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Context to the nugget

We live in a world where professions are being threatened and jobs that existed yesterday may not exist tomorrow. Atul talks about how the world of photography has been democratized with the penetration of mobile phones with good cameras. He shares his insights on how one could think about being relevant in these changing times.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): In a creative field, what does excellence mean? When do you stop? When do you know that you have done enough to really get the best shot possible for a single product or whatever the case might be? How do you draw the line?

Atul Kasbekar (AK): I mean, on a commercial job, at the point where the client is happy and you are happy. You need to be professional enough to make sure it doesn't really leave your door until you know you have delivered it over a certain line. And then, I guess that absolutely perfect shot, any photographer will tell you that they haven't done that many in their life, that they know that they just can't improve it. That's always open to a subjective kind of conversation. So, you need to know that you have done your absolute best. Otherwise, you won't last very long.

DJ: In a lot of ways, if I look at the corporate world, the digital wave has really changed the way a lot of leaders lead, and a lot of leaders stay up to date with what's going on. How has that influenced success in your field of work? The reason I ask is, earlier, you had to get the picture right. Now, I think the digital post-production leaves you with a lot of opportunity to make amends for mistakes that might have been made. So, how does that work for you?

AK: At a technical level, what has happened is most of the photography is now on the computer. So, let's say, the depth of knowledge that I had in lighting cars, which is curved sheet metal and curved glass extremely difficult to get right nobody is doing that anymore. The car is generated on a computer and once that's done, it can be twisted, turned in any way you want, lit any way you want, placed wherever you want. You don't even need to take the car there. So, if you have some stunning background plates from wherever, then you are done. Just place the car. So, now, it's the guy on the computer who has generated the car and then each turn, magnification, whatever is easy enough to sort out.

You don't want to be the last guy selling horse carriages when the car dealerships have arrived. That's technology, innovation; it's a constant, it's going to go on. I have maintained this from day one: your knowledge in photography or your expertise in photography will depend greatly on how much you read and immerse yourself in all the arts. And you are just generally aware and you are a

sponge and you accumulate and assimilate. You should have a keen interest in all the other arts, in fine arts, culture, cuisine, architecture, whatever it is. Graphic design, you need not know how to design but you can appreciate good from great.

If I am doing a lecture or something, I will ask them, how many of you been to this place? Few hands will go up. Did any of you visit this museum? They have no clue. Or very rarely is there. Even if you say something like London, did you get away from Oxford Street? Did you go to Tate, wherever? Even if you went to shop, did you go to, let's say, Portobello Road as opposed to the standard nonsense that everybody does. No problem, but after you have done that. If you are in the arts, you need to be aware of all the other arts. So, similarly, when it comes to photography, there is certain, I like to call it, democratization of a medium, and it's become massively accessible to everybody. So, on a given day, your doctor could take a world-class photo and by himself aided with some filters, apps, whatever it is, that photo is unbelievable. Point is can he do that time and time again and day after day? Then, I guess you would be a great professional. But why I say this medium has become so democratic is because on a given day that doctor can take a great picture. On no day can you either prescribe medicine for one of his patients nor can you perform a heart surgery. Forget it! That ain't happening, digital or no digital. On a given day, you can't design that building but your architect can take a world-class picture. So, to some extent, not cheapened, that's not the right word, but '*haan, yaar, main bhi kar sakta hoon*'.

DJ: True, it's made it accessible. If I were to use a metaphor from the sporting world. I remember reading an article which talks about the difference between Usain Bolt and Michael Phelps. It says that not everybody is a swimmer but everybody can run. So, that makes him that much of a bigger deal because he is competing in a completely democratized sport. So, on some level, everybody with a phone — that's probably taking it too far but everyone with a decent camera...

AK: No, no. James Cameron just said that: 'If you have a phone camera with video in it, you are now a director. Go, make a film.'

DJ: But actually, when you look at people who've managed to sustain greatness over a period of time, what have they done to stay relevant and continue the excellence over a period of time?

AK: I love the word 'relevance'. I am glad you used it. I think hats off to people who have managed to do that in their careers for long. I mean, for example, whatever criticism anyone does of Mr Bachchan, I am a huge admirer. And I am a huge admirer just from the fact that he wakes up every day and he thinks to himself, 'this is a new day, it's a new fight, *kal tak jo kiya hain bhool jao, aaj kya kiya hai batao*' and onward ho! I don't know when the man sleeps, but he still writes his blog and he will date it and he will number it, and it's incredible! And he has stayed relevant, and he is getting paid a lot of money, and more power to him, whether to endorse something or whether to whatever.

So, I think, if you can do that over a sustained period of time it is only because of a couple of things. I think, one is, the fear that you will be number four, five, eight or forgotten. And that's traumatic to most. So, then, you work extra hard. I guess, it's like Muhammad Ali wearing a top hat and tails and walking down Trafalgar Square the day before he was fighting Henry Cooper and made a poem in his Ali-esque way, which I forget, but basically saying that Cooper will fall in four. Now, are you insane? Black man in the '60s walking up and down Trafalgar Square. '*Tere desh mein aake keh raha hoon ki tere champion ko haraunga woh bhi kis round mein*'. You know, are you completely mad? And this is without security, couple of his boys. I am amazed that he didn't get killed. Now, that puts incredible pressure to work that much harder and do a few more pushups or whatever it is to back that claim,

because you are going to fall in a pile of dung if you don't back that. Amazing! So, I guess it's a fear of failure or the fear of irrelevance that would drive most people.

I was just talking a couple of days ago about film directors. Look at Clint Eastwood. I mean, somewhere in his 80s and we're talking Dirty Harry who made some utterly time-pass Westerns in his time. I never had any great respect for him then, in his heyday as an actor. But man, I will touch his feet if I meet him now! Because I mean, oh my god! A, as an actor and b, as a director, what has he done? You cannot be doing 'American Sniper' at 80. He is 80 something. It's a really complicated film, on location and bombed out areas and this is like hectic. And you know, if you have been in a film shoot, you know how difficult it is what he has done. And he is doing that at 80-something. He is not saying *haan, yaar*, what I have done is enough for a lifetime achievement in whatever the hell I want it to be. And let's now stop. Incredible!

Now there are directors out here who have been directing since they were, I suppose, in their late 20s, early 30s, massively successful in their time and can't put a movie together and you are 60 something or early 60s. What went wrong? Did you just sit on your laurels and say, oh yes, that movie of mine. Of course, terrific film! Then, what? It's done, it's over, and it's gone. Now, after we got the National Award for 'Neerja,' I told myself we are not discussing this again. It's over, it's done, and it's gone, *aage badho*. Now, somewhere, if we've got 10 films and they do a retrospective, of course, it will come up and someone might ask for an anecdote from it. That's fine, but there is nothing to crow about anymore. It's done, it's gone, move on. And I just think that with the absolute assault every day, the amount of information in every form that's coming at you, the time to mull and reminisce on it is like reduced, if it's there any way. If you even see something like deaths. People die just as surely as they will be born. And if you notice, now, life moves on after a death, any death, much faster than it ever did. I mean, the people who have lost their own are back at work in like, two days. It's not like relatives are hanging for 10 days like they used to. There is no time.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Two takeaways for me here. First is the point Atul makes about have a wide range of interest in art if you are a photographer. I guess it is a broader point that is arguably relevant in the digital world in general where value is being added at the intersection of multiple disciplines. I recently read the book by Dan Pink - A Whole New Mind - Why Right Brainers will rule the future which talks to a similar theme. Very often, the commonly pursued disciplines like Engineering, Accounting, and Medicine nurture the left brain but don't do much with the right brain. In a digital world, how we cultivate that side of us will start becoming more and more important. In an earlier conversation, one of my guests Abhijit Bhaduri makes the point about leaders in the digital world reading across disciplines and cultivating a range of interests. If this is of interest, do look up Nugget 7.07 with Abhijit Bhaduri. The second takeaway was the notion of waking up each day and metaphorically speaking, starting with a clean slate. Interestingly enough the same theme came up in my chat with my last podcast guest Nandan Nilekani. When I asked him about how he has reinvented himself across different situations, he mentioned he never looks back when he moves from one canvas to another. It is a new battle that needs to be fought afresh.

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End of nugget transcription

Podcast Transcript [12.04 Atul Kasbekar - Staying relevant over the long term](#)

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Staying relevant: How do we stay relevant as we go through our journey is something that keeps a lot of us awake. This is both in the context of refreshing and rejuvenating ourselves over time and also ensuring that our skills and capabilities are fit for purpose in the world we live in and the future of work. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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

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Atul Kasbekar - Nuggets

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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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