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Context to the nugget

Dr. Guha shares his perspectives around some of the elements behind being an effective historian. He talks about how his early years in cricket prepared him for the grind of being a historian and refers to the criticality of an independent mind and the ability to articulate complex thoughts in everyday language. He also gives us a glimpse into the rhythm of his typical day, especially in the mornings.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The Podcast tries to understand what it takes to succeed in your profession. Given your long career in this field, what does it take to be a good historian?

Dr. Ramachandra Guha (RG): So, I would say many things. I think what is absolutely indispensable is Hard Work and no distinction with Monday and Sunday by you have to be consumed by the time history writing is a calling, it's like it is inferior in its aesthetic virtues to shall we say classical music but like classical music it is a Calling, or like science it's a Calling, a scientist on Sunday she goes to the lab if there's something unless it is a pristine family, it's not just inspiration it's just hard work its hard dogged complex work and in some ways my training as a cricketer in retrospect I realize prepared me for this. You have to clock in long hours with the archives.

DJ: Show up for the nets

RG: Yes, show up in the nets, so I was a bowler, so I used to bowl for three hours I mean batsman guy has his hit and goes off. So bowling for three hours, fielding and all that and history is a craft which requires digging in all kinds of archives or all kinds of obscure documents nobody else has seen I mean contribution to what young people think 98% of what I find is not online. It is in dusty distant repositories all over the world sometimes in small places of strange countries and so on and you have to dig through these documents and get out what you think is important and then of course the writing comes later so hard work, sustained work is one thing of course passion and commitments so you must love what you do the ability to be independent minded that is not to be swayed by what is swayed by what is currently fashionable so I can give you an example from my own work on a social history in the forest of Himalaya, now at this stage we are going back a very long time certainly you yourself and many of your listeners were much younger than me so can't remember, this is in early 1980s, this is Calcutta in early 1980s which was absolutely dominated by Marxism there was a CPM government in power and intellectual life is totally Marxist in the early 1980s the Soviet Union was alive in well the fall of the Berlin wall was many years in the future and at that time environmental concerns were regarded he did immortal friars of a Marxists as the Bourgeois deviation from the chasten, so where I said I want to work on peasant and forests and

importance of integrating rural livelihood with environmental sustainability they thought I have the complete reactionary and many of my Marxist teacher dissuaded me, they said you work on a working class go to Jamshedpur and study the state union movement, go to Bihar and study the landless labourers and their conflicts against the Zamindar's all worthy subjects but they simply did not understand how you know the use and abuse of natural resources why that could also be a legitimist study for research, I mean environmental movement and climate change and all of that and so on. So I went on doggedly, I wrote a biography of Verrier Elwin many years later though everyone told me that sociologists don't waste their life writing on a single person they look at structures and processes and how societies unfold and move and it's stupid of me to spend four years writing on a relatively not very well known person, many years later I wrote India after Gandhi and there I was told that Indian history stops in 1947, after 1947 it is political science so work on the first half of the 20th century, so I think independence of mind, so there is long hours, long sustained work, a commitment to your Calling that we need to independent minded energy the ability to communicate your research findings and accessible at if possible elegant prose because history is not a science it is something unlike physics where if the physicist wants to communicate the complexity of his or her findings to you or me they have to dumb down but the historian doesn't the historian can convey the richness of his or her research and the subtlety of his or her arguments in everyday language and finally luck I have been lucky and we can talk about luck, there are certainly would be people as gifted as me, as hard working as me, as independent minded as me who would not have had the luck I have had.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: In the work I do, I find it interesting to get to the bottom of the day in the life of a profession. When you ask somebody who has spent time in a certain field for several years and ask them what does it take to be good at what you do, they often come up with a level of insight about some of the traits that have nothing to do with the profession per se but often has to do with how you are wired. Zia Mody (ZM), for instance speaks about the criticality of attention to detail as a pre-requisite for studying law.

ZM: *"What is the Successful lawyer at the end of the day, He is the one that has the ability to marshal every fact in the matter and to bring out an argument that wears the success factor best in his favour that is not possible unless you know every single fact, that is not possible unless you paid the attention to these facts, so that is why a successful lawyer according to me is one that knows more of the fact pattern than his opponent."*

DJ: Photographer Atul Kasbekar (AT), in our conversation speaks about the fact that he loved Chemistry in school and joined Chemical Engineering but says that very quickly he realized that Chemical Engineering had very little to do with Chemistry.

AT: *"I was exceptionally good at chemistry, I enjoyed that subject, my dad at a chemical factory it always seemed logical that I will become a chemical engineer, now I had the grades to get into UDCT which is now called the ICT at that time the university department of chemical technology and rated as top 10 in the Asia as well so it was just one of those things that you got into UDCT everybody was like oh my god you got into the UDCT!, but when I got there I realize that Chemical Engineering had very little to do with pure chemistry, it had to do with the chemical process which pretty much already known you had to design equipment it was more physics and physics I hated so all of a sudden I realize that, I was quite easily going to be the worse chemical engineer known and then when I checked a lot of the former grads I found very few of them was still doing chemical engineering and I couldn't find for the life to figure out why one would spend four years doing*

something that eventually they are selling some insurance or running some company that at absolutely nothing to do chemistry, the chemical process, physics or engineering they were in finance so it seemed to me like a singularly useless waste of four years”

DJ: Before making a career choice, not just focusing on the subject at hand, getting an insight into the nature of DNA required to succeed in that area is paramount.

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

Nugget from Zia Mody that is referenced: [Law as a career choice](#).

Nugget from Atul Kasbekar that is referenced: [Transitioning from Engineering to Photography](#).

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Dr. Ramachandra Guha- Nuggets

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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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