



## MR. VISWANATHAN ANAND

Indian Chess Grandmaster

Taken by the Editorial Board

**YT:** Your mother was a chess aficionado and an influential socialite who taught you chess from the age of six. If it were not for her passion for the game, could you ever see yourself becoming a professional chess player? What alternative profession would you have opted?

**VA:** The critical moment for many chess players is the moment they get introduced to the game. That is the biggest point of connection. I would have to say that if my mother had not taught me how to play, the probability that I knew someone else who might have taught me how to play chess drops quite a lot. So clearly, she was decisive in getting me into the game. Besides the support that my parents gave me for many years, that moment was very crucial. Having said that, it happened at the age of six so it was not like I had an alternate plan lined up. I simply did not know what I was going to become. I had certain interests and leanings but honestly, I could have gone anywhere.

**YT:** You broke onto the world stage and became the first Grandmaster from India in 1987, at a time when chess was not considered a serious sport in the country, and since then 75

**Grandmasters from India have followed your footsteps. Do you think that the sport has been successful in reaching the masses and how does it feel to be a pioneer of the sport for the nation?**

**VA:** Well, that is a very interesting question because chess has had a constant challenge to face; which is how to make it more popular, expand its reach and how to get more people to play it. One obvious limitation is the fact that to be a fan you need to know the rules and to be a reasonable chess player yourself. Back in the day, many people popularized the game by bringing out stories about how the game evolves, talking about the struggles that players face, to try and engage with people and bring them into the game. In recent years it looks like several solutions are beckoning, thanks to the availability of graphics, connectivity, and so on. We have kind of addressed that problem because now it is possible to have commentary teams sit there and explain the game, graphics which make it visually easy to understand what is happening and the level of sophistication in the broadcast has caught up. So right now, we are in a good moment thanks to the ubiquity of the

internet, we are able to be a broadcast sport in effect very similar to gaming platforms and so on and that is our biggest hope right now. Of course, you still have to get your fans one at a time but the method has become much easier. There are already 75 grandmasters in India so it is very nice as it kind of connects well with the 75th anniversary of our independence.

**YT: You learned the intricacies of the game in Manila while staying there with your parents for a couple of years. What influence did the Filipino culture have on your upbringing and approach to life?**

**VA:** The Philippines deepened my interest in chess because in contrast to India, where chess was highly specialized and you had to go to a chess club to engage with other chess players, in the Philippines there was already a television show about chess at that point, so what would happen is that they would show one of the most important games played at some part of the world and then they would give you some puzzle to solve and if you sent in your answer, they would check all the answers that people mailed to them to see which the correct answers were. After this, all the correct answers would be put into a box and they would pick a lucky winner out of that box. Since I used to be at school when the TV programme happened, my mother would take down everything that was said. She would write down that puzzle, show me the game that they showed, display the puzzle and we would solve it together. Then we used to send the answers. Like this I won many chess books, because that used to be the prize they gave, so most of my early library collection came from there. That is why the Philippines is where my interest in chess deepened, so by the time I came back to India, I was a very regular chess player.

**YT: The controversies around the 1998 World Championship continue to be discussed till date with many hailing your match against Karpov as unfair. What impact did this result and the subsequent comments of your**

**opponent have on you? How did you deal with the backlash? Does the envy of your competitors serve as a source of motivation for you?**

**VA:** I would say that people found the conditions unfair and they thought that it was not a format that should happen again. In fact, progressively, the privileges that certain chess players used to get have been removed. Now the competition has been in terms of being universally fair to all the participants rather than weighted towards one or two. Having said that, you can complain and try to be a martyr for a few days and it is fun but then people get bored very fast and it is best to move on. So, the most important thing was to forget about that thing. It still bugs me a bit when I look at that tournament that I had to go through all of it, but the important thing is to move on and go to the next championship because you cannot keep on talking about the past. In fact, you should not lose your next tournament because you are thinking of the previous one and I think as I mentioned in the start that this event was one of the things that caused public opinion to shift in terms of very fair formats.

**YT: In the April 2007 FIDE Elo rating list, you were ranked first in the world for the first time, a tag that every professional chess player aspires to achieve. What was the feeling of having your dream fulfilled? How does an athlete ensure that the feelings of pride do not overwhelm them and they do not lose motivation towards surpassing boundaries having reached the top of the ladder?**

**VA:** When you reach a long-cherished goal, you should pat yourself on the back and take a minute and appreciate what you have done but then move on to your next goal and not stop. I found that in general you do not appreciate a big success when it happens, you appreciate it many years later. So now when I look back at these moments like that and think that it was very nice and it was wonderful that it happened and so on. But the moment it happens, it is easier to think of what is coming next, what you have to do because how long can you sit and celebrate but

many years later it is still something that gives me a lot of pleasure.

**YT:** **In 2010, you joined the Olympic Gold Quest to promote and support India's elite sports persons and potential young talent. In the 12 years that have elapsed, how has the situation changed and what additional changes do we need to make to proceed further towards gaining widespread recognition at the Olympics?**

**VA:** Olympic Gold Quest (OGQ) was created to be an organization, an institution that helps athletes. So, the main aim was that we would go to companies and the public and tell them and try to raise money and then support athletes with experiences that people like Geet Sethi, Prakash Padukone or I had faced, with the intention that if the athlete knew that we were supporting them in that area, one weight on their shoulder would be lifted and they could focus on Olympic Medals. I think the research shows in 2012, 2016 and then last year's Tokyo Olympics, a good number of the medal winners are of the OGQ support and work with it, so that is nice. Over the years, we have created centres of excellence having physiotherapists, personal trainers and coaches. You build these networks because that is very useful as well, since what is useful for one athlete in one sport very often turns out to be very useful to another athlete in another sport and so you build these kinds of excellence. The sports people themselves get to pass on their experience to the next one. I think in a sense the result speaks for itself where I would not claim that OGQ is exclusive here, nonetheless, it is part of a number of organizations that are working to get there, including the Government of India. So, the Government of India often has a sports budget and a sports ministry or sports authority who come to OGQ and say let us avoid working on the same area. Why do not you do this and we will take care of that, let us coordinate our efforts. So like this you also build networks and it is manifested in the fact that our athletes are now regularly winning medals. The important thing is they are thinking of winning Olympic medals. They don't think I won bronze or qualified and

that is great, They feel that if I did not win a gold and if I win a silver then that is already something to aim for, for the next time and the bar is set high. So, every person who wins the medal sets the bar higher for the next one. It is kind of an upward nudge.

**YT:** **You have often been described as the most versatile world champion ever, owing to the fact that you are the only player to have won the World Chess Championship in tournament, match, and knockout format, as well as rapid time controls. How did you manage to balance the dynamics and the pressures of the different formats without losing out on your performance levels? How does your approach differ while you are preparing for and playing the different formats of the games?**

**VA:** In the knockout formats, I did not know what to expect but once I started playing in it, I felt that I am fairly good at it, in the sense that your target is very clear. Every two days you will survive and you move to the next round and you focus on that one and since you don't do any long-term planning, there is no use of planning for the fourth round. You have to get to the 2nd round first so it is a very step-by-step approach. I found that I was very good at that. I was very good at the rapid formats. The formats in which it was the hardest for me to catch up on were the slowest and the most classical formats. I came close a lot of times; I came second a couple of times but there were a couple of crucial decisions. So, in 2007, when I was going to play the tournament format in Mexico, I had to revisit how I worked and address problems that I had been ignoring for a long time. To simplify, I would say that it was not enough to simply focus on my strengths. I had to keep on working on my weaknesses too because they kept on coming and haunting me, especially in that format. Therefore, at some point I had to face what I disliked working on, forced myself to get better at it and then the next year, for the match format, the most important thing I did was to think very strategically. Instead of just deciding, well this is what I normally do, how to get better at it, my whole approach was

what kind of positions do I want to have in the match. So I switched my entire approach to something I have never played before which is very risky because you are not very familiar with it, but the nice thing was that it was easier to generate new ideas because you have not told yourself for many years that there is nothing here and nothing there. It was very easy to work on many new areas and in terms of my creative achievement, that was probably my highest.

**YT: Having been successful in reaching the pinnacle of the sport as a player, you set forth to spread out your years of experience and tactics through books to serve as an inspiration and role-model for every aspiring chess player. What was the motive that went behind publishing these books? How important is learning theoretical strategy to be successful in chess?**

**VA:** Theoretical knowledge is basically the knowledge that is shared by everyone in the sense that there are games that have already been played and therefore people study them, put them under the microscope and look at them very closely to draw conclusions which help them in deriving not only narrow concepts but also the wide concepts of chess because that is the very foundation of it. As far as my books are concerned, I did not publish them only for the chess audience, however some of them are targeted at people who play chess, but also for the non-chess players. I wrote my autobiography, 'Mind Master', which is geared towards a non-chess audience. The idea is two-fold that even if a non-chess player reads my books, he should learn and see something new that he has not seen ever before in my chess. He should look at familiar events and think that I know this story but there are these new experiences that he has shared which are very interesting and for a non-chess player, I wanted them to know the life of a chess player.

**YT: When two top Grandmasters are playing, there's virtually nothing to separate the two in terms of their skills and the tactics employed.**

**So, what makes the difference at the end of the day as one emerges triumphant?**

**VA:** What makes a difference at the end of the day is your nerves, your ability to concentrate under high pressure and high tension, your physical fitness, your ability to understand your decision-making process and then to face your worst decisions coming true. To be able to correct your wrong decisions and predict that your moves can cause a train wreck is essential. The other factors that also count are the general ambience and the kind of day you have led before the round and understand yourself. If there are two players with equivalent technical ability, then often the difference will happen over one or two moves and not more. So being able to hang in there till the end is the crucial element.

**YT: Your unfettered passion and dedication towards the game, and your allegiance to the nation and upholding its image has been a source of inspiration for millions and the students of St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata are no different. What message would you like to give to them?**

**VA:** I would say that the nicest thing is to find something you really like doing and do that, something that gives you fun and pleasure, that is the most important thing. Generally, you would want to do best at whatever you take up but it is easiest to do your best in something that you enjoy doing and something that you do not have to force yourself to do. This is not a tremendous insight and anyone who has been at school would understand that there are some subjects that come effortlessly and then there are others that do not and so on but it is not static. You are not born with it. There are subjects that I used to dislike but eventually learned to like. It is all about finding something that you are curious about, finding something that is difficult for you and trying to be better at it. As you learn unconnected things, you will become interested in new things. As long as you have that curiosity and willingness to learn, you will find your way out.