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Context to the nugget

Dr. Guha speaks about his journey from playing cricket for St. Stephens (along with players like Kirti Azad who played for India and was part of the 1983 World Cup winning Cricket team) to pursuing a PhD in IIM Kolkata to eventually becoming a historian. He talks about the context behind some of the choices along the way and talks about the role of chance at various inflection points.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Please tell us about your choice to go to IIMC to pursuing PhD?

Dr. Ramachandra Guha (RG): So that will require another long explanation because I joined IIM when I was 22 and I had made many choices before that, most of which had gone no way so I was born in Dehradun and my father was a scientist, my mother was a high school teacher, and I grew up obsessed with cricket and I wanted to play cricket for India. I was the best bowler in my school team and then I joined St. Stevens College to play cricket. I come from a family of scientists, My father has a PhD in Science my grandfather, my uncle, some of my aunts and some very distinguished scientists and I was passable at Science but I had been told that if I went to university to do science practical's would be in the afternoon and I could not play cricket, so I was looking for a humanity subject at that stage I liked writing, I had got some prizes in school for my essays, I was editing one of the school magazines but English back in the 1970s for an orthodox middle class family was regarded as only for women who have got married so it was impossible for me and I knew nothing about history then. So, someone told me economics is an humanity subject and classes end at 12 and so I joined St. Stevens college, firstly my marks were good enough to get in the economics which is the most prestigious course in St. Stevens college so I joined in 1974 and within a week I realised that economics is not for me that I simply did not understand indifference curves and multipliers because I do not have an abstract mathematical mind but I was playing cricket and my college had the best college team in India at that stage so my captain Arun Lal played 18 test matches for India, Kirti Azad who was two years junior to me and with whom I played three years was part of a 1983 world cup team Rajendra Amarnath youngest of the Amarnath brothers who played Dulip Trophy, Rajindar Singh Hans who was the left arm spinner and a reserve for India was in our team Piyush Pandey now an icon of India advertising but at that stage Rajasthan Ranaji Trophy wicket keeper was my wicket keeper, so I was playing very good cricket for five years.

DJ: So when you say my, you were the captain of the team?

RG: No I was the bowler so he used to take my catches the captain was Arun Lal, Piyush Pandey and others and Kirti Azad. So I played cricket for five years and college cricket in those days was very competitive so you practice every day from 2 to 5 you play matches around Saturday Sundays the

intercollege competition was three day, four day, five day final so your life was consumed by cricket and the college authorities were indulgent because it was the most prestigious sport and we had the best team and we were used to beat our rivals Hindu college so it didn't matter if you 30% attendance and kind of in economics, so I did a BA got through a second division and my father who was a very unusual kind of educated Indian was not disappointed I got a second class, I told him I want to do an MA simply to play cricket, two more years of cricket and enjoy university life, he said university life is not basically about studies so I joined Delhi school of economics to do an MA and to continue to play cricket. Now, I have already kind of began to realise that my cricketing career had plateaued, I was in a best as I said the best college team in India but I was the fourth best bowler in their team, I used to bat in number 10 and I was absolutely the worst fielder. At most I don't even think I could have played for Tripura in the Ranaji Trophy so basically I was a decent college cricketer and no more and I was stuck with a MA in Economics so happened that while I was doing my MA I got a research grant from the Delhi School and I had an uncle this is the family connection, my uncle used to work in HAL Hindustan Aeronautics and he knew a factory in Orissa in Sonabeta in the tribal belt and he said why don't you do, we want to study on how the tribal workers there are doing? So I got a grant in the summer holidays between my MA previous and my MA final and I went to do this research project on the Efficiency of Tribal workers, I mean I knew some statistics because I don't falls using economics so I essentially ran a regression comparing tribal workers to non-tribal workers and found they were as efficient but they were massively underrepresented the work force that here was the very typically carelessly conceived development project which said we are bringing development to a tribal area but not skilling tribal to be employed in profitable employment, now in the course of that research in Korapur someone told me actually a veterinary scientist Dr. Das who helped change my life told me you know you are a young man come from outside here do you know someone called Verrier Elwin, I have to backtrack a bit in my last week the PRO of HAL factory said you have been here for two months do you want to go to a tribal village? So he took me to the tribal village where there was this veterinary doctor who saw me and said you have come from far away have you heard about man called Verrier Elwin? I said no. and he said well he was an anthologist of England and he worked among tribal here, so I was intrigued I went back to my college library and found Verrier Elwin's autobiography, now Verrier Elwin was an extraordinary figure he was born in England in 1902 son of a colonial bishop, he took 2 first class degrees in Oxford was disenchanted by the church came to India joined Gandhi, left the church and started working with Adivasi's and married an Adivasi girl and did the great pioneering studies of central India tribes their food, cloth, their music the attitude towards the forest and so on. He became the Indian citizen he advised Nehru on tribal affairs and very unusual colourful man so I said look, now this is very interesting sociology anthropology deals with human beings not with graphs and charts and equations and numbers this seems to appeal to me I like this guy's work I always like writing even in college I was editing the college magazine I was reading but I had two low in second class degrees in my economics in my BA and my MA I had 357 in my BA and 53 in my MA or maybe 51 which meant if I wanted shift to sociology admission in Delhi university or JNU was ruled out later on a foreign scholarship, now it so happened that when I was at Delhi school doing an MA there was someone a junior lecturer there who is now quite well known as a public intellectual who's writing I am sure you have read called Shiv Viswanathan, so Shiv was six or seven years senior to me I was in my MA he had already completed his PhD and was a junior lecturer and we used to chat in a coffee house and I told him am reading Verrier Elwin and economics is not for me and I am interested in sociology what do I do? So, Shiv said look your grades are bad so we can't give you admission but my friend Anjan Ghosh who is brilliant is teaching at IIM Calcutta and that's all he told me and I think they may have a PhD program in Sociology so I went blind and I went IIM only because Shiv, I got admission. Now how I got admission is also an interesting story. So, I went there and it was the only department that would give me admission and a scholarship and they were quite happy to have me because at the IIM Calcutta unlike the other IIMs had a special social science program they had a PhD program in

Economics, Sociology and regional development where unlike the normal FPM in IIM Ahmedabad you did not have to do marketing and finance. All you had to do is you have two years of course work on your subject with the only compulsory courses who were 2 in statistics 1 in maths and 1 in computer science and everyone else who had applied that year for a PhD in IIM Calcutta came from a sociology background whereas I had come from Economics background so the people thought look this guy will at least pass this compulsory courses and not be kicked out of the program so that's how I landed up there. Now, just as from my first week of studying Economics I knew this is not for me, from my first fortnight from studying sociology I knew this was for me, the faculty mediocre except Anjan Ghosh but there was a great library and I was greatly enjoying what I was reading, life in the IIM hostel was rather strange because everyone else was interested in jobs in multinationals and corporate sector so I had very few people to talk to unlike in St. Stevens where I used to cricket for the college, edit the college magazine, run the bridge club and I was very gregarious but when you are forced to be your own, you reflect and think and internalize much more and it was really good training for anyone who wants to be a writer. Solitude is very important for scholarship in writing or for any creative field of that kind so that's how I did a PhD. My PhD was supposed to be a sociological study of the Chipko movement in the Himalaya doing field work, I got more interested into history, went to the archives, found the long tradition of peasant resistance to state forest management dating for 19th Century and I moved from sociology to history so it was clearly a chapter of accidents and I am grateful to IIM for giving me a home but I must say in my four or five years in the place I was completely out of odds with the institutional culture and especially the hostel attitude, placement season comes and who is going to get into McKinsey and who is going to get into Citi bank?

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Couple of things struck me in this piece. First Dr. Guha talks about the role of chance in the way some of the transitions happened. Especially the section where he talks about how a chance introduction to Anjan Ghosh leads him to a PhD in IIM Calcutta. In my work and other conversations in the podcast as well, I have come to realize that careers are not as linear as they seem from a distance. There is a big role of chance in the way some of the careers are shaped.

The related piece that struck me was how Dr Guha recounts his inner journey of disconnect with economics at St Stephens, his passion for Sociology and the disconnect again with the peer group at IIM Kolkata. I find that the first few years of our career give us interesting data points for us to mull over and course-correct as we go through our journey. But however, I find that several people get into the mode of "I ought to be doing this because I graduated from here" mindset. But being true to yourself and really listening to your inner voice does open pathways that often make sense for us in the long run. Ensuring that we keep listening to our inner voice and giving that voice a seat on the table when it comes to making crucial decisions is key I guess!

Thank you for listening. Apologies for the audio being a little noisy. Dr. Guha and I had this conversation in the outdoors in the pleasant Bangalorean winter. But we couldn't put the construction worker at a neighbouring site or the birds on mute. Hope that didn't come in the way of the listening experience. For more podcast content curated by theme, please visit playtopotential.com and visit the Curated Playlists section. To know more about the Coaching and Transition Advisory work I do, please visit transitioninsight.com

End of nugget transcription

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Dr. Ramachandra Guha- Nuggets

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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