when he was patient, it was not he was just sitting and

watching dance performances or anything like that, he was actually sitting and consolidating his administration. And Shivaji had this remarkable ability to build forts, make those forts self-sufficient and work at a very personal level with the farmers around those forts to build a connection and improve the agricultural productivity. And his ability also came from constant travel in his country, so he knew the geography of his region so well, one is of the first it helped to fight the battles with the Mughal and use guerrilla warfare techniques, but in the travel, he was able to build personal connections with each of those people and consolidate administration as well. So multiple lessons from this Deepak. One is that you need that council of ministers, you need to have patience to know when to strike, when not to strike, even when you are not striking, how are you consolidating. When you are not striking, you are sitting back and relaxing and you are consolidating, building personal rapport, not just with your farmers but with your military people as well.

DJ: Hmm. And any particular instance that comes to mind when it comes to Shivaji to bring this to life?

PC: Not sure. I do not know whether I can give you a personal specific instance, but if you look at the way, after he fights the Bijapur forces and he marches over to Konkan and Kolhapur, the Panhala Fort capture for example, is a good example of how he really focused on the patience with which he had worked himself up in the time when he was not fighting the Mughals and he was able to capture the fort with this newfound connection with the army and the farmers around the region.

DJ: Hmm, got it. The other theme that caught my attention Pradeep was this notion of journaling, right. You refer to Baburnama, Babur's autobiography, which is based on the extensive notes that he took during his life. Can you talk a little bit about what you have observed great leaders do in the way they journaled in those times?

PC: Right. So, we do not have many examples of these frustratingly, any even Babur's is incomplete and it is a remarkable feat that it survived for such a long time after all the troubles that Humayun had, his successors had. And there were other Mughal emperors who had this as well but I have chosen Babur in this book, so I have spent a lot more time on that. The other person is Krishna Deva Raya, we have Raya Vachakam, which gives us a fairly good insight into his life, and there are some others, other Nayak kings as well, but these are difficult to come by. Journals have not stood the test of time but what is important from this Deepak is, I have seen very successful leaders practice journaling, which might be as simple as just writing down what are important lessons they have learned for the day or they may be tracking something. So, for example, have I listened well today, and every day, they would track whether they have been able to listen, they have been able to summarize. Sometimes, it might be actual words that they will enter, sometimes, it might just be tally marks, the number of times that they have done something. But one thing that I arrived, I have maintained a journal myself several times over, I change this very often, one thing that I find is the power of journaling is that it makes us self-aware. And when we become self-aware, most of the times, we become self-correcting as well. The data of the journal just stares back at and it is unbiased information, right. I am doing it for myself, nobody is biased there, nobody is judging me, it is just my own observations of myself, it is a pretty powerful way to change behaviour. So, I would definitely recommend, in fact in the last part of the book where I have talked about how you can make this history a very tangible way for us to improve our own leadership, journaling is something that I have mentioned. And I might say, if you read Aurangzeb chapter for example, and you find there is one insight that you have learned from it. Every day, ask yourself in the journal whether you have practiced it or not. And if you have maintained the journal just for a week or maybe a fortnight, the insights will be enormous.

DJ: Hmm. Moving to a different theme Pradeep, and I was curious about succession planning, it is something that we talk about a lot in the corporate context, how do we get the next round of leadership ready for the company as it evolves into the future, what have you seen? If you look at situations where succession planning was done well in history, are there one or two examples that come to mind and what can we learn from it?

PC: Actually, in the book, strangely enough, I have not found too many examples of succession planning that was done well, to be honest. The poster boy example of that is the Mughals, but the Mughals are a very different story. The word Mughal comes from the word Mongol, and the Mongol tradition of Chinggis Khan was, well, when the king dies, let the best man win, only the fittest survive, so the siblings fight amongst each other and the best one survives. And that is a system that the Mughals used. So, if we use very harsh words against Aurangzeb, for example, for what he did to Shah Jahan, if you look at Shah Jahan's history, he did not do something very different from his father and his siblings, maybe not the father but definitely the siblings, so the Mughal history is very different. But you do find examples like Serfoji II, very small king of a very small region, Thanjavur, people would not even place it on their map, but here was a boy who was adopted and he was started to get educated but his uncle or the heir to the region tortured him a lot, they denied him the education, denied him food and the basic sustenance as well, but the rani and the queen stepped in and with the help of a German missionary, he was able to get trained, he was able to get mentored, educated, and he turned out to be a remarkable king, a king who we should really learn, especially in these times of frequent lockdowns. So, there are examples of where there has been some thought put into grooming of the kings, but maybe, some of these Deepak we do not know because those documents have not survived, those oral traditions have not survived. Malik Ambar clearly could have done a better job. For the kind of survivor that he was, for the kind of entrepreneur that he was, he could have definitely looked at grooming somebody as a successor, but we do not know why he did not do it. And we can get into a good discussion on why did not he do it or whether he tried and it failed, but I think it becomes more important today for a person who is in an organization to say, hey, these people have not done it, their legacy did not survive or it did not survive as much as it could have, let me not make the same mistake. So always at the end of the day Deepak, I think it is a choice.

DJ: Hmm. And you talk about entrepreneurship, what I found interesting once again, back to connecting dots across domains, you talk about Ahilyabai Holkar, the queen of the Maratha Empire, and you compare her life to that of a start-up that is yet to reach a point of sustainable scale, and you talk about her ability to put the larger cause above her own. Can you talk a little bit about that and the way you have seen it in history?

PC: Sure. So Ahilyabai Holkar was somebody who might have never lived if it was not for a man behind her to say, do not commit sati, continue your life. And I think you need to understand the enormous importance of how much a woman could do something like this at that point of time, yeah. She lived in, the 18th century, so 1725 to 1795 roughly was when she ruled, and she really put Indore on the map in terms of construction, in terms of crafts, in terms of negotiating a treaty with the tribals in the region, and all of this she was able to do putting her own needs aside. And I think the biggest thing was she lost a successor in her own lifetime, must have been a crushing situation for her, but yet, that did not demotivate her and she still continued. So Ahilyabai Holkar is a woman who was able to do so much and she was able to do this with the, of course she was able to do this with the support of men around her and would not have happened otherwise, but the ability to constantly reinvent herself, not just her, the other woman in the book that I have talked about is Jahanara. Jahanara was a woman in the Mughal Empire, she was born to riches, but it was not as easy for her because she was always trying to be the peacemaker between the men in her life who were all bitterly fighting with each other.

DJ: And the one thing maybe just to come in here, one thing that struck me about Jahanara when I read the book, you say that she is Shah Jahan's daughter who was never a queen, but she was able to build alliances and achieve her ambitions through the alliances, can you say more about that here, once again, linking it back to what probably Tipu Sultan did not do enough of?

PC: Yeah. So, I think what she has been able to do is, she actually supported Dara Shikoh, Dara Shikoh did not get to power, Aurangzeb came to power after a very bloody violent struggle, and she was not in the best of terms with Aurangzeb and yet, Aurangzeb chose her over her sister who he was much fond of to be the first woman of the kingdom. And this shows, well, we do not know the kind of conversations, yeah, frustratingly, we do not have her diaries, but clearly, she must have been somebody who was able to maintain a sense of respect with somebody like Aurangzeb who was pretty much my way or the highway. So, was it in terms of the principles that she lived by, was it in terms of a sense of fairness, we do not know, but clearly, she is somebody who must have had extraordinary personal resolve to be able to navigate this really complex relationship between a Shah Jahan and an Aurangzeb, a Dara Shikoh and an Aurangzeb? And even when she was in that privileged position, she seemed to have played her cards very carefully. She could have easily tried to do another coup against Aurangzeb, she has not done that, so she is somebody who really played fair by the rules, looked at, accepting the fact that she was never going to have complete control, but within her sphere of influence, she has been able to really work hard and create something for herself, not just financially because she made a lot of money through her private trade with the Dutch, East India Company and others but also in terms of building monuments. So Chandni Chowk in Delhi, for example, is something that she created.

DJ: Wow. And back to her relationship with some of the Mughals around her, any particular event where we get a glimpse of her diplomacy and her skills there?

PC: Well, I think, in the way she managed her father's death and how she was able to work with Aurangzeb after that and come back to power.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. This is a crucial point I feel for a lot of the entrepreneurs who scale up. They often operate in warrior mode to bring it to a certain scale. But once they start growing beyond a point where they start hiring senior leaders and they lead other leaders, some of the skills around influencing and diplomacy become more and more critical. This is a non-trivial transition for several people who are wired to be a warrior. If you are keen to read up more on building this muscle, one book that comes to mind is Political Savvy by Joel Delucca. Thank you for listening.

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DJ: Let us get back to Serfoji, Pradeep, you spoke about him earlier. He was adopted as an 11-year-old boy by Thuljaji, then ruler of Thanjavur, and you say that a big part of the kingdom was taken away from him and he was given a small area of 30 square kilometres and he got an annual grant, of course, it was 3.5 lakh rupees in those days, which is non-trivial, but you go on to say that he could have very well wasted his life, but he chose within his limited sphere of influence to be a role model

leader for today till his death in 1832, can you say more about his life and some of the choices he made under these circumstances?

PC: Sure Deepak. So, whether it is Serfoji or Jahanara or Ahilyabai Holkar, we have to also look at it in the contrast of what they could have done. I think that is an important question. The choices that they had to live an easier life and how they have lived a life of more value to the people around them. So, if you look at Serfoji, yeah, like I said, he had a very generous pension, he was the ruler of Thanjavur Fort which is not even 30-40 square kilometres, that is about it. But here was a man who was so scholarly, he got books from abroad, he built a library and the library has a phenomenal diversity of collections. You have art, philosophy, history, you have literature, you have water divining, you have medicine, food, the range is enormous. And not only did he do that, he was also passionate about building a navy, he built a lighthouse, he was passionate about education, if girls were not enrolling in schools, he found out that was because there were not women teachers, so he went and enrolled women teachers at that point of time, if kids were not interested in geography, then he created plays based on earlier genres of Tamil poetry of bringing geography to life through a play, through a music dance drama, and he started a printing press because there were not enough books available, if he had to fix the medical problem, he went and learnt how to do surgeries himself, he was a qualified eye surgeon himself, kept meticulous documentation of how the eyes looked before the surgery and after the surgery. So clearly, a man who could have wasted his life away doing nothing and sitting in the palace and enjoying life. Said, no, in what little I have, let me do what I can. And I think that is a good lesson for us to live in the lockdowns, right. That, yeah, we are cut off from many many things that we would normally like to do, but we have that gift of time, what can we do differently in that.

DJ: Got it. In a different part of the book Pradeep, you make the connection between Sankardeva and what he did with music and images and fascinatingly enough, you connect it to how leaders of today use social media, connect the dots for us.

PC: Right. So, who is Sankardeva, Sankardeva was a poet saint from Assam, and he is largely credited today for spreading Vaishnavism or the worship of Vishnu in Assam? We do not have many sources of his life history, and this is not to say Deepak that we are looking only at written sources. I am very clear, in India, we have always looked at oral traditions as well. And in fact, I have struggled a lot with this period and I will struggle a lot more with the earlier periods because many of these oral traditions have actually vanished in the last 20-30 years or 40 years because we have lost that generation, as and when each generation passes away, that oral tradition goes away. But Sankardeva was somebody who was able to bring Assam, especially the various smaller rulers of Assam, to move from the earlier religions they were practicing into Vaishnavism, and not only did he bring them into Vaishnavism, he was able to unite that entire region on the basis of Vaishnavism. And what he has done is very interesting. He has worked with the kings in a particular way and there, it has largely been practicing of personal leadership, and I have taken the Sikh Gurus as well, so they have also done this, small acts which showed personal example of leadership. So, in terms of living a life of the values that he preached, or never asking a king for favours, or never admonishing a king in public or giving advice to the king in terms of how he should rule but never thrusting himself at a level of the king. But at the mass level, he has also looked at how do I communicate stories to the larger groups of people. And what are these stories really all about, all the stories of our texts in the religion are stories of hope. And he has looked at these stories of hope to really give hope to people and improve their self-identity. So, he has created these bhajan mandals as they are known today in terms of bringing people together through music. And as they sing, they connect with each other, there is an emotional outlet for the music, they are able to bring each other closer to themselves, and he has also used visual images. So, he had this huge scroll painted with all the stories. And even today in the Assam Bengal region, I mean, I suppose it is a dying art, you have

these stories which are painted in paper, and as the story moves, the paper also moves. So, it is like your PPT in the olden days, but visually capturing what the aspirations could be. And we do this even today, right, when many coaches, when we want to inspire somebody, we paint a picture of what the future looks like. And that image can be a very powerful source of inspiring us. And people like Sankardeva used it very well to bring people together and also develop a sense of self-respect. And he was able to use this to bring people together and remove a lot of the caste barriers, which has been a curse in India for many years.

DJ: Got it. And moving themes Pradeep, you also talk about, fascinatingly enough, the decline of the Mughal Empire and connect it to the role of the corporate office in an organization, you know, once again, connect the dots for us, how do you see the connect between the two and the role of the corporate office.

PC: Right. So when you look at the life of the last great Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb, his entire life he spent in the battleground. And if you see the empire at that point of time, it is almost a little larger than what India is today. So today, we should actually be acknowledging Aurangzeb as somebody who was probably one of the earlier kings to unite India geographically the way we note it, but you know what a controversial character he is. Within about 20 years after he died, that huge empire collapsed to what is smaller than even Old Delhi as today. And all his successors after that were not able to, in fact, there were so many of them, some of them I have not even mentioned in the book, but their names, otherwise, it looked just like a big laundry list of names, but one thing that comes across is, Aurangzeb himself, and I think that goes back to the Mughal tradition that we talked about, never looked at succession planning. And the consistent theme that you can see in the successors of Aurangzeb, Bahadur Shah, both of them, Akbar II, all of them, they were never kings who had a closer connect with the army, and they were also kings who never went and travelled to the different parts of their kingdom and developed a personal relationship with each of their revenue generators which were really the farmers, and the place was filled by people like Shivaji and others, the Ahoms and others who did that very well. So the big lesson for the corporate office in that way is, the wealth for the organization comes from the plants and the factories. and the number of times people from the corporate office can actually go to the plants and factories, the better it is. And in the decisions that take place, there is definitely going to be a lot of conflict between what the plant wants and what the location wants and what the corporate office wants, but the more companies are able to create a system where the plants have a greater say in the local systems, it is more likely that the organization will succeed for a longer time. And you have found this Deepak, there are other examples that I have not given in the book, the Cholas, the Chalukyas, the Vijayanagara kings, in all these examples, you find the death of an empire has been because kings have consistently stopped traveling, they have stopped going to their different locations, looking at their key revenue generators who are the farmers, building personal connections with them, checking on what they need and fulfilling those needs. Instead, they have been sitting in their corporate offices, having a good life and in that, they have become weak, they have not built a relationship or they have not earned the respect of the army, and that has cost them their kingdom in the long term.

DJ: So Pradeep as we wrap up, maybe a few rapid fire questions just to get your top-of-mind responses given you have been studying history for several years. Of the various personalities of the past, who inspires you the most personally?

PC: I think it would be Malik Ambar because he was a man who came into a new country with so many odds. And remember, he did not live in a global civilization where we knew the languages, it is easy, we have Google translate today, we have connections, we have social media, he had none of those, and he came as a slave, very impoverished, so economically, he was backward, educationally,

he was backward, and to be able to raise from that through just sheer personal resolve and determination, obviously, qualifications to be the king of a small state, and to hold his own against the Mughals, and the Mughals were so angry with him, Jahangir, for example, had a painting done of him standing on the world and shooting an arrow and decapitating Malik Ambar. But till the end of Jahangir's life, it remained just a painting. And at the end when Malik Ambar died, he did not die because of the Mughals, he died because of old age. So Malik Ambar, truly inspiring, and I am glad he is first on the list of my book.

DJ: Lovely. And for the listeners if they want to sort of read up on Malik Ambar apart from Wikipedia, any resources you would suggest?

PC: There are a couple of references I have given in the book, sadly there is not much.

DJ: Okay. A historical leader who offers lessons on what not to do?

PC: I think it would be Aurangzeb, and the biggest lesson from Aurangzeb we learn is, it does not seem to be so much about what he did, it seems to be more about how he did it. And one thing that comes across in Aurangzeb's life is, he had a very high standard which he lived for himself, and he wanted that high standard for others. But when that high standard did not happen for others, he seems to have been ruthless with them rather than patient with them.

DJ: Hmm. A ritual from the olden times that we could bring back and we could be served well if we did?

PC: I think the ability to bring the arts more into the workspace, into decision-making. The ability to look at how different people will have different points of view. It is not necessarily that one is right or wrong. The smarter kings seem to have done that fairly well through their council of ministers. And be open to new ideas, at least the ones that survive. Sorry Deepak, I just want to continue on this because one group that we have not looked at is the Ahoms of Assam and the battle of Saraighat and Lachit Borphukan. Northeast has generally been neglected and I am very happy that this made it into the final cut. Lachit was somebody who was able to use the geography, use the Brahmaputra river, use the physical phenomena of how when a heavier object is in water, automatically, pressure is created for smaller objects to gravitate around it, so using that principle, he was able to actually win over the Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat. And he was able to do this because he was open to new ideas and also the king, he worked in was open to new ideas. So this resilience of doing new things or being open to doing new things seems to have been a very critical reason for empires to survive, for generals to win battles.

DJ: Hmm. One figure from history whose life has not got adequate attention?

PC: Figure from history, it would be Sankardeva, but generally, the Northeast.

DJ: Hmm. And from the Northeast, any individual you would call out who has not, any leader who has not got...?

PC: I would say Lachit Borphukan. He was a remarkable general. Borphukan, by the way, means a general in Assam, Lachit is his name. Certainly somebody we should be praising more often.

DJ: And any resource you would recommend to dig in for him?

PC: Not much, I think there are a couple of resources I have given in the book but there was not much else. See this is a thing Deepak, at the end of the day when we look at resources today, we

have a very colonial mindset of looking for books. But the true tradition in Indian history was oral tradition. And we have lost a lot of these ballads, we have lost a lot of the poems, even Ahilyabai Holkar, what little we have is because, I think, a British author wrote a little bit about her. And he also collated oral histories that he had heard. So in that way, it is a little difficult which is why it becomes more profitable for us to have whatever little information we have. Even if it is just a Wikipedia page, you have that, but start asking the deeper question of what are the needs, how can I make this work for my performance.

DJ: And back to you Pradeep, last question, you have been a student of history all these years, one or two habits or behaviours you have picked up in your personal life that you attribute to being a student of history?

PC: One is about nothing is going to be permanent in life, everything changes. If today is a high, there is a good chance tomorrow will be a low and then there will be a high later. And the second has been the one that I have particularly been inspired by Serfoji II, we will have a lot of things that do not work around us but in the little part that works around us that we have control over, what can I do to make an impact.

DJ: Hmm. Pradeep, this podcast is titled Play To Potential. One thing I find fascinating is as I wrap up my conversations, I ask people to give me their take on what this phrase means to them and it is wonderful to see the breadth of perspectives and responses on this question. As you see the world, what does the term mean to you?

PC: If we can look at our own past and the past of others differently, we have enough data for us to change the present and live fully into the future so that we can recognize our own potential and live as best to our potential as possible Deepak.

DJ: Lovely Pradeep, thank you so much for making the time and for listeners who are curious about picking up the book, do you want to share a couple of links and resources for them to pick up the book?

PC: Leadership Shastra: Lessons from Indian History is available on Amazon. Yeah, I think that is good enough I guess.

DJ: Lovely. Pradeep, great having you on the show and all the best with the book and everything else that you do.

PC: Thank you very much Deepak.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening. If you liked this conversation and are into history, you might also like my conversations with Historians Ramachandra Guha and Vinay Sitapati. With Ram Guha, we speak about his insights on Gandhiji and what made him a great leader. Vinay has been on the podcast twice. Once to speak about his book Half Lion on Narasimha Rao. Second time to speak about his book Jugalbandi that traces the relationship between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and LK Advani. Irrespective of where you are on the political spectrum, hopefully you will find some of this relevant and thought provoking.

To know more about what is in the podcast archives and the nature of my advisory work, you can just tune into www.playtopotential.com.

Thank you and look forward to having you at one of the subsequent conversations at the podcast.

End of transcription

Nugget from Ashish Dhawan that is referenced: [What it takes to be a good PE Investor](#).

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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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