

The Clutch - Part 1

Too sudden and steep...

Sunday, May 19th. *I am writing from an unusual place—Room 610, Ruby Hall Hospital. It is important I pen this experience. But, I am unable to process my thoughts. I have an hour or two before I go downhill again. Tomorrow is a big day. My wife is telling me not to think about it. It will attract negative energies of the universe. So, whatever happens I need to deal with it and write about it later. For now, this paragraph will suffice. It works as a prelude to another blog that I had been working on recently. It is uncanny how my unpublished work has captured the essence of my current predicament. So, here it goes.*

Every life comes with its share of downs. Fortunately, life itself prepares us to handle the lows. The challenge, however, comes when the fall is too sudden and steep. From where should we draw comfort when faced with a calamity such as a dramatic financial loss, a spectacular fall from grace, or perhaps, a terrible disease? This blog is an attempt to search for the ‘clutch’ when something precious is snatched away from us.

Rajat Gupta: Way before Indra Nooyi, Satya Nadella, and Sunder Pichai made India proud, there was Rajat Gupta—the first foreign-born head of the world’s number one consulting firm, McKinsey. He served on the boards of Goldman Sachs, P&G, American Airlines, was an advisor to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, UN World Fund, founded the Indian School of Business (ISB), was a regular at Davos, rubbed shoulders with the world’s richest, and shared podiums with the heads of nations from east to west!

Then, one fine fall day of Oct 24, 2012, everything was seized away from him. In the fallout of 2009 economic meltdown, Rajat was convicted of insider trading on Wall Street. He became the first (and the only) high-profile public figure to spend two years in the U.S. prison, while being officially castigated by the very institutions that once showered him with accolades and placed him on the highest pedestal.

This is not how fairy tales end. This is the stuff for tabloids. And last month, I was given the dubious privilege. One that of moderating a session with Rajat

Gupta in front of business leaders of Pune in a talk show setting.

It was a daunting ask for a commoner like me. How does one interact with the Alumni of IIT and Harvard—people with brains the size of a football field? To prepare, I read his recent book—*Mind without Fear*. I expected it to be heavy, complex like the one you will expect from high-end consultants. To my surprise, it was smooth and easy—as in Rajat’s words—the primary audience he had in his mind were his grandchildren.



Apr 12, 2019. I decided to break the ice with Rajat before our session at JW Marriot, Pune. He arrived late, visibly exhausted from his prior commitments.

He was dressed in a wrinkled shirt, half-sleeves peeping out of his vest. His voice had a soft, whisper-like texture, almost that of a person tired of talking. I barely got minutes to gauge his comfort zone. He had no hang-ups, I was given the free rein for the interview. Rajat then headed to the restroom to wash his face and that was all the preparation he needed. That, and a peg of single malt on his coffee table during the interview.

As we walked to the podium, I decided to shy away from Rajat’s much-publicized trial. He had spoken enough on the subject, on and off the book. My hour-long interview was not going to prove his guilt or innocence. Instead, I chose to put Rajat in a different kind of a witness stand, one that of a fellow business leader.

All of us have some guiding principles, so does Rajat. In his book, his personal leadership style has been captured by one of his friends, as eight laws of Rajat Gupta:

1. If someone else wants to do it, let him.
2. The softer you blow your own trumpet, the louder it will sound.
3. Being there is 90% of the game.
4. If you have 10 problems. Ignore them, nine will go away.
5. There is no such thing as too much work, or too little time.
6. You can't push the noodle, you have to find a right angle and pull.
7. Listening takes a lot less energy.
8. When in doubt, invite them home.

As the session began, I delved into his eight laws. How much they helped him climb, and perhaps also led to his fall. After all, we are a sum total of our beliefs. When we dissect our beliefs, our true colours come shining through. Some places I cornered him, some places he stumped me, other places he circumvented me.

The audience had their share of fireworks, everyone drew their own conclusions. From my perspective, I was uninterested in judging him. My objective was to discover the 'clutch' that had held him steady, particularly during his fall. Towards the end of the interview, I discovered his clutch. It came out loud and clear during his narration of the two years behind bars.

The session came to the end. I gave him a dignified closure. To my disappointment, Rajat didn't stay back for interactions with me or the audience. There was no vibrant thank you either. I felt his goodbye to me was cut and dry. On my way back, I wondered about his coldness. Maybe because he had three back-to-back sessions in Delhi the next day? Maybe he felt I didn't give him a fair chance to prove his innocence in the interaction? Maybe it was just in my mind? By the time I reached home, I was startled by a realization—there was one more 'clutch' that Rajat had been trying to hold on to!

When things go dramatically wrong, humans seek solace in not one, but two clutches. Based on their life experiences, the readers are welcome to take a shot at naming these two clutches.

I am fully recovered now, hale and hearty, and will be discharged from the hospital tomorrow (May 25). Once I have caught up with work, I will share my

personal experience in a follow-up blog.