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Context to the nugget conversation

Raghu speaks about some of his choices post his undergraduate degree from IIT Madras. He speaks about how he was influenced by the times he was in and the people he came in touch with (Student Revolutions around the world, Meeting Dharampal etc). He goes on to talk about how Dharampal urged him and some of his friends to spend a decade going deep in a subject before moving on to make a difference.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Several batches before, I went to campus but post IIT you made a set of choices which are I would say quite different from a lot of the others. So, can you talk a little bit about some of the key choices you might have made post that and maybe you also talk a little bit about what you do now?

Raghu Ananthanarayanan (RA): See, I think most of the choices that I made were actually set in the last couple of years of study. I finished in 72. So, seventies were a very... very important time across the globe because there were lot of student revolutions happening all over the world. Vietnam was happening, and I got to meet people who were part of the Vietnam Resistance in America, who were traveling the world, who drop into IIT and these were very interesting kind of movements. So, at a time when the general idea in IIT is to go abroad, I was confronted with now really looking at many of these influences, which made me deeply question what should I do with my life? One of my friends was very interested in Sri Aurobindo, so we would read that together and things like that. So, these were very critical things, and the other critical thing was meeting up with Dharampal; unfortunately, not very many people know about Dharampal. He was a Gandhian who had worked with the Panchayati Raj, setting up the Panchayati Raj system in India and he has done a lot of study of what was India like in the 17th-18th century just when the British came in. And his recounting of it, which interestingly is largely from Vice... you know, the records of the British, the Vice-Regal records in Britain, he went there spent a long time is a fascinating study. And when you hear people like this who have been in the movement, who have really studied this speak to you about India, it really moves you, the kind of sacrifices that were made. His own direct experience of Gandhiji. And then there was another very important Professor called, we used to call him Caesar, Seshadri, Dr. Seshadri. He was another big influence because he was one of the people in IIT who challenged the idea of why we are doing science, why are we doing technology, what should we focus on? So, though immediately after IIT, I went into working with a medium scale company; my dad was running a company making printing machines, I got in heading manufacturing but very soon things changed because when I went in things seem hunky-dory from the outside, so when you go in you discover how the organisation is working and I went right into a turnaround situation. And I did a lot of work on the shop floor, which is like bringing in flow manufacturing and things like that. My focus

was operations research. So, a lot of the work that I did was on that production manufacturing. So, I did that and did bring about a turnaround as far as the operations were concerned. So, slash down the turnaround time of manufacturing the machine to one-third of what it was and things like that. But the other thing that happened was I discovered how many mistakes my dad had made in running the business and abhipraya bhedom like you call. So, I just I had to leave, and that's when the choices became much more critical. And by that time this whole... Dharampal was in Chennai over a period of time so constant engagement with him plus other influences and things like that. So, one of the critical things I think that happened which really changed the course was a conversation that I had with Dharampal, many of us, not just me, where he asked a group of us what are you going to do with your education? Are you going to run behind the tales of the West or are you going to invest it in India? How do you make India great? Can you do it by going abroad? What's your idea? And also, this whole question of what does it mean to be Indian. And the necessity of going back to your roots in order to build that you can't import ideas and graft them on a culture that is not compatible. So, several ideas like this. So, that's when one of the suggestions he made was that each of us take up an area of study, go to a teacher, study for at least 10 years and study a text in depth and see why it is relevant for India today. So, his advice was very, very simple. He said, don't go and study to glorify India; go and study to see if there is something real out here. So, many of us took up different areas of studies. So, I went into yoga particularly to look at psyche, how the psyche works, my wife Sashi, she was also a part of this, there was a movement called The People's Patriotic Science and Technology. So, she went to study Vastushastra, Balu studied Vriksha Ayurveda, MD went into, MD Srinivasan went into studying Indian Mathematics and Science, Nayjyoti went into studying Aesthetics. So, it was not just me, many of us...

DJ: What's fascinating as I hear you Raghu is the pathway, you spent 10 years go deep, there are no easy answers at the surface, you need to really go deep, it takes 10 years and then see what you can do with it. That's such a refreshing approach to driving change rather than just running with it.

RA: Yeah, of course.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I was really struck by the notion of going deep into a subject for a decade before emerging to make a difference. I recently watched this documentary – Jiro Dreams of Sushi (its available on Netflix and YouTube). It speaks about how Jiro, a Japanese restaurant owner has taken Sushi making from a mundane activity to an art form. It is an 80 odd minute documentary but it has lessons about craftsmanship, patience, resilience, focus, quest for excellence and much more. Last but not the least, it alludes to the notion of how we relate to time. Nothing comes easy or quickly. A decade seems about the right time frame to make meaningful progress in any discipline.

I am reminded of something that came up with my conversation with Bill Carr (BC) – Author of Working Backwards, a book that talks about some of the things that make Amazon so unique and special. When I asked him about what we can learn from Jeff Bezos, he referred to how Jeff Bezos thought about time scales.

BC: *"The other thing that Jeff that's learnable, that's remarkable of Jeff is the timescale is his way of thinking about time. Most of us are actually very short term thinkers. We don't, many who are short-term just think about what they are, you know, what's going on, how can they satisfy their needs at this hour? Some of us who are longer term can think in terms of days or weeks or months or a few years, but Jeff thinks in terms of decades and if you want one example of the way in which he thinks at a timescale is different, just go Google a Clock of the Long Now after this podcast and learn about*

the project that he is financing to build a clock that will run for 10,000 years. And he's also deeply curious about space and if you think about space and time then you realize of course that we are A, so small, and B, time is so vast and long. So, that long-term thinking though comes in very handy when you are trying to be an effective business leader."

DJ: The challenge is that we don't really get any feedback in the short-term for some of these investments for the long-term. How do we build the discipline and the tenacity to keep chipping away at this is the real question that each one of us has to answer in our respective lives.

Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Bill Carr that is referenced: [Learnable elements from Jeff Bezos's leadership](#).

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the 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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