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Context to the nugget

Vinay speaks about some of the nuances involved in the way Advani and Vajpayee handled their personal and professional relationship. He speaks about how they often put the Hindu Nationalist agenda (as cultivated given their formative years in the RSS) might have acted as a glue that might have held them together over the long term despite their differences.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other theme I wanted to explore coming back to the jugalbandi Vinay is how they balanced their friendship and hierarchy both in private and public life. If I sort of marry it to a corporate context, it's not a like to like example, but sometimes you are a part of a leadership team of 8-10 people, you become the CEO, you still have relationships. How do you assume power while keeping your friendship, while distancing yourself and a lot of people struggle with that tightrope of how do you manage the professional relationship and the private relationship? So, what can we learn from these two on how we manage that?

Vinay Sitapati (VS): So, I think that it is as difficult as well as everyone else. So, there is no magic potion here. Their relationship did suffer for example when they were in government between 1998 and 2004 and Vajpayee was Prime Minister and Advani naturally expected to be his number 2. But Vajpayee didn't think much of Advani as a minister. He thought a lot about Advani as a party leader, but he didn't think Advani had the chops to run government. So, he had his Principal Secretary, Brajesh Mishra who he considered in many ways his number 2. And that relationship frayed, the families also didn't get along especially during this period so there's a lot of tension there. So, I don't want to alight that, I don't want to say that doesn't exist. The puzzle for them is nonetheless they stay together and it does remind me since you use the marriage example of one of those marriages where the husband and wife absolutely don't like each other. They find it hard, there's tension, there's competition nonetheless they never divorce and you will find them if you go for a walk in a park, you will find some of these old couples snapping at each other. But nonetheless they are happy to go back home together hand in hand. I think Vajpayee and Advani were like that. And ultimately, I think, that glue that held them together despite the problems you mentioned was ideology, that both of them were Hindu nationalists and they felt that if they split it would go against everything, they learned in their either you can call it indoctrination or their socialisation. I think there is something to that.

DJ: The other piece I wanted to get to in the book you talk about the elections, 1984 elections. And it so turns out that I was living in Gwalior at that point in time. I spent four years 1984 to 1988 so I saw the election between Madhava Rao Scindia and Vajpayee live. So, the people going around in vans canvassing and the billboards and so on. And page 138 you say post losing that election you say that

Advani was developing a reputation of being a hardliner, it was a reputation that Vajpayee was happy to nurture as a foil to his own moderation. They could play both the instruments that Hindu nationalism needed while still allowing him to pick the tune. So, I love the language I must say. [Say more here.](#)

VS: Well, what... I found... when you study personalities there are one or two deep desires that characters have and lot of their life is spent living up to that. So, the key to understanding Vajpayee was that at the age of 34 he becomes a party MP in 1957 for the Jana Sangh, which is a precursor of the BJP, he also becomes a leader of his party in the Lok Sabha and from 1957 all the way till I think 2007, 2008, he was a constant presence in Parliament, it's like 50 years. What he loved more than anything else is speaking for his party in Parliament, and he was profoundly influenced by Nehru for being this... so his idea of India was parliament. And he had no problem and no competition with anyone who ran the party, he had no problem. He was very, very sensitive that nobody else should be the media face of the BJP, and nobody else should be the parliamentary face. When that happened, he cut them aside. The reason why Vajpayee-Advani jugalbandi worked was that Advani was under-confident, he didn't consider himself a good speaker and all of you who have seen him on TV would agree with that view, and he is a diffident character. He was much more comfortable letting Vajpayee steal the limelight, he didn't really want it. The only time he sort of crossed that Lakshman rekha in their relationship was during the rath yatra in September 1990. Other than that, he really didn't want the spotlight. And I think that's a very good reason why this relationship worked that there was professional compatibility. This is also the compatibility required for Hindu nationalism, which is both a movement on the ground where you need an Advani like figure or an Amit Shah like figure as well as a movement that needs to win elections where you need a Modi right now or you need a Vajpayee back then. So, in that sense there was a professional jugalbandi that was very happy. What Vajpayee does think is that ultimately, he will call the shots and we see very soon after between 1986 and 1995 that's not the case. And that's not the case because Advani realises that while he owes a loyalty to Vajpayee, he owes a higher loyalty to the Hindu nationalist cadre and that cadre is going in a very different direction during this period.

DJ: Got it. The other piece coming back to the organisation, the one piece that comes through is the pulls and pressures in the RSS and BJP at various points in time as the as the country evolves. What I was curious about Vinay was how do you drive an organisational culture when you have got several participants tugging at it from different directions. You have got choices to make in terms of what do you stay, what do you keep fixed and what do you evolve? So, can you talk a little bit about your analysis around how RSS thought about keeping the core while evolving as the sentiment changes?

VS: It's a good question Deepak, because one of the conclusions I come from this book is that the RSS doesn't always win. So, RSS is not always in command. There isn't a clear strategy through which they win every time. There were many aspects of what the BJP was doing when they were in power the first time that the RSS didn't like and they protested and they lost; Vajpayee was able to stare them down. There were some others for example, Vajpayee wanted to sack Narendra Modi in April 2002 after the riots, the RSS said no, the cadre said no, and Advani said no and Vajpayee had to back down. So, I would say that the way to think about that relationship of give and take is not linear and not based on these are the cores because there were some cores of... one would argue that sacking Modi was a core liberal belief on Vajpayee but he stood down on that. One could argue that not supporting the destruction of Babri Masjid was a core liberal belief of Vajpayee but he stood down on that. One could argue that when it came to the RSS building a Ram Temple at Ayodhya, which is what Modi has now been able to do is a core belief but Vajpayee refused to do it from 1998 to 2004. So, on that I would say it's a little more complex give and take. The puzzle as I keep coming to is why do they still not split? Why does the RSS not back some other party? Why doesn't Vajpayee leave and start another party, which is standard in any other political party in India. And the answer to

that is a sense that that would mean breaking the family. So, to answer your question, I don't think there's a linear answer to that question. It's a messy give and take based on the conditions, the personalities, etc. etc.

DJ: Got it. Fair, point taken Vinay. Coming to the individual versus the collective, you know, the other piece that struck me as I read the book was at various points in time you speak about the organisation's desire to move in a certain direction, but that clashes with what that individual stands for and what that individual believes in. What can we learn about how Vajpayee and Advani walked the tightrope of staying independent to their individual beliefs while conforming to the organisation beliefs? So, whenever that road diverged, you have touched upon it already in some of the pieces but I was curious about how do you stay independent yet loyal especially when they start pointing in slightly different directions.

VS: I think that in that to answer your question on that Deepak, Vajpayee and Advani may not be the best examples because when push came to shove, they were organisational men. At key moments when this precisely this question of your individual principles, your individual conscience versus ultimately what the movement decided, the movement tended to win, it tended to there were some exceptions, but I would say that... that yeah, so, I would. So, in that sense I don't know they are the best example of standing your ground while still working within an organisation.

DJ: And would you have a view on why that might be the case? Why they eventually sort of conceded to the organisational direction?

VS: I think it's not a... in a technical sense it is not a liberal worldview and when I use the word liberal, I mean focused on individual rights that the individual at the centre of the belief system, the RSS doesn't have that, Hinduism doesn't have that. Frankly, India doesn't have that. So, the RSS does not, in fact, in anything the RSS feels that the individual ego goes against organisational outcomes, group-based outcomes. So, you know, I mean in western cultures, in western organisations... more entrepreneurial start-up cultures you do see individuals as very important because they are a creative font, sometimes they make the right decisions. I don't think that was the RSS view that's the BJP view and I do think that's a failing but on the other hand they have stayed united. So, you can pick which one you want.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: While this tells us something about Vajpayee and Advani and how they handled the relationship, I guess there is something to be said about how one creates a culture where the leaders of the organization put the collective agenda ahead of their individual agendas when push comes to shove.

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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