

VIKRAM KIRLOSKAR 1958-2022 A friendship of the kind that transcended all disagreement

A Dosti With Differences



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My friend Vikram Kirloskar, vice-chairman and animating spirit behind Kirloskar-Toyota, died last week.

Vikram and I disagreed about many things, from politics to pandemics. What originally connected us was a shared passion for food and wine. As Vikram said when we last had dinner — after flying to Jaipur to host an incredible meal for us — ours was a friendship based on the really important things in life. As often with Vikram, it was said with his tongue firmly in his cheek, and as I am sure he knew well, we also had the kind of emotional bond that transcends all disagreement.

In many ways, this is one of main things I value the most about having grown up in India. Deep friendships in India tend to be post-ideological, in the almost physical sense of having traversed the ideological space before you get there, after calling each other names, insulting their intelligence and assigning labels that will

stick with us for life — as in 'Ei sala communister bacha!', for those who know some Bengali.

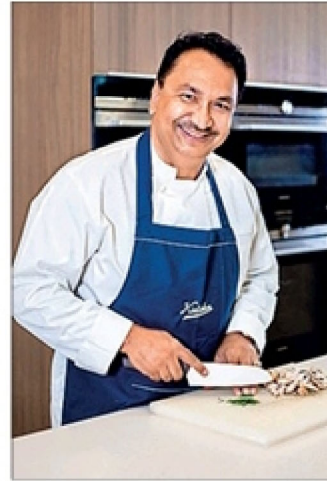
We don't agree to disagree because the battle will go on. We will keep coming back to the ways in which the other is wrongheaded and stubborn to boot, to tease and to poke fun — but ultimately as a way of priming the warmth that undergirds the relationship.

We purposely violate the norms of polite conversation to establish that we can, that the relationship has enough in it that we can get away with the insults. With Vikram and his equally warm and affectionate wife, Geetanjali, that was always clear — conversation was always part-banter, even when the topic was dead serious, with Geetanjali vainly trying to bring some order into our wayward chatter.

Industrious, Not Pompous

But there was something else about Vikram that I also admired very much. At a time when economic success all too often turns into public bombast — think, for example, about a prominent electric car manufacturer who not only has an opinion about everything but also feels obliged to throw them at the world — Vikram eschewed public prominence to the point where most people don't know just how forward-looking he was as an industrialist.

I remember him blandly telling us that his Toyota factory was close to



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Always on the cutting-edge

being carbon-neutral — it achieved 100% neutrality right after that — and proceeding to explain how it was not that hard. That was Vikram. It was also Vikram to explain patiently that in the Indian context, where power generation relies heavily on fossil fuels, hybrids might be more carbon-saving than fully electric vehicles — he was, after all, an MIT-trained mechanical engineer — which opened up a new line of thought for me.

And it was very Vikram to tell us in the context of a discussion of labor costs in India that he thought he could replace 75% of the workforce by automatising and save money, but it didn't seem to make sense in the social context, a thought we heartily endorsed.

Unlike so many business people of prominence today, he didn't feel that

he needed to wear his social conscience on his sleeve, partly because being considerate and gracious came so naturally to him that it would not have occurred to him take credit for it.

There were things he did take credit for — his and Geetanjali's collection of modern Indian art, for one. They were always excited about new artists they had discovered, and the challenge of finding wall space in their beautiful (but not enormous) house in Bengaluru for their growing collection. He himself was an accomplished artist and his daughter Manasi, who studied art at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), even more so.

Pairing Larder With Cellar

And, finally, food and wine. He would always start by taking me to see his collection of wine bottles, probably one of the best in India. The times when we stayed with them, there would then be a moment when Vikram would lay out the wine plan for the day — this white for the late afternoon, that red for dinner and so on.

And the menu. The home-made chaat with the afternoon tea, the different types of rotis and bhakris for dinner and so on. Vikram was a serious cook, and I remember him telling me about a Kashmiri dish of ground lamb, cooked with grated tart green apples, hing and cardamom that he liked to make. I long had a plan of trying it out and, before that, getting Vikram to spell out the exact recipe. Now I won't, I guess. I will miss him.

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