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Context to the nugget

Dr Guha speaks about the phase of transition when Gandhiji moved from South Africa to India. He talks about how Gandhiji was advised (by Gopal Krishna Gokhale) to spend about a year understanding the nuances of the country before embarking on a journey of change. He also speaks about Gandhiji's open-mindedness and willingness to listen which enabled him to absorb the complexity of the country without bringing his biases.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (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?

Dr. Ramachandra Guha (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 challenged 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 saying.

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 a 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.'

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Three things struck me here.

One is that while looking at a problem, we often look at it from the inside and that can often give us a distorted picture of what is going on. Find a way of stepping out of the system and developing a view might be valuable. It was interesting to hear Dr Guha speak about Gandhiji's stint in South Africa as the time where he got exposed to the diversity and the complexity of India across various dimensions.

The second piece that struck me was the time Gandhiji took to settle into the system before moving forward. He launched the Rowlatt Satyagrahas (a national movement) only 4 years after he came back from South Africa. But in the time until then, he had been involved in three local movements (Champa Aran in Bihar, Kheda and Ahmedabad in Gujarat). Again India is a complex country and driving change requires that investment of time. But the key takeaway for me is the criticality of giving oneself time to absorb the nuanced context, build followership slowly before undertaking drastic changes.

The third element that I found fascinating was the point about how Gandhiji engaged with people and the insight that Dr Guha shares borrowed from Louis Fischer. I guess, it is not just about doing the rounds and ticking the boxes in terms of meeting the various constituents. I guess a lot of it is due to how Gandhiji connected with the people that he met, how well he listened and how he was able to shape his beliefs along the way rather than coming in with a pre-determined point of view.

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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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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