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Context to the nugget

Vinay speaks about how the RSS and BJP use the interpretation of history to create a certain purpose for the institution which is beyond the individual. He also speaks about some of the institutional norms that ensure that the organization stays cohesive and there isn't unnecessary "chatter". He also uses the term "sulking on mute" to denote how leaders would disagree yet commit to a chosen path putting the institutional interests ahead of theirs.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (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.

Vinay Sitapati (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 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-ghus 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 going to 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 Subramaniam 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 circumstance 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: When we think about resilience, we often have this mental image of a warrior in front of us. To recollect a scene from the movie Independence Day that came out in 1996 where the President of USA played by Bill Pullman says in his rallying speech "We will not go quietly into the night, we will not vanish without a fight". That's often the visual people have when they think of resilience.

But in my limited experience, I notice that individual resilience or institutional resilience often feels quite different. Leaders know that they can't win every battle. They ensure that they live another day to fight the good fight. Needless to say, this is a function of the culture of the organization and the context. This is something that comes up in Vinay's (*VS EP1*) earlier book as well "Half Lion" where he profiles Narasimha Rao and the key attribute he talks about is how Narasimha Rao wielded silence as a strategic weapon to have his way.

VS EP1: "The stereotype of NR was analysis from paralysis, and the joke was NR knew that how to be silent in 10 languages and I think that misses something at the core of NR that he was the man of action but he was also acutely aware that as the book points out he lack power so his genius was where to act under which political cover and when he lack political cover he would withdraw and it's a fine art because most politicians you would argue only care about survival NR cared about survival but he also cared about other things."

DJ: I notice that a lot of Type A leaders, who experience Wave 1 success in their careers for the first 10-15 years, often hit a hidden glass ceiling when they get to a CXO type position. They keep winning in their respective functions and they then show up at a playground where they face players that are as good as or better than them. And this playground requires a very different style of competitiveness and temperament. And picking which battles you fight and learning to sulk on mute is a super-power for a long innings.

End of nugget transcription

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

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Vinay Sitapati - Nuggets

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- 66.01 Vinay Sitapati - The uniqueness of the Advani-Vajpayee relationship
- 66.02 Vinay Sitapati - Managing transitions when power flips
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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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