

Trains, Planes, & Vishwanathan Anand

The Grounding Silence...

10 Jan, 8 pm. “The constellation right over your head is [Orion](#). The only constellation clearly visible from all corners of earth. January is the best month to observe it in the northern hemisphere”, the spectacled guy educated me. “What about that planet?” I asked, “that’s Venus, right?” “No, it’s not,” he explained, “Venus is in an inner orbit planet; therefore, it is detectable only in the late evening hours. The one you are looking at is Jupiter. On a clear night, you can even make out three of its moons with a simple telescope.” “And is that [Proxima Centauri](#), our closest cosmic neighbor?” I quipped. “No,” he patiently elaborated again, “Proxima Centauri can be spotted only in the southern hemisphere. The one you see is [Sirius](#), the brightest star in the night sky.”



I was charmed by these free lessons in stargazing, considering my tutor was not even an amateur astronomer. Instead, he was the first recipient of [Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna](#) award in 1992 and the first sportsperson to receive [Padma Vibhushan](#) in 2007. One of the sharpest minds on our planet, the five-time world chess champion—[Vishwanathan Anand](#). I marveled at his knowledge of the sky and touch of the ground, as we entered the club house and navigated through the blinding flashes of cameras.

An hour earlier. Within minutes of picking up Vishy from the hotel lobby, I realized that we shared something in common: both of us learned the game of chess at the tender age of 6. Except, he learned it the conventional style; I learned in my proprietary style—the carom way.

. Perhaps that’s the only trick that I can teach the champion; the grandmaster seemed to have a handle on most other things that matter—both on and off the chess board.

It was a long drive. The venue was a club house in the outskirts. The audience was going to be the young business leaders of Pune. I was to moderate the session. It was a daunting task. How does one go about interviewing a star who has brains the size of a football field? It would be much easier to just play a game of chess with him. At least the ordeal would be over in two minutes! I needed to prepare for the forthcoming challenge. The intention was to derive benefit from a sneak preview of Vishy during our long drive. Contrary to my preconceived notion, Vishy was not a carom player. Simple. He played carom quickly, chess slowly as his chess moves. Amongst

the insights that rolled out, the following twin tales stirred my emotional chords...

“1989: Shortly after I achieved grandmaster status in 1988, I was traveling in a train in Kerala. An elderly gentleman sitting in the opposite seat started chatting with me. He asked me “What do you do?” “I play chess,” I stated. He said, “Good, but what exactly do you do professionally?” “Play chess,” I politely repeated. The old man didn’t get it at first. Then once he understood, he tried to dissuade me on my choice of profession, advising me how impractical it is to pursue such unrealistic career options. After much cajoling, when he realized that I was steadfast in my thought process, he concluded with a resigned laughter... “Just remember, young man, you can’t make good money in chess unless you are Vishwanathan Anand!”

“2012: A couple of years back I was at Hyderabad Airport, walking along the security screening queue. There was a man moving parallel to me by the adjacent screening belt. He stared at me repeatedly. As I collected my carry-on from the screening belt, the onlooker kept looking, desperately trying to place me. He finally smiled, walked over and shook my hand enthusiastically “Your last movie was great. I really liked it!”

The stories were simple but elegantly summarized the prevailing prejudices in our society. The man in the train encountered a plain-looking fellow traveler and generalized that he must be just another ordinary being of limited talent. His behavior was not much different than how mainstream judges any stranger—a *commoner unless proven otherwise*. Interestingly, the reaction of the man at the airport was the exact reverse. To him, a celebrity is defined by how recognizable the outward appearance is. Like many of us, his definition of stardom is someone – *who portrays larger-than-life image on the silver screen*.

Vishy’s narration had a strong emotive resonance. The ease with which he could relate to mainstream mindsets had transformed him into a commoner I could connect to. It reassured me that interviewing him will be a cake walk. The twin anecdotes were still ringing in my head as we arrived at the venue, paused for a short stargazing tutorial, and walked over to the clubhouse.

We entered the banqueting hall, eased into the podium chairs as I hosted the coffee-with-Vishy game. The interview was a breeze. His talk captivated the audience as we learned about his life—his success and failures, his allies and rivals, his values and hobbies, his wife and son, and his laughter and tears. The engaging interaction continued as I drove him back later in the night—his favorite movies, TV serials, authors, friends, weekends, vacations etc.

His book was wide open; however, my mind kept struggling to sort out one missing chapter in his manuscript. Then right before we reached the hotel, I couldn’t resist popping the question “Did you ever reveal your true identity to the train or airport fellow?” His answer was on the anticipated lines “They never asked!” Sometimes, it is not the soaring words but the grounding silence that epitomizes a leader’s glory...