

EPISODE 475

[EPISODE]

[00:00:00] AH: It sounds like you're really busy and since you have retired.

[00:00:04] VS: Yeah, I think that's what the wife complains. She says, "YOU got more busy now than you were working." That was a tough period, I think the last two and a half years. But it was fun. I think in an intelligence organization is one of the most exciting things. Something keeps happening every day. The adrenaline flow took over on the first of January 2001 and retired in March 2003. Two years.

[00:00:45] AH: There were some interesting developments during that period?

[00:00:50] VS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It started off with 9/11, of course. Then we had our own Parliament attack in December. Before that Musharraf had visited India, he had been invited for last minute sort of peace effort by the Prime Minister. Well, there were quite a few of us who said it won't work and it didn't work. So, in reward of that, we got, one an attack in the Srinagar Jammu and Kashmir parliament, or the Legislative Assembly, terror attack. After 9/11, we got another one in December, when we had the whole world coming to us, the British Prime Minister, the US Secretary of State, coming in telling us, "Oh, please hold your hand, don't do anything. We'll take care of these fellows," of course, nothing really happened. It hasn't changed anything.

But even before that we had in '99, we had Cargill, the attack on Cargill, by the Pakistanis. And then we had the hijacking of the aircraft. IC814 was hijacked by terrorists taken to Afghanistan, Qatar, eventually, where we had to do a deal with them. So, there are seven violence and wars took a lot of my time. And then we had the Cargill review committee, so we had to answer questions to the Committee on a so-called intelligence failures. We were the fall guys, of course.

[00:02:42] AH: That also seems to be the case here in the United States, intelligence are the fall guys. As we discussed in our emails, I don't want you to discuss anything you're

uncomfortable with. I want you to be happy. So, I'm just going to go on the last email that you sent me. Can you tell me –

[00:03:11] VS: I will tell you what I would I can, I will definitely.

[00:03:18] AH: Okay.

[00:03:17] VS: I'll tell what the R&AW know, the Research and Analysis Wing was formed in 1968. September 1968. It was hived off from the Intelligence Bureau, which was an all Police Organization. And when the R&AW was created, the idea was that it would draw talent from not just the police, but wherever it is available in the civil service, and that they would also start direct independent recruitment from the open market. It was 1971. They started this, and I think it was a very revolutionary kind of step.

Personally, I think it could have worked. But unfortunately, Mrs. Gandhi, who was the Prime Minister at the time, our organization was formed last elections in '75. And the intelligence agencies are very closely connected in our system with the Prime Minister. The next prime minister was Mr. Morales, he decided his morality standards were very high and that intelligence was a bad word. He went about hacking R&AW in particular. It was a big setback for the organization. You're barely nine years old and you're going to face this kind of slaughter. So, we had a setback and then with this, I lost the Premiership, but he had done the damage and gone. So, when Mrs. Gandhi came back in a second, it wasn't quite the same thing. She was busy with a lot of other things, the merger of Sikkim, and then we had – remember we had the Sikh troubles that time, and she was assassinated in '84.

So, the '80s were a bad year. The United States was busy with its jihad in Afghanistan. Pakistan is busy making their bomb. So, '90s was a period, when our organization had – when the country had a series of prime ministers who came and left after a couple of years, and not really paying much attention to this aspect of their work or country's work.

Things improved when **[inaudible 00:06:00]** took over, and we had a little more room to maneuver and play and be, and they seem to be doing things. That's what I ended my career in 2003, when Vajpayee was still the boss, the Prime Minister. So, we're there. We do only

external intelligence. We don't do internal at all and we're not like the ISI, which does everything under the sun that they have to – it is owned by the Pakistan Army, which owns the country. So, things are a lot simpler there. We still have financial advisors and controllers and budgetary restrictions and et cetera, that goes on. So, how it is in democracies, we have to do all that.

[00:06:54] AH: What's the intelligence service?

[00:06:55] VS: The Intelligence Bureau is our internal service. It's the counterpart to the MI5 or the FBI and we are like the CIA, not as powerful, but external. Yes. For a powerful country, you need powerful intelligence organizations. They are global, truly global and we are not. We are much smaller. Our interests were Pakistan and China to begin with, and then we added terrorism and then it just keeps growing. Now, the concept the meaning of terrorism has expanded in ways now. Money laundering, human trafficking, all those aspects come into it, because they're all at some level, terrorism, even trafficking, weapons smuggling, drug smuggling, they all get interlinked. Sometimes the same group does a couple of things together. So, we have to be there. Also keep a watch on that.

[00:08:02] AH: The area of focus for the R&AW is really South Asia and China?

[00:08:09] VS: Yes. And that's been so, but I think that's going to change, as we look ahead. And we'll look ahead, say 2050 or 40. As we hopefully grow bigger and better, we want to be a 10-trillion-dollar economy by year x. So, our needs will increase. Our threat perceptions will change. And the quality of threat will also change because now it's going to be artificial intelligence and computers and ciphers and cyber. So, all that is going to be part of the – the ability to deliver threats is changing, and the ability to carry out threats also is changing.

In five minutes, you can even write in 10 parts of the country. On WhatsApp, flash messages all over and the intelligence won't have time to react.

[00:09:10] AH: How did you find yourself in the world of intelligence?

[00:09:12] VS: When the organization was created in 1968, it was, like I said in the beginning, an offshoot from the Intelligence Bureau, many of the officers from the intelligence bureau came

to the R&AW two from the organization. They were looking for people from outside the police join. Our expression is talent scouting, but you know, it actually means looking for new faces. So, they've sent around, asking for people to join a mysterious organization in the government whose name was still not known properly to many. So, you're all curious and supposed to be something secret and glamorous for youngsters. I was young at that time. I was 27. No, 28 when this thing floated. So, I put my hand up, I said, "I volunteer." Then they went through the usual routine of checks and interviews and kept up to watch and me perhaps for a few weeks or months. Did a background, and then one day they said, "Come along, join us." So, there I was sitting in that organization and it took a while to get used to coming from a strong system.

I was in the civil service before. I had done five years with them. Those are the posts and telegraphs. Then I searched. And many people have asked me how come you come from an organization not really connected with intelligence, but they were looking for people from outside the police. So, I was one of them. That happened back in '72. The ISI was created by an Australian in 1948. So, the ISI is actually an older organization compared to the R&AW. The R&AW was the Intelligence Bureau which was part of the British establishment. So, on the 14th of August, the intelligence bearer was answerable to the King of England, as it were.

On the 15th of August, it was answerable to the Prime Minister of India. Like the Indian Army, all of us are answerable to one person and quite different on the next morning. So, the systems of work, the traditions, continued for a long time. And then as their perceptions are varied and changed, so we have to evolve new ways of doing things. Perceptions also change. So, that's human evolution. It's not as if you said, day one, we're not going to do anything what they did. No, it couldn't be like that. That had to be maintained to make it a gentle transition.

[00:12:26] AH: That's a fascinating period from 1972 until you become the chief in 2001. And then you'll leave in 2003. In the history of South Asia, that's a fascinating period.

[00:12:41] VS: Yes, it was. A lot of things happen. A lot of things happened in the world in these three years. The Iranian Revolution, Soviets coming to Afghanistan. Vietnam and Bangladesh was created. Inside, in our area, in our periphery, a lot of things happened. Then you had the Iran-Iraq war, and then you had the Iraq War and the Iraq War to Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden. I know somebody has asked me 2000 to take a guess where would Osama bin Laden

be today? Where would he be hiding? I said, "Well, I don't really confirm it. But he would be with the Pakistanis." And where do you think he would be kept? I said, "If I were them, I'd give keep in [inaudible 00:13:43]." And that's where they found him, eventually.

Well, that's just a coincidence. I looked at the map and said, "This place looks good enough, close to the military academy, secure on the side of the hill. Not many people go there." So that's how it was, and where.

[00:14:03] AH: What are some of the major things that R&AW we're involved in over that time period? So, '72 to you leaving in 2003.

[00:14:13] VS: Our main concern in '72 was Pakistan's attempts to get the nuclear bomb. I began my book, *The Unending Game* with this very aspect of – that this was the thrust of the whole thing, how it was done, how we discovered that they're taking the uranium route, not the plutonium route. But they were not stopped by anyone. That's a pity.

[00:14:46] AH: Tell us more about that book, *The Unending Game*.

[00:14:51] VS: *The Unending Game* is actually a book that I decided to write. After retirement, I started writing a lot of – I had a column in the newspapers. A fortnightly column. Then I graduated doing essays for longer pieces for books and magazines, then chapters in books, and then editing some books. Then somebody said, "You're doing all this, why don't you sit down and write a book yourself?" So, I said, "Okay." "Write a book on espionage, on what you did." I said, "No, I can't do that. I'm not allowed to do that. It'll never get published. And if we exclude all that, it doesn't make a story." So, I won't do any memoirs. So, we thought about it. I said, "I'll do something on tradecraft." Necessarily doing something on tradecraft in the modern sense, means talking about the Russian Soviets, talking about the Americans, the British, the French, and this is where it happened, all of it. This is where the Cold War and everything else was fought.

So naturally, a lot of my chapters are related to that aspect of the Cold War. It's a very fascinating period that went on. So, I covered that. And then I also discovered that, controlling the narrative is an essential part of the game for the government, and the CIA, or the

intelligence agencies love to do that. Well, it's just done. Control the narrative to control the world. That book has a chapter on controlling the narrative. When I finished the book, I did one chapter on keeping intelligence relevant, which is mostly about India, what we should do for the future. I've been looking ahead. I'm not saying what's wrong with us now. If you keep talking like that you never get anywhere. What you have to do is to think about the future and say, "If you want to be successful, and 30 years from now, what should you be doing today? What would be the threats then? And how would you be able to handle that and are you prepared for it?"

So, that is what I try to argue. My constant refrain has been that you reform intelligence and you must – your human factor is the most important factor. If that is not right, that is not trained or motivated, all your technical equipment, and all these things will just not deliver. So, that's the main thrust of my book, I give instances and stories.

[00:17:53] AH: This is your most recent book, or this is *The Unending Game*?

[00:17:57] VS: That is the first book. *The Ultimate Goal* is the new one. That's about narratives. That how the world of major powers, how they – you can have the best army, the strongest military, the strongest economy, the best technology, everything else is good. But if your story doesn't sell, then you're in trouble.

Also, it works the other way. United States with all its – the best army in the world, the strongest, the best equipped, the entire globe is divided into military commands, hundreds of bases all over. But they haven't won a war. It is still considered the strongest, the best, mightiest but that's the narrative. That narrative is healthy. So that is the point I'm making, that your narrative has to be strong. You have to tell the people who you are, what you are, what you want to do. For us, by giving examples on how it is done the world over. It's a not a conscious effort that somebody pins down on the blackboard. Today you shall do this. It's the thing that – it's like the major establishment in the United States. One of the finest, the strongest, the best, I think, is the Council on Foreign Relations. Because perhaps the best brains that are there for this intellectuals, former presidents, corporate heads, journalists, writers, even actors, even I think, Georgia or George who – I forgot his name, sorry, never mind. They are members of the Council on Foreign Relations.

They're described in the West, in the United States as the Wall Street's Think Tank, or alternatively, the second Department of State. So, that's that's the power. It's not a conscious effort. But it's there. They do it. Then you have the CIA, working along with the Hollywood, Hollywood movies. Zero Dark Thirty was obviously an attempt to show the extraordinary interrogation worked. When we used to give intelligence to Western friends, and they'll ask us, where does come from, we would say interrogation. They'd say, "No. We don't believe your interrogation."

So, narratives and stories change with circumstances and there are still stories out and what happened to Osama bin Laden, how he was caught out. So, narratives play a big role and for us, we were colonized. The British didn't come because they were from the Salvation Army, or they were Red Cross volunteers. They were there to make money, to build them up. They were an imperial power. So, they behave like one and we must learn from that. We did not hold that as a rancor about it. But we let them do that. But what has happened is that over time, we've not been able to get over building our own story ourselves. We love approbation from the west. They've like what I said or they don't like what I'm saying, I'll say it. My interests, and the United States interests may not tell you all the time, and they need not. So, we have to be able to put a point of view across to the west, to the Western governments.

Look at the way these days, these farmers are protesting all over in the West, I believe, because of some law introduced in India. That is giving a narrative to the west, which may not be true. So, we have to counter that. believe there is nothing to be gained by complaining, nothing to be complaining that the Washington Post or the New York Times or The Economist says this and that. They will say it. You just learned to come to them or you anticipate and say what you want to say and have the means to say our problems, we don't have the main so far. Everything is controlled by a few companies, media companies in the West. Reuters, AFP, CNN, voice comes from there. We don't have the means yet.

[00:23:13] AH: How did you become interested in narratives to begin with?

[00:23:16] VS: When I joined service – when I was at college, let's say we had the '62 war with China. We had the '65 war with Pakistan. I was still at college. Soon after the '62 war, we had visitors from United States and Britain. I think **[inaudible 00:23:43]**, they came. And to evaluate

how much interest or how much they could help us is terrifying. We find gesture, but there was a clause, a hidden clause that we'll give you but you might want to talk to Pakistan **[inaudible 00:24:05]** kind of thing. A gentle nudge, but you do this.

Okay, that passed. '65 we had conflict with Pakistan and they had attacked us. Then we found that the Time Magazine would say three third rate armies fighting each other for nothing. That was the – you started getting feeling that here we are, trying to find ourselves, find our way out. But nobody wants to pay attention to what we want to do. So, it continued to happen that you could see that democracy was more and more a slogan. When I joined R&AW, then I started to realize that certain things are only slogans, they're not meant to be taken seriously. The narrative is that the United States would bring peace and harmony and democracy to the rest of the world by defeating the Soviet Union and commons accepted. But who was helping this fight? '65 dictators all over the world. We have a narrative of peace and freedom, but you're also getting support only from dictators. So, there was this anomaly you have with this – and then of course, when we had the invasion of Iraq during Bush's time, Al Qaeda and weapons of mass destruction, nuclear. So, how he was treated afterwards, or how Gaddafi was treated afterwards.

So, it left me with a feeling that human rights, democracies are good slogans to use. There is no such thing as democracy in the international sphere. Democracy exists only inside each individual country. If it does. Outside, only sovereignty is equal, perhaps. Power isn't. Power resides where it does, with the powerful. So, they dictate what is to be the narrative, what is to be the storyline for the day. That's why I thought I should put my – that narratives don't have to be completely based on truth. You have to tell the world of your superiority, invincibility, your nobility, that love for freedoms and democracy. The United States also covered its entire population with surveillance, when they're listening to all conversations, in the name of war and terror. That's what I try and describe narratives can go wrong. I've talked about the Chinese, the Russians, the Brits course, they are the originals. They are the original United States. And I've also said, what we should be doing, or who are we or how do we describe ourselves to the rest of the world? How should we be doing it for the future? If you want to be something, you must have a narrative.

[00:27:29] AH: I'm personally interested in narratives and identity, but it's not often something that's associated with intelligence, because people think that, people that work in intelligence are all art headed and it's all about how many times do you have, and how big is your industry. But in your most recent book, you say that the power of narrative is more powerful than anything that comes out of the barrel of a gun?

[00:28:01] VS: Yes. Long lasting. This shows that the intelligence agents can be sensitive souls, they can do art and literature and music.

[00:28:19] AH: It's not always science and a number –

[00:28:22] VS: Not always.

[00:28:26] AH: You mentioned Hollywood. That made me think, does the R&AW have a link with Bollywood?

[00:28:39] VS: I know a lot of people have asked me that too. But no, we don't have. They do bring out some movies which are a bit of an embarrassment. It's not remotely connected to the real thing. They've had a few movies where they've shown glimpses of trying to understand, it was pretty well done. I thought – but not a story, which is purely based on espionage. There's nothing like that movie. The movie, which we saw recently about Rudolf Abel.

[00:29:20] AH: He was swapped for Francis Gary Powers if I recollect.

[00:29:25] VS: Yes, that's right. I begin one of my chapters with that story. How the narrative how Stalin was able to change the narrative, not just because they will, but others got the bump.

[00:29:42] AH: What role do you think intelligence agencies can play or should play and shaping narratives? Are there particular challenges or dangers there?

[00:29:53] VS: I would think that the intelligence agencies have a role, but sort of limited role to change the narrative. Narrative changing has to be a little more open and to be acceptable. If it is done surreptitiously, they have this – you can do a movie, you can write books, you can find

books, you can find NGOs, you can do those kinds of things that the intelligence agencies are pretty good at.

But the big picture has to come from on high. The intelligence agencies become the executors, not originators. They shouldn't be made the originators of the narrative but maybe the executors in certain fields. They can glamorize the movie. I mean, the United States would give bits for many of these movies, Tom Clancy movies, the actual airports and aircraft for filming the shots. So, that level of coordination between the producer, between the actors and the government agency involved, has to be subtle and trust, then you can do it, but if somebody's going to go around, talking about it and say, "Oh, the R&AW helped me make this movie", then it doesn't sell.

[00:31:27] AH: I mean, some people would find that a little concerning. The government getting involved with the entertainment industry to try to advance a particular narrative.

[00:31:42] VS: No, that's true. Narrative therefore have to be done by the society. What do we want to be? How do we want to be seen? It should be left to the individuals sitting together and working out and after some time, it becomes automatic. If the government's sit, I shall tell you what to do, then it becomes a becomes eventually just a propaganda, and you must be able to have the ability to take criticism. Credibility requires that somebody must be able to criticize also. If everything is hunky dory, and everything you're doing well, and nobody's bothered, but anything that's wrong, then it is not a good story. Your storyline has to be real.

[00:32:36] AH: It has to be a societal narrative. It has to come from this society as a whole.

[00:32:42] VS: Yeah, it has to come. It has to come from society.

[00:32:45] AH: But is that a part of India's story since independence? The search for a unifying narrative?

[00:32:53] VS: Not recently. For a long time, we carried on with this belief that everything is fine with us. Secularism was given a slant, which meant appeasement, that's what the majority began to think. We always say that governments have to be secular, but the people have to be

tolerant only when it works. Individuals, you and I are not secular. You don't have to be secular. You don't have to be equidistant from all religions. But we have to tolerate each other's religion or beliefs or thoughts of speech or whatever.

But over time, it became necessary for – we are a majority in the country. And the ethos of any country comes from its majority. It's either Christian or Jewish or Islamic. It comes from the majority. Religion, I am language maybe. So, when the Indian votes, and he votes now, more and more for BJP, it doesn't necessarily mean that India is becoming a majority from Hindu regime country. The Hindus will work and votes for a party, that party will win. That's democracy.

Now, if they vote a right of center party, it does not make that party necessarily a majoritarian party which will exclude everybody else. But this is the story which we hear from the West, about us. We're always the Hindu nationalist party. The BJP. It's a favorite description. We don't call the republican party or the Christian Democratic Party of Germany, any such name. But the US President to Christian breakfast, the first Tuesday of February, every year. Since the time of Eisenhower. Only Christians are invited. So, everybody has a majority theme, but doesn't mean excluding others.

[00:35:21] AH: How does Indian society map on to India's intelligence agencies? Are the intelligence agencies reflective of society? Are they bringing people in from different religions, different groupings? Or is it something different?

[00:35:40] VS: You mean, ethnically –

[00:35:41] AH: Ethnically, religiously, linguistically.

[00:35:46] VS: To be quite honest, when we started off, it was monthly, it's like monthly religion, multi religious, monthly linguistic, everything. But there was hesitation after the partition of India to take Muslims into the service, intelligence service. But that is changing, weather began to change and people do realize that patriotism is not the birthright of only one community, one religion. So, that has begun to change and we will normalize one day. But it's not any more a conscious effort to kick them out. It was **[inaudible 00:36:32]**. It started off like that. Yes.

[00:36:35] AH: I remember when I was studying Indian intelligence, as that there was more Muslims in India there as in Pakistan.

[00:36:46] VS: You're talking about, I would say about 250 million Muslims. That's not a minority, really, in many senses of the term. It's huge. It's four times the size of France's population. So, it's a big number. They're doing very well in many fields. They have problems, of course, they have problems. But their problems I think, are not much different from what the problem of every other Indian in similar circumstances has been. So, to give it a religious color is a favorite political ploy, of course, and what some of our best commentators, some of our best journalists, artists, Muslims. It never mattered to us. It doesn't still matter to us.

Pakistan does not know how to live with another religion. They don't have any other religion. That is their problem. They want to be Islamic, but they want us to be secular. An Islamic country can be secular. An Islamic country is always Islamic. But those Indians should be secular. Oh, that won't change really. We're not going to be changing and we are secular because the majority is secular and tolerant. There are some bad ones, that's there in every system, some extremists.

[00:38:18] AH: A lot of our listeners are from the Five Eyes community. To what extent did you interact with people from those communities during your career?

[00:38:29] VS: We interact largely with the British, Americans, Canadian also because the Diaspora was there. And the Diaspora, those days were sometimes tended to be anti-Indian and you know, the famous Air India bombing in 1983, '84. It was shut down, like exploded, just short of Cork in Ireland and the entire aircraft had blown up. It was done by Sikh terrorists. So, there was a lot of liaison with the Canadians of the Indian intelligence. It had to be. The Diaspora in Britain is a big one, in the United States as well. But the other countries not so much. Australia, New Zealand didn't have that.

Indians didn't have the need to develop that kind of relationship then. Things are different now. There are other reasons to be cooperating now. We have the quad and so on, and so forth. So, there will be more cooperation here.

[00:39:47] AH: Talk a little bit about the quad.

[00:39:51] VS: The four-nation grouping of – the Chinese once asked us. After retirement, I had met some Chinese, and they asked, “Is this the Asian NATO?” So, they were worried that would be about 10 years ago when the thing was really being thought of. So, I think the quad is a long way to go. It's still an idea which the Indians will remain a little skeptical about joining, formally joining an alliance. They will do everything else, but to fight wars on each other's behalf. I don't know whether it would work, and I don't think it will work. I don't expect the Australians to come and help us if the Chinese were to do something to us tomorrow.

So, ultimately, it's each country to itself, and cooperation to keep China in control or semblance of control, not to fight wars, really.

[00:41:01] AH: From your position as R&AW chief, what are some of the major things that you were involved in? Or what are some of the highlights that the organization was involved in during then?

[00:41:12] VS: Intelligence wise, I wouldn't be able to say much. Security wise, I'd mentioned that we were in the throes of hybrid to deal. Just a year before I took over, we had Cargill, we had hijacking of aircraft, we had those terror related activities. Terror became the main story of our lives during that period. I was there, and not so much hot wars. But they are from Pakistan, terror in Pakistan, terror by Pakistan. In Afghanistan, that became the centerpiece of the story and we had a lot of exchanges with the West on that. That was used to be the –shall I say, almost the everyday story. We did other things alongside with China and Pakistan. But this was the hard battle most of the time.

[00:42:20] AH: So, terrorism became the major thing that the R&AW was dealing with from 2000 on?

[00:42:28] VS: Actually, we started dealing with terrorism in the '90s. When the Pakistanis unleashed various terror groups into Kashmir, and one after the other. They create one, remove it, bring another, bring another, **[inaudible 00:42:48]** and all these various groups. So, keeping a watch on terror, keeping a watch in Pakistan took a lot of human resources, and it continued

until – then ultimately, it happened in 2008. You remember, Mumbai? November 26, 2008, when Mumbai burned really for three days. That was a terrible attack. We like to call it our 9/11, although the casualties are less. But there was a lot of anger. There was probably even – probably the government thought of retaliation by then, so that's where it ended.

Terror hasn't stopped. It still continues as one of the major battles. Only last year, we had incidents in Pulwama. We struck back with an air raid, and these major terror attacks don't come every day. It's once in two years, once in three years, by the nature of thing. But everyday terror is there. It's less now, it's less than more it was than the horrible period of the '90s when 300,000 Kashmiri Hindus had to leave Srinagar, overnight.

[00:44:16] AH: Very few people ever reached the position of being the chief of an organization. What's it like to have all that responsibility?

[00:44:25] VS: A lot depends on in the Indian system and how good your relationship or how good your political leadership is to you. That makes the job much easier. There is immense tension with every job because, well, anything can go wrong any day and you will be held responsible with another bomb blast somewhere else. But if the leadership is supportive and it's understanding and also contributes to helping you decide things or takes decisions for you that need political clearances. That helps a lot. That takes away the anxieties, that keeps the blood pressure down, keeps it even.

[00:45:25] AH: Who does the R&AW chief report to?

[00:45:28] VS: The Prime Minister.

[00:45:31] AH: Directly to the Prime Minister? Wow. For our listeners, within the R&AW, is it similar to, for example, the CIA, where you have analysts, you have operators, you have technical officers?

[00:45:46] VS: Yes. We have all that.

[00:45:52] AH: One of the things that I'm personally fascinated than as the Soviet Afghan war, I wonder if you could tell us a once about, if that was part of your career?

[00:46:03] VS: I was still young in the service. I wasn't in the Afghanistan. So, my knowledge about Afghanistan was what I read in the papers, not what they were doing, or not doing inside. You operated with the restrictive security principles. So, one didn't get to know much, and one didn't ask too many questions. That was taboo.

But as one went along, and when the second – when the war on terror started, Bush's time, then of course, everybody know then we were – I was in the thick of it in the sense that he was sitting there at the head with the Afghan Global War on Terror it started. So, there was a lot of activity. There was a lot of exchanges with guns. But that's it. Naturally, I mean, you have something happening in your neighborhood, your intelligence agencies will get involved and will want to know, help the government come to a decision of some sort.

[00:47:15] AH: What are some of the things that you think our listeners should know about Indian intelligence agencies?

[00:47:24] VS: There are three main intelligence groups, the groupings or agencies today. One is the Intelligence Bureau, which is the oldest, which was formed by the British originally and it was not called Intelligence Bureau in the first place, called the Political Branch. Then it became the Intelligence Bureau later, and R&AW came in '68. In 2004, we had the NTRO, the National Technical Resources Organization, like the American NSA. It's purely for technical intelligence. So, they do that.

Many of our paramilitary organizations, we have a large number of them, the border security force. The Indo-Tibetan border, of course. The border forces, and the Special Services Bureau, which is for the Nepal and Sikkim borders, Nepal and Bhutan borders. So, they do tactical intelligence for their own requirements. For cross border.

The armed forces of the DIA, Defense Intelligence Agency with Air Intelligence, Military Intelligence and Naval Intelligence separately. So, they also do mostly tactical intelligence, purchases, military hardware. They don't do political analysis. R&AW is an all source agency

which is supposed to provide to the government intelligence related to all strategic aspects that relate to the security of the country, which could include military, economic, political, scientific, all that. So, we take material from everybody else. Their reports, our own reports, our own signal intelligence, whatever you could lay your hands on from the NTRO to get a composite picture and present it to the government. We don't do policy. They may ask the government is willing to raise – free to ask us, but on matter of principle we merely give you the assessment of the situation. It's for the political leaders or the Indian Cabinet Committee on Security to take a decision.

[00:50:01] AH: Is there an Indian equivalent of the President's daily brief?

[00:50:05] VS: No. It's not a daily brief in the sense that it is presented to the president every morning. In India, it's sent by mail to the Prime Minister in the evening, which is one document that the head of the organization must sign and be held responsible next morning.

[00:50:29] AH: This is something that you had to sign off on and be –

[00:50:31] VS: Yes. Every night, sign up and hope for the best.

[00:50:39] AH: Were there ever any times where you signed off on something and crossed your fingers?

[00:50:49] VS: Not in a major way. But, yeah. It was pardonable.

[00:50:59] AH: A lot of the energy of Indian intelligence is focused towards Pakistan, would that be fair to say?

[00:51:09] VS: Look, it's changing now. It's changing in the sense that China is a big problem for all of us. I think, that would be a zone that they would need to pay much more attention, to what the Chinese could, might, do. Have you seen what has happened in our borders in Ladakh? Two years ago, it was in Bhutan. There is a sense of aggression in China. Maybe it's premature hubris. I don't know. But Xi Jinping seems to be somebody in a hurry. We'd like to call him the chairman of everything. He owns everything there and the party owns everything else.

So, there is a push. You can't have a normal relation or trade relations with a country which is going to do this to you. I mean, at least for us, it is not possible, to have a border, which is demarcated, which is liable to be transgressed by any side, anytime.

We have a nuclear power to our North, nuclear power to our West, and the one on the west is willing to use it anytime. It carries out its nuclear – it carries on with terrorism under a nuclear umbrella. But despite that, Pakistan has not made a difference. Well, not made a difference to our life, but China can. So, that would be the ultimate threat. Pakistan, I think we will learn to handle it. Pakistan is probably clogging itself on its own feet. So, it's okay.

[00:53:05] AH: This has been absolutely fascinating. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me.

[00:53:11] VS: It's been great talking to you. Thank you for having me on your show. Keep the good parts there, okay?

[00:53:21] AH: I'll make sure.

[00:53:22] VS: Where I look good.

[00:53:26] AH: Thanks.

[00:53:29] VS: Okay. Take care. Bless you.

[00:53:31] AH: Take care.

[00:53:33] VS: Bye.

[00:53:34] AH: Bye-bye.

[END]