



## MR. KARAN THAPAR

Indian Journalist, News Presenter and Interviewer

Taken by the Editorial Board

**YT: You were the president of the Cambridge Union, which is a society focusing towards debating and free speech. In contemporary times, where importance is being given to discussion of different opinions, how vital are such institutions in upholding these values?**

**KT:** The Cambridge Union is over 200 years old. Obviously, debating societies are ipso-facto dedicated and predicated upon free speech and freethinking, but at the end, it is a debating society, and that is its main function. It is about at least 15 years older than its Oxford junior equivalent, and what it does is invite people to discuss subjects so that young college students, who have an interest in debating are able to do so.

Often when you're debating, you are asked to propose or oppose a motion, it is not necessarily your personal belief and your personal opinion. You're simply arguing a case. It is the fun of debating that draws people to the Union, and you debate regardless of whether you personally believe it or not. You're not actually pronouncing to the world your personal beliefs. It may be, and they may well on some occasions be the case, but that is not always the case in any debating society anywhere in the world.

**YT: When you had been offered a job at the Times, you decided to discontinue D.Phil at Oxford University. Having studied an array of subjects at graduate and undergraduate level, what drew you to take up journalism, when you could have easily pursued more lucrative careers?**

**KT:** I stopped my D. Phil at Oxford because I was offered a job by the Times, and I knew if I didn't take up the job that the Times was offering, they wouldn't keep it open for me. At the time I thought, wrongly as it turned out, that I would be able to finish writing up my D. Phil thesis but obviously that was wrong. My job took over my time, and as months turned into years, my distancing from the D. Phil thesis also meant that my interest in finishing it had begun to diminish. Then you get so taken up in your career that you no longer think of yourself as a D. Phil student or an academic. You become more journalistic in your thinking, attitude and aptitude and less scholarly. Then, you suddenly discover one day, three-four years down the road, that you have changed and become a different person. The importance of finishing a thesis that was so prominent and predominant in your life four years earlier, no longer is and that is what really

happens. I suppose the truth is that events and opportunities overtook me.

**YT: Journalism, as a profession, has been facing criticism as a section of the population believes that it has begun enforcing its opinion on the general public. Is there any truth in this perception? If there is, what do you think is the reason behind it and how can constructive change be brought about?**

KT: This depends upon which journalist you're talking about, or which paper you're talking about. I don't think a single broad sweeping statement is true for every paper and every journalist, so that is the first point to make. Secondly, by and large, news reports tend to be objective in the sense that the facts they're citing are truthful and not made up. But the facts they cite may be selective and that is another matter because sometimes, the full compendium of facts make a different impression to the one that you choose to pick upon. So, selectivity can also introduce bias, but that is not necessarily the same as being untruthful or making things up; that is a second sort of problem.

But if opinions come through in op-ed pages, then that is perfectly understandable because that is what op-ed pages are meant for. By and large, I would be reluctant to come up with a general sweeping statement to brush all journalism aside because that would be wrong, it would be mistaken and fully misleading.

**YT: You returned to India in 1991 and have since interviewed a host of politicians and continue to do so even today. Over these 20 years, have you noticed any particular change in the nature of politicians towards the press and media?**

KT: Well, over the years that I have been interviewing politicians, I think they've become savvier. They're more aware, and they're also better instructed by their colleagues on how to handle interviews and perhaps specifically, how to handle difficult and aggressive interviews. Therefore, no longer do you have politicians like one did in the 80s, who would say, time and time again, 'Don't say anything about Rajiv Gandhi!', which is a very silly

and shallow way of handling questions about the Prime Minister. Today, they're infinitely more thoughtful about their response.

However, and this is very important, they've acquired a new bad habit, which wasn't so prevalent in the 80s and 90s or even the early 2000s. That bad habit is to refuse to give interviews to people who you think will give you a tough time. The challenge of handling that interview is altogether done away with, because you've already decided that you won't give them an interview and that is a terrible practice because this is just contempt for people trying to hold you to account; it suggests also, subliminally, that you don't know how to respond to the questions they ask. It also shows that you're not willing to be made accountable, which politicians should and must be.

**YT: You interview people from many different domains and fields of expertise which range from economics to biology and in order to question them, you have to be as adept at the subject as them. How do you prepare for the interviews, particularly those which do not fall within your area of knowledge?**

KT: 90 per cent, if not all of the interviews I do, do not fall within my area of knowledge; that would be the case with any interviewer on any television channel, and what you have to do is to research, reasonably comprehensively and widely. What you need to do after that is discuss the structural strategy of the interview with your colleagues, and then devise questions that ensure that you get in that direction. A lot is learnt through experience and understanding of the task that you're doing. But I would say, the most important thing for any interviewer is to know the subject fairly well and to have read reasonably comprehensively around it. You are an interviewer and you can never know as much as the people you're interviewing. They're experts, you're not, and you must bear that in mind. You must've done a certain amount of strategic structured reading, so that you're aware of what they're likely to say, and if there's a need to counter, you know how to counter it. That is a part of the process of research, and, more importantly,

part of the process of structuring and discussing with your colleague about the interview.

**YT: Your book, Devil's Advocate, reveals many riveting incidents of your professional life which were previously unknown to the public. While writing such accounts, how do you decide what can be revealed while still being within the bounds of professional ethics, particularly when a few of the instances might not cast your guest in a good light?**

**KT:** I simply chose those which I thought were interesting, both to me as an author, as well as to what I presumed would be the case for the audience or the readership, and wrote about them. The fact that, sometimes, people that I am writing about may not emerge in a good light was not a major concern because as long as I was telling the truth, it didn't matter too much to me. Obviously, I was not asked to malign or hurt people, and I ensured that didn't happen. But, if telling the truth meant that sometimes they were depicted in a light that was not as favourable as they would want, well, that is just a fact of life.

**YT: At a time when everybody is using social media to increase their reach and interaction with the audience, you are not on any social media platform at all. Does this aversion to social media entail a conscious rationale or, is it merely a personal choice?**

**KT:** It is definitely a personal choice. The reason being I don't see the need to broadcast my views on every subject to everyone, and I don't understand why people would be interested in them. Secondly, Twitter only gives you 290 odd characters, and there are many subjects on which abbreviating your views to 290 characters is not just to simplify it, but makes it rather simplistic and distorted. So, for both those reasons, I see no need to be on social media.

I wrote columns for papers, and if people want to know what I think of certain matters, they can read the columns. I sit for interviews, so you can get a sense of my thoughts about these subjects from the questions asked, but not a lot, because

remember, my questions don't reflect my viewpoint - they reflect the job I'm doing, which is to often play the devil's advocate to someone else.

**YT: The creation and propagation of fake news is becoming a serious problem for India as a society, leading to several rumours and misconceptions. As one of the senior journalists in the country, what steps do you and the media fraternity at large take to keep the emergence and propagation of fake news in check?**

**KT:** Basically, when it's a matter of fact you try your best to clarify and make accurately sure that those are the correct facts. There is very little that I take from WhatsApp because I'm not on social media, so I don't go to people's Twitter accounts to find out what happened. I tend to rely on newspapers, television channels and on first-hand accounts of what has happened and, as often as possible, give source material so that I can say where I have got it from. I do not get my facts from Twitter or social media.

**YT: Over the years, your words have had a considerable influence on society; the students of St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata are no different. What message would you like to give to them?**

**KT:** I would say to all the students in any country, at any time, be yourself. Never be shy or scared about expressing an opinion. If it's wrong - fine, so what? It's not the end of the world. One learns through one's mistakes but have the confidence to say what you believe. At the same time, have the willingness to keep your eyes and ears open and adjust your thinking as the surrounding circumstance changes. Be open to new ideas and stand up for your beliefs. If you believe that someone else is being wronged, stand up for them. There is no point in believing someone has been wronged and keeping quiet about it because that's the easy way of seeking cheap popularity for yourself. That is a coward's position. So, be true to yourself and be proud of it and be confident about it. Thus, when the world changes, you must change as well.