



The banner features the 'play to potential' logo on the left. To its right are contact details: a WhatsApp icon with the number '+91 85914 52129\*', a Twitter icon with the handle '@PlayToPotential', and a globe icon with the website 'playtopotential.com'. Further right, under the heading 'Also available on:', are icons for Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. On the right side of the banner is a portrait of the host, Deepak Jayaraman, with the text 'Podcast Host' and his name 'Deepak Jayaraman' in a red box below it. At the bottom left of the banner, a small note reads: '\*Just send us a Whatsapp with your name, number and email and we will add you to our distribution list.'

## Context to the nugget

Dr. Guha speaks about some of the key choices he made at various forks in the road that presented themselves in front of him. He specifically talks about the crucial role of his father and his wife in giving him the flexibility to pursue his calling without getting him to “play safe” or to seek commercially lucrative options at the expense of pursuing things that energized him.

## Transcription

\*\*\*\*\*

**Deepak Jayaraman (DJ):** What would your advice to be to somebody who is at the cusp of making a choice of direction?

Dr. Ramachandra Guha (RG): If you see, both my wife and I were very fortunate that our parents didn't push us in a certain direction, so for example I will start with myself, my wife can speak for herself I can say it about her also here was I, I went to the Doon school I went to St. Steven college I spoke good English I was well read, I had a sense of ... although I did not have an MA back in 1979 when I graduated from St. Stevens, MBA Tatas or Hindustan Levers got to give me a job like that because right CV, right social background, polish, smart, clever of the quiz champion of the university all that, I would have done that or the other option would be again with contacts I could have gone to England and been articulated as a CA to the best firm there. Some uncles told my father send him there, one uncle told my father I will get him a job in ITC he has got the right background and my father said no if he wants to do he PhD even fine even though he has been dud in his BA, he is been a dud in his MA he still wants to do his PhD fine and father was quite extraordinary when I was started my PhD he was a government servant he had no property, he had a job and he had pension but he had no property in the first year I joined IIM my scholarship was 250 Rs. A month, I needed 325 to live and he get me 100 Rs. And it was the last year of his service luckily by the time he retired the UGC or the head increased the scholarship to 500 from 250 that not had been increased for a very long time so but you know I think that is you need to have to have that course kind of understanding parents. I think it's very important to have that kind of attitude so long as your child is interested in something seriously let them be free if they are bumming around going to malls, moping at home, smoking dope, that's different. But if a child wants to play is not studying science and he is studying the viola fine anything, so that I think is something which and unless you take risk you must following your Calling I mean when my wife and I started we had nothing, we would go on a moped in Kolkata that's all we could afford her first job none of us going to thought that you know we would be distinguished, successful or well known or financially comfortable and because we were absolutely committed to what we were doing and we did it whole heartedly, of course we are unconventional one is not asking people to follow our life pattern but I think I was very lucky particularly in my parents and particularly in my father because generally the kind of family I come

from a south Indian patriarch with the son like me would have pushed the son in a comfortable cosy job which my background equipped me for there would have been no problem.

DJ: Talking about your journey in a way you have been an outsider to the institutional system you have not chosen to belong to a certain institution or platform whether it's an organizational or educational institution again I am curious about why that choice?

RG: So, partly that happened by accident. So I did a PhD in Kolkata and then I had a series of jobs in Kolkata, in America, in Bangalore and in Delhi and then in Berlin so for 11 years I was an academic I also had, in 1994 I was appointed to the professorship at the Delhi school of economics as a sole department at a rather young age. My wife was running a design practice in Delhi but we decided to come back here and at that stage there were a couple of jobs here for some reason they have did not work out and then I stuck out on my own and again if my father in my early stages of my life was really absolutely responsible for giving me the freedom and the second part of my life is been my wife who has given me the freedom the support the intellectual feedback and also the financial stability because unlike other Indian men I never had to support her or to the family she is an independently established professional she was always fine with my doing what I wanted and it worked out that way. I mean it was partly out of just an accident we moved to Bangalore, Bangalore not a social science city there were a couple of jobs I should have got but there was some intrigue and some politics and less qualified person got it and then I started writing columns and books and that began that way though I am 60 I may re-join the university I was supposed to join Ahmedabad university but that didn't work out but I think more than my being outside the institution and an institutional framework I think what I have been lucky in is I have been outside Delhi so for someone who does the kind of work I do being outside Delhi gives you a kind of freedom, intellectual freedom. You are not part of any faction you are not push into taking certain ideological positions you are not forever running from one seminar to another one diplomatic party to another which is what people do in Delhi in that sense it gives me that kind of space and distance, you are not being courted by; you know specially I write on politics and if you are a political writer you will be courted by one party or another one politician or another and it's very difficult to find people absolutely objective and neutral and distance and time so I think in that sense I am grateful that I work here and not in Delhi.

DJ: And as you track your journey I am also curious about pivotal choices that people make in their journey if you had to really look at your journey since IIM Calcutta to where you are today, are there two or three choices that you would really call out?

RG: Often luck plays a very important part, so I wouldn't say that I am responsible in some I mean except as I said my father's decision to support my instincts even against the advice of all his relatives and my wife's support have been much more important than choices I have made. I have always been independent minded I have been to the point of maybe sometimes being too controversial and all of that, that's different but I think if someone said don't work on environment I said but I like it I will work on it if some said history is before 1947 I said let's make history after 1947 so that's kind of but you know a luck plays a very important part it could easily have gone differently for me.

DJ: I am also curious about following someone's arc of curiosity again for a scholar environment, cricket, Gandhi talk to us a little bit about what's been the arc of your curiosity and how's that evolved over time?

RG: Cricket I used to play cricket and I used to read about cricket so one day I wrote a book about cricket I mean in that sense that was environment was accident again I was at IIM Calcutta and a

professor came from IIM Bangalore to give a talk and after talk I started chatting with him and he said what is your PhD about? And I said you know what I have told you maybe I look at steel workers in Jamshedpur or maybe I will go to Bihar and look at share croppers he said where are you from? I said Dehradun it's in 1980 and the Chipko movement had just broken out he said you know about the Chipko movement? I said yes I have read it in the paper he said it's a really interesting movement you are from Dehradun you speak the language you know the hills you are doing a PhD in sociology why don't you write the sociology of the Chipko movement? So that's how it happened and then of course that took me on the journey where I worked on the environment for 20 years so often it is then cricket just part of it. Elwin because Elwin has changed my life I decided to write a life of Elwin. It says the one decisions and even my History of independent India I was commissioned in London because they had read my work and then saw this great gap of historians do not writing after 1947 in some ways the one decision I have taken absolutely on my own but no providing from anyone is to write this too volume biography of Gandhi which also was I suppose, in his own way I suppose an act of independence because unlike the other research themes that taken up where I was always the first. I was the first to do the environmental history in India I was the first to write a social history of cricket in India I was the first biographer of Elwin I was the first to do the serious history of post-independent India, there have been 5000 biographies of Gandhi so why the hell should I write if someone write 5000 and first but I had been as I explained in my book stalked by Gandhi all my life and I thought I must settle my accounts with him and then I spent many years on that but luck plays a very important role in life and luck continuously chance and there may be remarkably gifted people much more gifted than me who would not have lucky chances.

DJ: But maybe just stick with that for a couple of minutes, is there something to be said about how you respond to opportunities that come your way again it's easy to apportion a lot of things to luck.

RG: Well I just work incredibly hard and am not distracted by fashion but people around me say this is the trendy idea you must read Yuval Harari he is the latest guy in town, have you read so and so have you read Tom Friedman, you want to understand the Marx. I just follow my own instincts I read what I want, even outside my work if I want to read a book that's not connected to my research I will try and browse through a bookshop or library pickups from there so I am my own man.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: To me the big takeaway from this piece is that if you pursue your calling in a field where you have clear strengths and put in the hard yards (or go to the nets everyday as Dr Guha puts it. It is a matter of time before you get to a meaningful place in the profession. Of course, there is a matter of luck and family circumstances and being in the right place at the right time but I realize that being true to what gives you energy and investing your soul over the long term in a steady consistent fashion is the ultimate unlock for us to realize our potential.

The other piece that struck me here was the pivotal role of parenting and how we enable our children to make our choices. It was interesting to hear Dr Guha speak about how his father let him follow his passion rather than getting him to a low risk and a safe place. One of my earlier guests, Pramath Sinha (PS) spoke about this. When I asked him about how children of today should make career choices for the future, he spoke about the role of parenting in ensuring that the child learns the process of decision making. He went on to say that how a child makes a decision is often more important than the actual decision that is taken.

PS: *"What you specialize in will not matter in fact this whole thing about specializing in a subject and then being in a career and align to that as you know is tenures it happens sometimes but increasingly*

*happens less and less. So, when it's important to major in something it's not really that important to major in the right thing and so that kind of releases the tension of a lot of parents and children when they realize and sometime they don't but most of times you can actually show the parents themselves that what they majoring and what they are doing now has no connection it puts the choice in perspective and so that then it opens up whole host of possibilities about what this kid could do? And I think that's when you move to the point of saying ok so what are your choices really? And there are host of choices I mean you could chose to go just study science or psychology or history or go abroad or stay in India and it takes the pressure off having to get the decision right"*

DJ: One of my other guests Atul Kasbekar (AK) spoke about how his father allowed him to quit Chemical Egg at UDCT to go and study Photography in the US.

AK: *"My dad insisted that "whatever education you want is not a problem, you figure out which is the best place in the world to go to and I will send you there and I was like but you can't afford it right now," and he was saying "shut up that none of your business" but this is your long rope because the education is everything the receipt I want for it, he always had this thing about degree, so I said photography I don't really need a degree I can assist people and like I will learn, he said "no, I want a degree to make myself happy that the degree is my receipt for the money I am spending so you give me my receipt, I don't care what you do with this. So, it was a great line he said "this is your long rope now you come up with it or you hang yourself is up to you"*

DJ: It is just fascinating to just imagine a thought experiment where we think about what the person would have been and what we would have lost if had they had played safe and done what they ought to be doing.

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](http://playtopotential.com) and visit the Curated Playlists section. To know more about the Coaching and Transition Advisory work I do, please visit [transitioninsight.com](http://transitioninsight.com)

## End of nugget transcription

\*\*\*\*\*

Nugget from Pramath Sinha that is referenced: [Educating ourselves \(and link with leadership of the future\)](#).

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

## RELATED PLAYLISTS YOU MIGHT LIKE

**Navigational principles:** Leaders discuss their personal frameworks around how they made choices around pivotal moments in their lives. They articulate the set of criteria we should consider having when we are at a fork on the road and have to pick between disparate options. Arguably one of the most critical skills of the future as we navigate a world of abundance. You can access the playlist [here](#).

**Parenting:** Discussions around the role that parenting plays in shaping who we are and our beliefs, habits, behaviors and mindsets. Leaders share their personal experiences around how a lot of who they are got baked in their early years. You can access the playlist [here](#).

## SIGN UP TO OUR COMMUNICATION

**Podcast Newsletter:** Join 1000s of leaders who benefit from the Podcast newsletter. Not more than 1-2 emails a month including keeping you posted on the new content that comes up at the podcast. High on signal, low on noise. Sign up for the podcast newsletter [here](#).

**Nuggets on Whatsapp:** We also have a **Podcast Whatsapp distribution group (+91 85914 52129)** where we share 2-3 nuggets a week from the Podcast archives to provoke reflection. If that is of interest, please click [here](#) and send a message stating "INTERESTED". Do also add this number to your Phone Contacts so that we can broadcast our messages to you when we share a nugget.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Dr. Ramachandra Guha- Nuggets

- 39.00 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - The Full Conversation
- 39.01 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - Path to becoming a Historian
- 39.02 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - Being a historian - what it takes
- 39.03 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - Key career choices
- 39.04 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - Multiple identities of Gandhiji
- 39.05 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - Settling in a new context
- 39.06 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - Gandhiji's personal life
- 39.07 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - Being vulnerable
- 39.08 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - How Gandhiji made decisions
- 39.09 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - Inner journey
- 39.10 Dr. Ramachandra Guha - In Summary - Playing to Potential

## 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](#).

## Disclaimer and clarification of intent behind the transcripts

This written transcript of the conversation is being made available to make it easier for some people to digest the content in the podcast. Several listeners felt that the written format would be helpful. This may not make sense as an independent document. Very often spoken word does not necessarily read well. Several of the guests have published books and the language in their books might be quite different from the way they speak. We request the readers to appreciate that this

transcript is being offered as a service to derive greater value from the podcast content. We request you not to apply journalistic standards to this document.

This document is a transcription obtained through a third party/voice recognition software. There is no claim to accuracy on the content provided in this document, and occasional divergence from the audio file are to be expected. As a transcription, this is not a legal document in itself, and should not be considered binding to advice intelligence, but merely a convenience for reference.

The tags that are used to organize the nuggets in the podcast are evolving and work in progress. You might find that there could be a discrepancy between the nuggets as referenced here and in the actual podcast given this is a static document.

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in any retrieval system of any nature without prior written permission.