



Guest

Ramachandra Guha is a historian and biographer based in Bangalore. He has taught at the universities of Yale and Stanford, held the Arné Naess Chair at the University of Oslo, and been the Indo-American Community Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkeley. In the academic year 2011-2 he served as the Philippe Roman Professor of History and International Affairs at the London School of Economics.

Guha's books include a pioneering environmental history, *The Unquiet Woods* (University of California Press, 1989), and an award-winning social history of cricket, *A Corner of a Foreign Field* (Picador, 2002). *India after Gandhi* (Macmillan/Ecco Press, 2007) was chosen as a book of the year by the Economist, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, the San Francisco Chronicle, Time Out, and Outlook, and as a book of the decade in the Times of India, the Times of London, and The Hindu. *Gandhi before India* (Knopf, 2014) was chosen as a notable book of the year by the New York Times. His latest book, *Gandhi: The years that changed the world* (Penguin Allen Lane, 2018) is widely considered as one of the most comprehensive biographies of Mahatma Gandhi. It was shortlisted by The Economist as one of the Books of the Year. Apart from his books, Guha also writes a syndicated column that appears in six languages in newspapers with a combined readership of some twenty million. Guha's books and essays have been translated into more than twenty languages.

In our conversation, we first spoke about Dr Guha's journey as a historian and then went onto discussing his insights on Gandhiji given he has spent a significant portion of his life studying Gandhiji. For ease of listening, the full conversation only contains the discussion around Gandhiji. If you wish to get some context behind Dr. Guha's career, some his early choices and his insights on history as a career option, please click on the appropriate nugget.

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Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 39th conversation and the first conversation of 2019 at the Play to Potential Podcast. This is a series of reflective conversations with leaders across disciplines on topics around Leadership, Transitions and Careers. I am Deepak Jayaraman, your host and curator of the podcast. I

am an Executive Coach and work with leaders and help them play to their unique potential. To know more about my LEADERSHIP Advisory work, you might want to visit the ABOUT section at www.playtopotential.com.

I believe that just like businesses need to be coherent about their answers to “where to play and how to win”, we all need to be thoughtful about our responses to the 2 questions “where to go and how to grow”. This podcast is an attempt at exploring how some leaders across domains have grappled with these two questions as they have gone on their respective journeys.

My guest this time is Dr. Ramachandra Guha, a well-known Indian historian and writer who has written prolifically across various subjects including Environmental, Social, Political, Contemporary and Cricket History. His latest book: Gandhi: The years that changed the world is widely considered as one of the most comprehensive biographies of Mahatma Gandhi. It was shortlisted by The Economist as one of the Books of the Year in 2018. The 1000 page book starts with Gandhiji's arrival in Bombay from South Africa in 1915 and takes us through his epic struggles over the next three decades. It offers a high resolution view of the inner and external journey that Gandhiji went through in the years that followed.

In our conversation we spoke about Dr Guha's journey as a historian and then went onto discussing his insights on Gandhiji given he has spent a significant portion of his life studying Gandhiji. For ease of listening, the full conversation only contains the discussion around Gandhiji. If you wish to get some context behind Dr. Guha's career, some his early choices and his insights on history as a career option, please click on the appropriate nuggets. I hope you find the conversation purposeful.

Over to my conversation with Dr. Guha.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): There has been written about Gandhi what prompted you to invest a significant chunk to have another book on Gandhi.

Dr. Ramachandra Guha (RG): Essentially as I explained in my preference that everyone has looked at him from the point of the collected works and the course of research I have done in the other subject I thought so much materials in the archives that were outside the collected works, letters about Gandhi, letters to Gandhi, intelligence reports ... accounts that could fresh out this perspective in a much more ... also this is large also can I explain in the preference to my book to the large collection of Gandhi's own papers which his secretary Pyarelal had kept and which were made available for me for the first time so there was all this material I could use to present I think many much much more layered version of Gandhi and I also knew that to be a really, that biography requires you to pay great attention to the other character in a person's story you know most people write Gandhi from Gandhi's point of view but to bring in his debates with Ambedkar and Jinnah centrally to talk about the circulars of his friends his associates his families, his fans you know gives you a much richer and may huge portrait of Gandhi that you will find in the literature so you know I had to do all of this. So obviously the facts I would have known, I mean no one reading my book most people reading my book will already know the salt march took place but they will don't know how Gandhi was received by villagers on road they would don't know what the ... thought of the salt March., what India critics thought of the salt march.

DJ: The fact that he was collecting the data about the composition of the village as he marched along that was eye opening for me.

RG: So all these details I think at every step of the book are new.

DJ: And out of curiosity when you set out to write a biography of a person, how do you think of an impact or success...

RG: Well you don't, you just say as it is, I mean people will read my book, some people will read my book and come out admiring Gandhi more than they did previously, others who read it will come out and dislike him more, that's fine and that's. So, this is not about impact and the things this is about how the life was lived in real time...

DJ: just to represent what happened in the real time.

RG: And with all the people around him and the context and the debates and the events.

DJ: Am, in one of your speeches you talk about possibly having five different careers in his lifetime, I am curious about how he saw himself how did his identity evolve over time?

RG: I think his best to read out just three paragraphs of my book to explain how Gandhi himself saw his multiple callings, so here I am reading out Gandhi what I say about Gandhi and then there is quote of Gandhi in between to deliver India from British rule was by no means Gandhi's only preoccupation the forging of harmonious relations between India's often disputatious religious communities was the second the desire to end the pernicious practice of untouchability it his own Hindu faith was a third and impulse to develop economic self-reliance for India and moral self-reliance with the Indians was the fourth these campaigns were conducted by Gandhi in parallel all were to him of equal importance, in 1933 he wrote to a close friend that "My life is one indivisible whole, I cannot devote myself entirely to untouchability and say neglect Hindu-Muslim unity or Swaraj all these things run into one another and are interdependent, you will find that one time in my life an emphasis on one thing at another time on another but that is just like a pianist now emphasizing one note and now another but they are all related to one another" and this is what I say in the end for Gandhi political independence meant nothing at all unless it was accompanied by religious harmony, caste and gender equality and the development of self-respect in every Indian, other patriots had used the Hindi word Swaraj to signify national independence. Gandhi made Indians aware of its true or original meaning Swa-Raj or self-Rule. So that is Gandhi in his own words and that is also as I told you a little while ago I don't believe in saying this is the most important thing the only cause just a one route to success, Gandhi conducted his multiple careers and saw them of equally importance and at different times different aspects of his work came into the forefront others receded and those came into the forefront and so on.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. It is interesting that Dr Guha uses the metaphor of a Pianist who emphasizes different notes at various points in time. Bringing this back to our lives a lot of the discussion around how we should think about work and life has moved from the notion of striking a balance, indicating a trade-off to that of Harmony where we weave elements of work and life so that we lead one full life. In that context, I am excited to share that I will be speaking with Prof Stewart Friedman of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the founder of Wharton's Work/Life Integration project and is one of the world's foremost thinkers on how we

could lead a fuller life by harmonizing across multiple dimensions. If this topic is of interest, do sign up to be notified when I upload this conversation. This is likely to happen by end February 2019. Now let's get back to the conversation with Dr Guha.

DJ: As a student of transitions I am curious about Gandhiji transitioning from South Africa to India and one of the pieces that struck me was when he comes in he asked by Gopal Krishna Gokhale to take a year and really travel the country and understand sort of the complexity and the nuance before doing anything so talk to us a little bit about A – what he did? How he went about building that nuanced picture and B – How did that set him up in terms of moving forward on this mission?

RG: Answering your question, I will have to say a little about his years in SA. So, earlier all about the importance of luck and luck played a very important role in Gandhi's career too. Gandhi went to England to study Law came back to India and tried to setup a practice in Bombay and failed and in Rajkot and failed again and he was saved from obscurity and failure by an invitation from SA to settle a dispute between two Gujarati merchants that was being played out in the courts and those who were fighting needed a lawyer who knew the English law as well as the Gujarati script because many of the documents were in Gujarati and he went and stayed there for more than 20 years, so that's the luck, luck that enabled Gandhi to make a success in his profession that he could not at home, secondly and more importantly it was in SA that Gandhi understood the extraordinary diversity of this country assuming he had succeeded in the Bombay Bar in the 1890 and 1900s almost all of his clients would have been Gujarati's like himself. He went to SA he met Tamils, he met Bengalis, he met people from UP he met Telugu speakers which is why he ran magazines in four languages. He was introduced to Muslims, Parsis, Christians, all of whom played part in his movement he befriended Jews, white Jews, white Christians so his understanding of diversity religious and linguistic diversity comes in SA. It's in SA that women entered the movement in India in 1910 it was impossible in a conservative society for women to enter politics but in SA women were fighting against racial inequality. So, SA shapes its views expands his horizon and then he comes back and because he has been away for 20 years Gokhale tells him that learn about your country. So he didn't know the diversity of the country in practice but he knew about it in theory because with him in the struggle in SA were Gujaratis, Tamils, Telegu speakers, UP Bhaiyas. With him there was also a class diversity he was middle class in Bombay, all his clients will be middle class, but there, there were Indentured labourers, shopkeepers, porters as well as rich merchants but here he comes to understand the diversity in practice and he travels around the country for a year and deepens his knowledge of this place now the other thing about Gandhi which may be relevant to your audience which is less emphasized that he was the man of great ambition, he knew he wanted to change India one of the puzzles in Gandhi's life which is not fully documented is why he came back? He was hugely successful in SA he was the most important Indian in SA he was widely admired and loved but yet he upped his stakes and came because in my view though there is no documentary trail to confirm this him so what he says in the years before coming back 1910 suggest that Gandhi had discovered in SA the technique of non-violent protest or Satyagrah. He had discovered in SA the importance of Hindu-Muslim harmony, of economic self-reliance he had slightly but not properly began to understand the importance of cast distinctions and he want, but he felt confined or not challenging enough by being undisputed leader of 150 thousand Indians ... but he wanted to become the undisputed leader of 300 million Indians in India. Now, he never says this but that is the only plausible explanation of why he comes back? At the height of his institutional and professional success in South Africa that he wanted to try these ideas on a much larger scale and it was an exciting challenge for him, I mean just like I don't know what the corporate analogy would be but a boutique company taking over to Tatas...

DJ: Looking for scale.

RG: So he had this conviction in his abilities and his capability to transform India as a whole, not just Indians in South Africa.

DJ: But again back to the one year is there anything to be said about listening or just absorbing without.

RG: No, Gandhi always listened so even in SA people would write to him, he always answered important letters. He was a great listener I mean even before he came back he used to as more to acquaint himself as the country at first hand but his capacity to open mindedness, his willingness to listen to change his mind. If you look at the evolution ... in the caste system or on race or on gender he is becoming more and more progressively more and more radical and shading his earlier conservative status quo inclinations. Two things on which he has no negotiation are Hindu-Muslim harmony and non-violence those are matters of principals for him but he is the listener I mean he listens, he believes in arguments in debate. Again if you want I can read a wonderful passage on it if you are interested.

Gandhi once talked about taking one step at a time so he was an incremental reformer he wasn't a man in a hurry, he want to understand a society a system before seeking to improve it or transform it and his non-violence comes from that, his open mindedness comes from that and he comes back to India in 1915 spends year at looking around India looks a little more in 1917 organises some localized Satyagrahas and only 1919 after four years in India he launches his first movement at an all India level – the Rowlatt march so that he has that sense of soaking in the country and its diversity coming to grip with it before trying to change it. On Gandhi's open mindedness and his willingness to listen I want to read out an extraordinary passage in my book this is 1942 so this is 27 years after his comeback and he is the great and acknowledge Mahatma in 1942 he is the most famous man in India and possibly the most famous man in the world Hitler is the being most notorious at this stage now this is from what I am going to read to you is account of a visit to Gandhi made in June 1942 by the American journalist Louis Fischer, so he spends a week with Gandhi and his Ashram morning to evening and there's a lovely little book called a week with Gandhi and in this book he says part of the pleasure of intellectual contact with Gandhi said Fischer is that he really opens his mind and allows the interviewer to see how the machine really works other politicians chose their words carefully so I as to bring the ideas out in final perfect form so that they are least exposed to attack. Gandhi on the other hand gives immediate expression to each step in his thinking it was as though a writer was to publish the first draft of his story then the second then a third changing his mind and refining his arguments for all to see now this is Gandhi, Fischer goes on to say, Fischer had also made Jinnah several time he admired his intellect and knew him personally incorruptible but whereas Gandhi spoke spontaneously wrote Fischer, Jinnah talked at me he was trying to convince me when I put a question to him I felt as though I had turn on a phonograph record I had heard it all before or could have read it in the literature he gave me but when I asked Gandhi something I felt I had started a creative process I could see and hear his mind work, with Jinnah I could only hear the needle scratch the phonograph record but I could move Gandhi as he; I could follow Gandhi as he moved to a conclusion he is much more exciting for an interviewer than Jinnah if you strike right with Gandhi you open a new pocket of thought. An interview with him is a voyage of discovery and he himself sometimes surprised at the things he say so here is the man who is so famous, so powerful the Mahatma of all of India and still thinking, debating, reflecting, changing his mind so that's what he was.

DJ: What gave Gandhi followership compared to more charismatic people such as Gokhale and Rajaji?

RG: To answer this question I have to again begin with the question of luck. So, Gandhi comes back in 1915 Gokhale is his mentor. Gokhale wanted him to join the servants of India society and focus on social reform and stay away from agitation politics a month after Gandhi comes back Gokhale dies. So he has no one to answer to, free to follow his own path I mean it's like Gokhale was an extraordinary figure and profoundly inspired Gandhi but there could have come a time if Gokhale had been alive he would have been a constraining and constricting figure on Gandhi's further development that is luck number one. Gokhale is in 1915 the great leader of the social reforming during the congress, Tilak is the great leader of the agitation wing with the congress in 1919 after Gokhale's death, Gandhi decides to launch his first major all India struggle the Rowlatt Satyagraha in 1919 Tilak is far more influential, charismatic important than him but when the Rowlatt Satyagraha begins in April, Tilak is in London fighting a libel case and he is absent and Gandhi comes and claims the stage by the time Tilak comes back four months later Gandhi is the great all India leader so luck also plays a part that said what Gandhi had was experience; I talked about diversity, so Tilak at that stage virtually all Indian leaders of the congress was strongly rooted in their province so Tilak knew Maharashtra and he knew English to speak at the elites he never really had any understanding of how farmers in UP lived or weavers in Tamilnadu laboured, but Gandhi through what he saw in SA and his travels got this sense. So he could reach out to many different people across the India in a way which leaders like Tilak could not and that's something I don't know of course this is anticipating the book but it may be relevant to the kinds of things you are interested in because one of the great controversial subjects in contemporary India politics or in contemporary misunderstanding of history by India politicians is why did Gandhi chose Nehru as a successor? Its linked to this, you see Gandhi through his experience in SA and through his own travels comprehensively outgrew his Gujarati parochialism but he spoke Gujarati he wrote it, he was the master of Gujarati literature but he was not a Gujarati parochial, he was a Hindu a Sanatani Hindu but he believed passionately in interfaith harmony, he was upper cast but he wanted to abolished untouchability, he was a male but he brought many women into public life, it was Gandhi who insisted to Sarojini Naidu became president of the Indian National congress in 1925 at a time in which no female was in any major leadership role in any political party anywhere in the west. So Gandhi was someone through his travels and his life experiences and his own reflective thinking had outgrown all forms of parochialism, parochialism of caste, of religion of gender of region of language and of class. Now, when it came for Gandhi to anoint a success, he looked around him and Nehru was the one who was amongst all his close followers the least parochial. Nehru was the Hindu trusted by Muslims a north Indians, known and admired in south India and a man committed to gender equality whereas Patel, Bose, Rajaji were all confined by different kinds of parochialism.

DJ: How Gandhiji looked at leaders and in terms of how he thought about experience versus young blood or potential?

RG: At the party level he had to match, to when you are speaking to a party president he had to match age and experience also provinces, if you look at the party presidents often you know its Bengal's turn its Tamilnadu's turn but anointing a successor like a CEO handing over the bat on then he chose someone who would take forward his inclusive non parochial ideas of India in the most effective way

DJ: The other piece about Gandhiji's life is sort of the strange dichotomy between the accomplishments and the success let's say on the public front and let's say the tension in the family front in terms of the four sons especially, what's your take on, why it turned on that way?

RG: It's often true of many successful people that they neglected children and their romantic partners. I am sure if you look at great artists great musicians Picasso, Husain, Einstein it's very true, even Nehru was rather neglectful of his wife that's known. Where you are very consumed by your

career and making am sure many CEOs likewise. In Gandhi's case it was complicated by the fact that he had his children very young so with Harilal for example this is something explained with the great length in the prequel to this book Gandhi before India that Harilal was born when Gandhi was 18. Now do you have children?

DJ: I have two children

RG: How old were you? When your first child was born?

DJ: I was 33

RG: So you were 33 and I was 32 when my first child was born but Gandhi was 18 so when I was having my midlife career at the age of 40 or 38 and leaving the university and 37th, my child was 6 or 7 years old, there was no issue Gandhi was having his midlife career which was I want to give up lawyering to become full time activist when his son at 18 was having adolescent mid-life crisis saying do I want to do this do I want to do that? And they clashed so this is not to excuse Gandhi's harsh treatment of Harilal but to contextualise it that he was finding him a new calling he wanted to abandon being a prosperous lawyer and become a full time community activist working with the community and that made him deaf to what Harilal wanted. He told Harilal you go to jail because I am loving going to jail, Harilal said you went to London became a lawyer let me also do that first then of course the things then deteriorated and so on but he was a harsh and unfeeling father particularly to his two elder sons and towards his wife he was a typically Hindu patriarch of that time without questioning.

DJ: I guess you also go on to say in the book that Devdas the youngest was possibly the closest to...

RG: It took him a long time to learn how to deal with his children but he finally learnt and he had a very cosy relationship with Devdas.

DJ: I think the one piece that also struck me about Gandhiji was how he got a pulse of what was going on? I got a sense that he had his feedback mechanism in place to understand what was going on...

RG: I get, this is again something he had a feedback which many CEOs and Political leaders don't, and it came from many people, it came from the fact that he was open to people writing him talking him and also his great secretary Mahadev Desai who was an extraordinary figure, who was his moral conscience in many ways so, I don't know his own travels across the lands so certainly he had sources of information emanating from people who were not blindly loyal to him or did not wanted to feed him just for what he wanted to hear that he very much had in India, in SA maybe a little less and he had a magazine so he wrote and people wrote back so you will get a sense and he often used to be disagreed and sometimes he printed that disagreement in the magazine and then responded to it saying you are right about this but not right about that so he had all that. He absolutely had all that.

DJ: How Gandhi thought about vulnerability?

RG: I think he was constantly examining himself and exposing his fallacies and vulnerabilities to himself and to the world, he didn't suppress anything, it was just part of his personality to expose his vulnerabilities to the world.

DJ: Because no other leader of that era or even otherwise comes close in terms of how much...

RG: in fact my very last sentence of the book kind of talks about this which are just maybe read out “Gandhi’s heightened self-awareness and openness to self-criticism stand in striking contrast to arrogance of those in positions of power today” Gandhi was admitted to making a Himalayan blunder but contemporary activists as much as contemporary politicians and you can add contemporary CEOs to that are loath ever to admit to making a simple mistake. The poet Paul Valery once remarked that in general the things that people hide from each other are of an emotional or physiological nature such as defects, manias, lusts, passions and superstitions. Among all the public figures of his time or ours Gandhi was singular and that he exposed his defects, his manias, his lust, his passions and his superstitions to the whole world through his writings in periodicals, he himself edited and published. As an English Quaker who interacted with him over a period of 20 years pointed out Gandhiji had no private life as we westerners understand the expression. God knows what we would think of other celebrated figures whether in Politics or Business, Sports, Science or the Arts if we were so directly exposed to the intimacies to their lives and their thoughts. Beyond Satyagraha, interfaith harmony, environmental responsibility, the ending of the British Empire and the delegitimising of untouchability the practice of and the largely successful quest for truth may in fact be Gandhi’s most remarkable achievement.

DJ: How he made complex decisions? How Gandhiji went about making key decisions and how he involved the people around him? What can we learn about the way he went about making decisions?

RG: Well, I think he listened, observed, took in criticism but he could be quite firm when he made the decision, so Quit India is a great example. So the Quit India was one in which it was a very complex and difficult decision to make I mean we have the whole long chapter on this because the British are fighting for their own freedom against the NAZIs, India wants independence, British have their backs on the wall, they are being bombed, people are dying they can’t see the Indian point of view, Nehru is saying Hitler is truly evil he is much worse than the British so at this stage we must side with the British, Rajaji saying the same thing but Gandhi is like a says no, they are not listening to us at least let them concede some symbolically say they will grant us independence although they have not done that, he is old he knows his time on earth is running out people around him are dying so he decides to launch this final battle and takes people along with him including people like Nehru who were disagreed with him. Rajaji opts out, Rajaji says no this is wrong and these are breach which would heat later so in many ways I mean he did not; he listened to people, he took their views in account but on matters that mattered greatly to him, he didn’t like take a popular vote and yield to the popular vote... Subhas Bose is another example Subhas Bose finally had to resigned. Likewise with Ambedkar when he went on fast in Pune it kind of coerced Ambedkar because Ambedkar had to give in because he felt that otherwise the death of Gandhi would be on his hands so that says he was not, he didn’t have a complete decentralized the democratic approach I mean he will listen to people but he believed in something passionately he followed it. Usually through force or a will he got other people with him and some people left, Rajaji left in 1942 but Nehru fell in line in and went to jail.

DJ: Some of Gandhiji’s habits and rituals in the quest for inner discovery, what about some of those things strikes you, off the different things that...

RG: I think of course there was diet, there was medicine and then there was sex or celibacy, so there were these three main obsessions. Well there was a fourth which was interfaith harmony which we have not talked about, which was, some ways most important, what kind of Hindu he was? We can talk about that later now in terms of his personal idiosyncrasies and eccentricities; he experimented a great deal with that, so it was, what should we eat? What is good? What is bad? What is healthy? What is unhealthy? What excites the senses? What does not excite the senses?

DJ: And it seems like a very scientific trial and error kind of a...

RG: Then there was medicine, where he went from being someone who opposed modern medicine to someone who saw a place for it, particularly after he had two surgeries that saved his life one for one for piles and one for appendicitis so he adopted above plural pragmatic oppose to medicine and then there was celibacy which was the most peculiar and bizarre thing where he was so obsessed with celibacy that he conducted this strange and notorious experiment or testing it by sleeping with his grand-niece which I have described in a chapter in my book and that came from some peculiar belief that if you are sexually pure you can control society and tame the passions, that you tame the passions within, you can tame the passions outside with Hindus and Muslim pursuing each other this is totally absurd, absurd and also I say a manifestation of vanity that if he is sexually pure Indians would stop fighting with each other so then there is in terms of in his inner journey his religious journey which is again very interesting and very novel and worth spending time on and the discovery, so Gandhi was a Hindu and even he call himself as a Sanatani Hindu but he was a very special kind of Hindu, for one thing his Hinduism did not require a shrine to express itself so in adult life he went to a temple only once which is a Madurai temple in Meenakshi because they had finally admitted Dalits the kingdom of God was within him Ram was then in his heart so that's the first aspect as a Hindu. No ritual no shrine faith is within you it's inside you, you don't need a church or a mosque or a temple. Secondly, there is this whole issue of the discrimination with Dalits which he felt strongly about and wanted to absolutely eliminate thirdly he believed that, he was opposed to conversion and he famously said about CF Andrews his closest friend "my job is not to make CF Andrews a Hindu and Andrews' job is not to make me a Christian, my job is to make him a better Christian and his job is to make me a better Hindu" by which he meant that if you see your faith in a mirror, you see your imperfections and in Christianity they are texts that glorify violence so to be a better Christian not to pay emphasis on the text that glorifies violence, in Hinduism their text that glorify untouchability and a good Hindu would meet to remove those texts or don't pay attention to those texts and so his attitude to faith was stood between two extremes on one hand you have fundamentals so today Hindu, Muslim, Christian who believed their faith is absolutely pure certain everyone else infidel, or a bigot or a pagan and other side the atheist who are dockings who feel all faith is like crazy and superstitions and ration Gandhi has saw a room for faith but the faith must be personal must not we imposed on others and that faith could be improved and refined through interfaith dialogue so I think he had a very interesting unusual and that's the part of his personal journey he thinks about faith all the time for many years here is this young man, he is reading religious scriptures listening to them having prayer meetings with text of different traditions read, talking to Muslims, talking to Christians, talking to Parsis talking to Jews and I think that's the aspect of his journey and even talking to atheist is the very interesting book which some of your readers may want to see its available online it's called 'An atheist with Gandhi' and Gandhi had a follower and atheist follower called G Ramachandra Rao known as 'Gora' who worked in Andhra who was very involved in the movement to abolish untouchability and he lived with Gandhi and argued his atheism with him and they had a very interesting argument and Gandhi said its fine.

DJ: One of the quotes that struck me in the book Ram was Gandhiji wanted to shut out the world when it came looking for him. One of the challenges that we face in the world we are living is just preserving our mind space to think about what we want to do and the world calmers for our tension so in your research on Gandhiji how did he go about preserving mind space.

RG: So I think for example spinning, spinning is an activity in which you are of course doing labour you are breaking down the caste barriers via you know Baniyaa spinning in fact in one of his court appearances ... he says farmer and weaver, so you are spending time with yourself you know spinning is also and of course then silence, walking, walking is another activity in which you are

whatever you call it slow food and slow this right? And the day of silence that he adopted which was also a way of diving into self.

DJ: And did he keep that all the way?

RG: He started quite late he had to be started only in the 1930s in the last 10 15 years in his life he kept it I am not sure exactly when he has started I will have to check but, spinning is also a form of labour I mean spinning for him was also kind of something you do regularly and also producing something feeling that you are doing something worthwhile but also you are just with this machine on a human scale, at the human scale you are communicating with machine and you are driving. Spinning is very different from driving in a Mercedes for example, where it is a macho thing you control or a fancy motor bike its different from that or a speed boat or a launch. It's also a physical activity but has a very different kind, you with a machine but a very different kind of machine.

DJ: And there's certain simplicity to the machine, and sort of the repetitiveness of motion which drives I guess, it's an opportunity for reflection. How do you see the way Gandhiji went about negotiating things with different stakeholders? What can we learn from Gandhiji in terms of just how do he negotiate?

RG: Well, I think just being open, relentless, persistent, trust their good faith don't get angry, don't get polemical in these conversations and Gandhi very rarely did get angry on polemical sometimes, but hardly ever and have persistent, patient, civil, courteous, open minded and don'ts of course sacrifice your core principles, the two core principles for Gandhi were or three really untouchability must go, Hindus and Muslims should live peacefully without one being superior and the other inferior and in any dispute non-violence firstly used and never violence but he continuously debated with people who disagreed with him.

DJ: If I may come back to economics, if we go back to game theory research suggest that generous tit for tat is sort of the optimum strategy if you will to respond to a situation in the sense initially you give benefit of doubt initially you sort of observe but if the other person is attacking you then at some point you need to send a message

RG: Gandhi would never do that, this abstract economics I guess don't work in everyday life, and I mean I have no fait did or they don't. see economics is all instrumentality, it's about winning a game, it's about maximising what's it called consumer surplus or utility, this is not how human beings should behave, I mean economics of this kind is profoundly antithetical to any kind of philosophical or moral approach to the world I mean it maybe a clever linguistic or intellectual or mathematical game that's all so, when you want to take along a large and diverse complex country like India it has to move incrementally slowly towards, more economic progress, more social harmony, more religious peace, you know abuse and innuendo, and tit for tat is absolutely counterproductive, I mean since you are quoting economics to me I will tell you what a great economist who is noble Laureate called George Akerlof once said, he said "if you show an economist something that works in practice he will say ok it works in practice but does it work in theory? Economics has no lessons for everyday social life of political behaviour of a limited lessons or often the wrong lessons yes, maximising utility, calculating GDP, what interest rate should be, what is your trade policy? Fine. But let's not use game theory to understand how human beings relate to each other that's absurd.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. I should provide some context to where that question on Game Theory came from. I was reading the book Give and Take by Adam Grant of Wharton. He divides the world into three types – Givers, Takers and Matchers. He goes onto say that Givers run the risk of being used as a door mat. On the other extreme, if we are too sceptical and adopt a tit for tat strategy, that isn't good either. He suggests that generous tit for tat could be an interesting approach. He talks about how Givers should initially give benefit of doubt to people but if they are taken advantage of, before you retaliate with your action. This approach possibly works in a corporate organizational context possibly where you need to fend for yourself at some point so that you don't run the risk of being used as a doormat. But I guess, when we are talking about nation building it is a totally different paradigm as Dr Guha states in our conversation.

If you are finding the conversation of value, do rate and review the show on iTunes so that it is easier for people to discover the content. If you wish to be intimated when I upload new content, please sign up at playtopotential.com. Now let's get back to the conversation with Dr Guha.

DJ: The other piece that struck me was Gandhiji's ability to communicate his intent to the people around him as he moved forward in the freedom march given that people were getting restless about progress what really struck me was somehow, he found the mechanism communicating his intent which sometimes can be a challenge people interpret your behaviour but they don't know what's the intent behind the behaviour.

RG: So, I think one of Gandhi's great attributes was his command of language his ability to be clear, lucid, simple and direct in English in Hindi and in Gujarati there was no obfuscation, there was no grandstanding, there was no calling attention to yourself and some people understood very clearly what he was saying and of course there no anger or violence in the language either but the point was that it was not you know to go back to from current politics, a lot of current political debates they were innuendo So that's the honour how Gandhi communicates so he knew very much of what he was saying what he meant and what he believed at any time, his language was absolutely transparent certainly in English and Gujarati and Hindi he was very clear what he wanted to say.

DJ: I think it's plus coupled with the authenticity because of he is being vulnerable and he is sort of being open, it makes it easy for people to digest what they hearing. How Gandhiji used various platforms to get people together whether it was a salt march or spinning the wheel to use this example. How did he think about platforms along which he could get people? It looked like he would look different platforms at different points in time.

RG: No, he was just a genius. He thought about the salt march, I show in my book that in a dream in 1919 he has been operated for piles and he says salt is something on which we can have an all India movement and Mahadev Desai is noting him because he is noting his dreams also and 11 years later he realise this is the opportunity to movement so I think it's a I think the anti-untouchability march, temple entry movement which is a way in which you can say everyone is equal before god there is no hierarchy before god. So, he was the great innovator in that sense they just came from his experience, his own insights I mean not really from book learning. I have talked about independence of mine not what the scholarship says the book say, not about what game theory says so I need to go back to game theory but what your own experience your understanding, your instincts tell you to do is the right way to do it.

DJ: In summary – Playing to Potential

RG: If I were to look at my life and think of what are regrets, I think independence of mind is important. I think doing your own thing in your own way I think taking principled and doing things in your own way, in your scholarship is important as the citizen of this country taking principal stands even if they calls you certain risk is fine but if I have regretted something it is that I occasionally used careless or intemperate language which Gandhi virtually never did, very rarely and I mean I have got one or two examples. I am usually very civil and courteous but there's a difference, Gandhi was never polemical I am often polemical but even polemics is acceptable as long as it's not personal or abusive and occasionally I have transgressed that line and I think that something which not often but, in retrospect it is very important that civility in language is maintained so you know you can be firm and direct without being nasty or abusive and I think that something there have been occasions in which I would say I have lapsed from what I would like to believe is wrong. Firm argument yes, many scholars have a neutral style or a witty style that's fine but I think and also the unconscious self-regard or personal arrogance that sometimes can creep into my writing or any people's writing. So personalising yourself. So in my own writings sometimes I may have said boasted about what I have done, so these are things which I think I feel that one can learn from Gandhi that of course make your point forcefully, directly, without impugning the motives of the person you are debating with or your political opponent and without elevating yourself through some pompous language and that something which I think I would say painful lessons and hard to learn and you are continuously trying to learn them.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: As I was reading the book by Dr Guha I discovered an interesting piece of information. You might know that Albert Einstein was chosen by Time Magazine as the most influential person of the 20th century. Apparently, in his home, there hung a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi. I want to finish the podcast by reading out a piece written by Albert Einstein that appears in Dr Guha's book.

"A leader of his people unsupported by any outward authority, a politician whose success rests not upon craft nor the mastery of technical devices but simply on the convincing part of his personality, a victorious fighter who has always conned the use of force, a man of wisdom and humility armed with resolve and inflexible consistency who has devoted all his strength to the uplifting of his people and the betterment of the lot. A man who has confronted the brutality of Europe with the dignity of the simple human being and thus at all times rises superior. Generations to come it may be will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this Earth".

I hope you found the conversation purposeful. If you wish to be intimated when I upload new content, please sign up at playtopotential.com. Signing off, this is Deepak Jayaraman here, the creator and curator of this podcast series. To know more about the advisory work I do, please visit the About Us section at www.playtopotential.com.

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.

End of transcription

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In Summary – Playing to Potential: This playlist captures the essence of what the speaker is trying to say in their conversation. In a way, it captures the key principles with which they have approached

life which has brought them to where they are today. They share their perspectives on the mindset we need to adopt as we navigate through life. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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- 39.02 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - Being a historian - what it takes
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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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