

IN MEMORIAM

RAHUL BAJAJ HAD TO ROAR BECAUSE OTHERS MEOWED

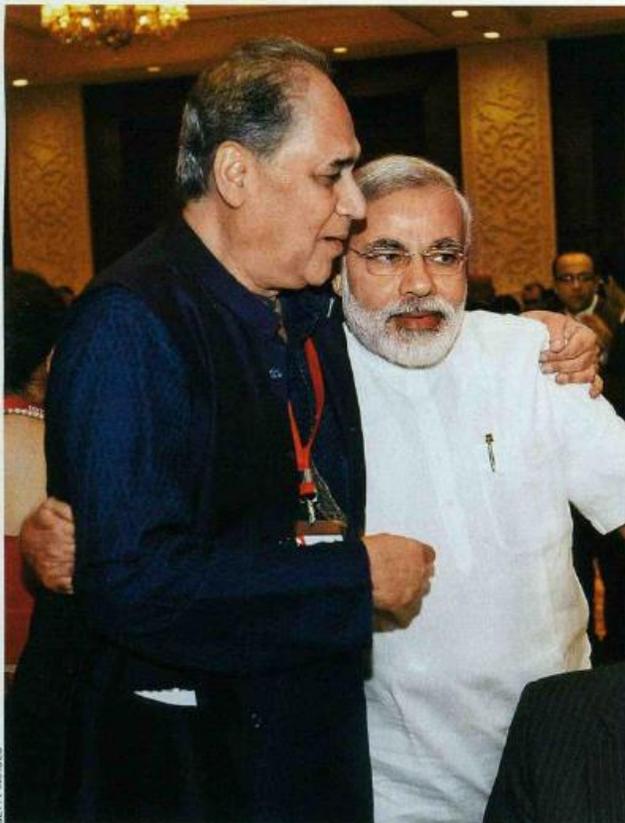


(Top right) Rahul Bajaj with wife Rupa in 1961 and riding the one-millionth Bajaj Chetak scooter around 1990 (bottom right)

The iconic industrialist was the voice of the Bombay Club. Most industrialists of the time agreed with him. They wanted the government to give time to the domestic industry to become competitive



>> *Arun Bharat Ram*



GETTY IMAGES

Narendra Modi, then chief minister of Gujarat, with Rahul Bajaj in New Delhi in 2011

Confederation of Indian Industry (CII).

I first met Rahul when I was 16 and he had joined St Stephen's College in Delhi. His father Kamalnayan Bajaj Ji used to call on my grandfather and sometimes bring Rahul along with him. It was then that I first met him. My initial impression of him was that he was a strapping, good-looking young man who would steal the hearts of many a damsel. And it turned out to be true!

Rahul was my brother's junior in college. I remember my brother telling me that they often lunched together at the canteen and shared a common passion for motorcycles.

The Rising Sun

We established contact once again in the late 1980s, when he asked me to join a contingent of Indian businessmen at the World Economic Forum in Davos. The forum was still in its infancy and much more informal than it is today. Rahul showed me the ropes and told me which lectures and interactions to attend, since he had already become a veteran of Davos.

As one may recall, India in the 1980s was still a controlled economy. Hence,

we were looked at with a certain degree of disdain and suspicion in the Western world. It was largely through Rahul's personal charisma that the Indian contingent punched above its weight. Of course, after 1991, things began to change rapidly at international events, and Rahul was often at the helm of projecting India as a new-born industrial destination.

Much has already been written by friends, colleagues, and commentators on the passing of Rahul Bajaj. I intend to largely make my eulogy based on my family relationship and close association with him during our time together at the



Uday Kotak @udaykotak



Rahul Bajaj; bold and fearless. A rare businessman who spoke truth to power. A proud Indian. Built world class enterprise. I am truly honoured to know him. Will miss him.

Industrialist



Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw @kiranshaw



I am devastated - he was a dear dear friend and will miss him dearly. The country has lost a great son & nation builder. Om Shanthi

Industrialist

The Bombay Club

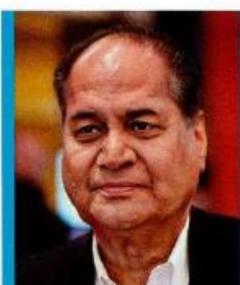
Many commentators have written about Rahul being at the forefront of the Bombay Club with negative imputations. I, as a member of the Bombay Club, and most Indian industrialists of the time were solidly behind Rahul. No one other than him dared speak out openly about some misgivings that we, as businessmen, had. The central point of the Bombay Club was that the import tariffs and duties should be brought down gradually, giving enough time to the Indian industry to adjust itself and be prepared to play in a competitive global market scenario. There was no other insidious motive behind the Bombay Club. Rahul spoke openly at every forum, while we applauded him from behind the curtain. Evidently, he took a lot of flak for it and continued to do so till the time he passed away. We often talked about it in the later years, and he would joke that while we were all kittens, he had to roar like a lion on our behalf. I do not know if we will ever have another bold, outspoken leader in the industry like Rahul.

CII Days

I had joined the CII in the mid-1990s and, while being a regular at Davos, continued my friendship and relationship with Rahul. In 1998, I was invited by the CII to become the president the following year. At the last moment, I had to withdraw my nomination, as, at that time, my family was going through a messy separation of businesses. I did not want media attention to be focused on the president of CII for the wrong reasons. Rahul was persuaded to take up the presidency of the CII—the first and only time a past president had stepped into the position again. He gracefully

agreed to do so and I had the privilege of being his vice president in 1999.

It was an eventful year. Then president of the United States Bill Clinton visited India and the CII was nominated as the host chamber for his business events. A memorable visit of the CII with President Clinton and his entourage to the Taj Mahal was organised, where the hostess turned out to be the future Bollywood and Hollywood star Priyanka Chopra. Since both President Clinton and Rahul had a glad eye for beautiful ladies, whenever we were walking around, Priyanka was between the two of them, while I was straggling behind with great envy.



Remember the Bombay Club? One-member club. There were 15. Government said 'shut up', they obediently shut up. Nobody told me to shut up, and I did not shut up
RAHUL BAJAJ
 Speaking at ISB in 2017

Deep Family Ties

By this time, Rahul and I had become very close friends, and he suggested a match for my daughter with Amit, the son of his close friend and Pune-based industrialist Baba Kalyani. Things worked out well and the wedding took place in 2001.

In 2002, Rahul, Baba, some other friends and I had gone on a cruise to Nordic countries. Rahul and Baba cornered me one day and bluntly asked me if I was planning on losing control of my company to my CEO. I was flabbergasted to know that they even had an inkling of the situation in my organisation—my CEO had been trying to convince me that business families should just remain investors and let the companies be run by professionals. Both my sons, who had earned a very good education from abroad and had the opportunity of working in other companies, joined SRF in junior roles and the CEO was thwarting their opportunities to take on more responsibility. The message from Rahul was very clear and, on my return, I took charge of my company as the CEO for a second term, while my sons grew into

leadership positions.

I happened to be in Pune with my daughter just a month ago and called on Rahul. That was the last time we met. I feel fortunate that I was able to have a conversation with him though he was failing in health.

I will always cherish my memories of having known him for over six decades. May he rest in peace! 🕊

(The author is chairman, SRF Limited, which has interests in chemicals, textiles and packaging sectors)



Javed Akhtar @Javedakhtarjadu



I have had the good fortune of meeting Mr Rahul Bajaj many a time. We were in Rajya Sabha I can claim to know him to some extent. Impeccable values, large heart, Logical mind and a sharp wit with tremendous courage were some of his qualities

Lyricist