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Context to the nugget

Vinay speaks about how RSS wires up its members in a certain way through the various things it does as an organization. He likens it to McKinsey, the Consulting firm in the way the firm installs a certain Operating System which often endures (I can vouch for it as an alumnus) in the way we think and act long after we have left the organization.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): 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?

Vinay Sitapati (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 swayamsevaks 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.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: As a proud McKinsey alumnus, I should 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. Thank you for reading. For more please visit playtopotential.com.

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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