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Context to the nugget

The first few years often shape a big part of who we are. Nandan talks about the significance of having spent 6 years in a small town in shaping his independence and cultural adaptability. He also refers to the role of his family in terms of shaping his choices around social service.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I am curious about what the things those happen in early years are, which get baked, which drive people and which plays a role as they grow. So, if you had to reflect, are there three-four things that got baked into Nandan by the time Nandan turned 15 or 18, which still form a core part of who he is?

Nandan Nilekani (NN): Well, I think, there are three or four things which will stand out. One is, of course, that I have grown up to be a fairly independent person. I think the reason is that when I was 12 years old, my father had a job in Bangalore. He was a mill manger and then he had to leave in his career, he had to move to multiple small towns for short periods of time. My parents were concerned about my educational continuity, so I went to stay with my uncle in a small town called Dharwad, which is where I did my schooling and my undergrad, PUC, before I went to IIT. So, I spent about six years there, from the year 12 to 18. I think that at an early age being independent of my parents and essentially having to manage gave me a strong streak of both independence as well as ability to manage new situations. I went from school in Bangalore to school in Dharwad, big city to small town, parents to uncle. So, that was one thing which I think helped or rather shaped [me].

The second thing is that my family has been very public spirited. My father was very active, even in his old age, doing lots of social work. My uncle was a member of a party called Radical Humanist, which was started by M N Roy, so he was very idealistic. So, we grew up in a family where the conversations were always larger than about ourselves, about social change and all that. I think that was the second thing which has influenced me and which is also why I choose to spend the bulk of my time on public service.

The third thing, I think, was dealing with the transition of going from a small town to an IIT. Because in those days it's not true today but '80s, '70s, most of the kids who went to IIT were from urban India. They had gone to the top schools either in Delhi or Mumbai or wherever and they would go to some Agarwal Class and join IIT, and I didn't do any of that. So, for me, it was a culture shock, going from a small town to IIT Mumbai. Again, understanding how that worked and getting acclimatized was another big learning experience.

Finally, I think the experience I got at IIT was on how to navigate in some sense, because I was active in some social activities, I was a general secretary, I was active in cultural activities. So, I learned how to work with diverse people and get things done. I think all these have been shaping influences.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I just find it fascinating to observe how much of who we are often gets formed in the first 15-20 years. Something very similar came up in my conversation with Vijay Amritraj the tennis legend. When I asked him about how he transitioned from a frame of achievement to giving back given his role as Ambassador of peace and through the Vijay Amritraj Foundation, he actually traced it back to the notion of paying it forward that got baked when he saw his father and uncle deal with situations around them.

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End of nugget transcription

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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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