

The Unreasonable Solution

My life after coming into the orbit of Sabyasachi Guha

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New Beginning

Three months after bidding goodbye to Guha in Kolkata, I was back in Pune the first week of February. I was relieved to return to the city where I was living independently for the past seven and a half years. I was getting ready to visit the two companies that had offered me employment. One was an American consulting company and the other one of the oldest and biggest Information Technology companies in India. I had never heard about the American company before. When I told my brother about it, he exclaimed, “Wow! How did you manage that? It’s one of the best places to work in India and people die to get in there. They are known to be fabulous paymasters. Their interviews are mighty tough though. Make sure you do well.” My little brother was always better informed than me about almost everything! He is an accomplished programmer who has to deliver softwares that keep businesses running. I on the other hand was a consultant who had to poke her nose into people’s work all the time, checking if they were doing their job right and on time!

One evening as I was sitting with my phone, a message popped up on Whatsapp. “Hello there!” it said. I jumped with surprise when I saw it was none other than Guha! “I didn’t expect you on Whatsapp!” I replied. “Well, I had to talk to some friends about the logistics of my India trip so I downloaded it.” “So you are coming!” I exclaimed. He wrote, “Yes, see you soon! Will you be able to come to Mumbai?” I was thrilled! I said, “Of course, I will come to see you.” “You can stay at Sanjiv’s house when I am there. I have already spoken with him. Is that ok with you?” I was touched. After the conversation ended, I thought, “It seems he wants to me again! Wow!”

On the morning of 15th February 2017 the consulting company sent a car to pick me up for the meeting. When I entered the office building, I was shocked by the opulence. The interiors resembled that of a top-end deluxe hotel! Fabulously themed work areas, designer cafes, break-out lounges, several pantries stocked with goodies - it was mind blowing. I met the guy who had interviewed me already and we exchanged pleasantries. I was then introduced to his boss who grilled me for 2 hours. He was grim all along but smiled when it got over and said he hoped to welcome me to his team. I agreed to join them on the 20th of February.

I think Guha arrived in Mumbai on the evening of 17th. I took an early morning bus from Pune the next day and reached the Hiranandani Gardens in Powai around 10 am. His friends in Mumbai had found a super swanky apartment for him on the top floor of a high-rise. My heart started racing as I entered the flat and saw him seated gracefully on a couch in a huge living room filled with designer furniture and expensive artwork! He smiled and asked me to come in and make myself comfortable. His body language seemed as though he knew me

since long. I found a seat and looked around. From every wall hung a painting of either MF Hussain, Raza, Souza or Tyeb Mehta. There was what seemed like a small elevator in the corner of the living room. I got to know later that it was meant for taking food up to the private terrace. I spotted two smartly dressed cooks waiting in the kitchen. A brightly lit mini Shirdi Sai Baba temple of sparkling white marble stood at the mouth of the corridor leading up to the bedrooms. Around Guha was a motley group of about ten people. There were three middle-aged gentlemen - an interior designer, a self-taught photographer and a retired IT professional. A fresh-faced science PhD from UK had brought along a friend who had recently decided to dedicate his time to the study of the Vedanta. There was a young medical doctor from Pune and another guy pursuing his masters in English literature from Gujarat. In the corner to Guha's right sat a teenaged girl who was in the middle of a crisis, unable to handle the pressures of law school and her family's expectations.

Guha started talking. The young PhD and his friend were putting forth some serious questions.

Guha: So, you see, thought gives solidity to the perceptive mechanism by creating an alternative reality and making you believe that you have a being, you are a somebody. You know, the scriptural significance of "third eye" is, when your wisdom flowers no disturbance can create illusion inside you. Your ability to see the way things are with you and with others cannot be clouded. You see me as a man and that's it, no more illusion in it.

M: Why do you think yoga or other meditative exercises are considered different from the use of chemical substances to alter the perceptive reality?

Guha: The whole point of meditation was to do exactly the opposite. During meditation the steps were originally devised to make you see the way you are supposed see. One of the fundamental prayers of the Hindus was: Take me from the Unreal to Real, Asatoma Sadgamaya. Whatever I see here is real, but what I think about it is unreal. That's the beginning of the unreal because I'm using my imaginative faculty. The divisions like brahmin, shudra , etc., have been created amongst us out of this imaginative faculty. Knowledge has created these identities and imposed them on you, telling you what you should be. This imposition is not acceptable to the system (body). So, right from the beginning, there is a conflict. The conflict is you're being told what you should be, how you should lead your life, what is bad, what is good, what you will get out of life, and it goes on and on. You are being constantly bombarded by information.

S: Would you say it would be better for a human being if he or she is not bombarded with information?

Guha: That is not possible. That's the dilemma, because without it you cannot learn anything. There has to be a dynamic balance. The balance is established when the learner finds a place that is appropriate for himself in that frame.

S: So the contradiction is inevitable?

Guha: Yes. It is inevitable, because in the beginning when you are learning, you have to have confidence. And you are taught to be happy only when you get the reward and acceptance from the value system. So, you see, you need to have confidence and motivation in order to survive. In the process, your sense of self is also solidifying its authority in everything you do. And to an extent it is required. For example, your mother has to be possessive about you to protect you as a child.

S: You previously said that this reality is constructed at a very biochemical level in us ...

Guha: I call it functional reality.

S: Right, but do you think there is a deeper level?

Guha: To me there is no reality, leave alone absolute reality.

S: That's what the Upanishads say too, that there's no reality.

Guha: No, that's incorrect! What the Upanishads say is, there is an unchanging reality which is beyond the grasp of human mind. That's the fundamental assumption.

S: I think what it basically says is that there is one eternal consciousness and it came prior to the mind and body.

Guha: That is what I disagree with. I feel it is impossible for something that is changing constantly to be aware of something that is unchanging. My point of view is that consciousness is an emergent property of the brain. The workings of the brain give rise to consciousness. I don't accept the belief that consciousness gave birth to everything. As far as I am concerned, this is not a verifiable piece of information, given the present state of human knowledge. But I am open to considering any scientific enquiry in this field that can bring to light things we don't know yet.

S: It also says that you have never known non-existence and you are not the body...

Guha: That's what they say. But how do you verify such a hypothesis? Can you close your eyes and find out? You have to experience now, not in the future. My question is, at any point of time, without this knowledge, is there anything in you that tells you that you were there from the beginning of time, that you were there before this body? You have been told, but you don't know it for yourself.

S: Exactly. Like they say consciousness is ever present.

Guha: So, at this point what can stop this consciousness in you? The doctor here knows (pointing to his doctor friend from Pune). When they take you to the

operation theatre, they disable a certain bunch of neurons in the thalamus and you lose consciousness. So, you see, now medical science knows what chemical reaction will inhibit it.

S: But that is still at a very bodily level, right?

Guha: Yes. So what makes you think that there is something that's not going to go? You are not ready to accept that. You want immortality and eternity. This sense is embedded in your question.

M: So, you're saying that even the perception I am a part of or I am the eternal consciousness is actually a knowledge?

Guha: It is knowledge, the information that is playing out in you. It has no relevance other than creating a belief structure. You can think about it. They did a lot of experiments. For generations, humans have enquired about the relationship between the thinker and that in which it lives, the body. That is the meditation they have tried to prescribe in order to find out if there is anything that is not afraid of the physical connection. If you say you're not the body let the hand be cut off, who cares?! But obviously, it's not like that!

S: It is what you identify yourself with. Like for example, freedom fighters identify their "I" with the nation and don't mind giving up their life for it.

Guha: I would say the belief structure hijacked the body's sense of well-being. The idea of "I" is connected with everything else. It does not exist by itself. It is basically a knowledge game.

Guha was so deeply engaged with the questioners, it seemed nothing else existed for him at that moment. My mind snapped out of the discussion for a while as I began wondering about how life changed for the twenty-one year old fugitive Guha, when he abandoned the armed communist movement, left home to run from the police and landed in Benaras in 1974. I cannot imagine what must have passed through his little head when a dead body washed up at his feet at a ghat. He was at a juncture in his life where everything he had previously believed in had fallen apart and he did not know where he was going from there. Guha says, he was forced to ponder about his own mortality and the purpose of his life. He started devouring spiritual books at the library of the Benaras Hindu University, looking for answers to questions that have bothered humanity since ages. As a child he grew up in the shadow of his religious mother, who, when he was barely fourteen, sent him away to study for two years at her guru's ashram. At the ashram the young boy would wake up everyday at the crack of dawn, get dressed in a dhoti and walk down to the meditation hall to pray to the guru for his grace, then meditate for half hour and study the Bhagwat Gita. During his summer vacations in his hometown Hindmotor, he would often go alone to the nearby Dakshineswar temple and meditate inside Ramakrishna's room. Guha says, he began experimenting with meditation techniques but found soon enough that none of them worked for him. Nonetheless, he developed some curiosity about

spirituality and became an avid hatha yoga practitioner during that time. His father was his yoga teacher.

Back to the present, the two young men were still discussing with Guha.

S: Do you think it is all based only on knowledge?

Guha: You go and discover! Is there anything you can say that is outside the framework of knowledge or idea? Anything that you capture and put in your memory, which you can retrieve later, is a part of the knowledge that you acquire. But knowledge can never be in touch with life. I accepted this unknowability so deep down that my fear of the future vanished. It is impossible to know because I am never in touch with what is going on inside me, no matter how much I meditate and experience Gods, Goddesses and everything else that is possible to experience as described in the scriptures.

M: But there was an incident in your life when in one of your deepest and most receptive states you saw Lord Ganesha in front of you very vividly ...

Guha: What happened is, my imaginative faculty created it. These things were taught to me from my childhood when I started reading books. They were part of my culture, these images. My discovery is, anything that creates a chemical disturbance in the body gives rise to internal visions and vivid imageries. If the brain begins to organise itself in a way that the illusion cannot disturb its capacity to see things the way they are, then it starts throwing out all that is sitting inside and creating a disturbance. I call it purging. It's like cleaning your computer, which is nothing but neutralizing and freeing up the memory circuitry, so it is available again. Because I am talking to you guys, I have to use information. Where did it come from? I gathered it using my imagination. But inside that if there is some kind of emotional content which does not allow me to function the way I'm supposed to, then it becomes a problem. To not let this happen, the brain does a much deeper purging. It is some triggering mechanism. I think it's a readjustment of the biological machine. But if I say it results in a clean slate, it would be a hypothesis. Only the holy man who wants to free you from your sense of self will dish out such possibilities. There is no such thing as a free state. You will never forget your name or food habits. What happens is, the memory is available on demand but it doesn't have the churning that drains energy.

Right from the beginning, I was analysing the fact that if knowledge is supposed to free me from conflict, how much knowledge do I need to gather? Do you know how many subjects are there in the branch of chemical engineering, how many segments each of them have and how much work is still going on in each of these fields? So, we are constantly adding more knowledge. How much can you keep track of? So, you see, the knowledge game is just an impossible game. Obviously that cannot be the solution.

M: Right, that's not where you're supposed to look.

Guha: But that is where you have to look, if that information can help you solve the problems you are facing. But if it has something to do with figuring out what's harmony, what's the relationship between you and the knowledge game and things like that, then this information is of no help to you. Now you can really see the connection between knowledge and the process through which knowledge comes.

M: The process of thinking is innate ...

Guha: The process of thinking should have a very specific goal. Just as the fish has to know what it should eat and what it must avoid. That's discrimination. We are no different! But looks like we have deviated from that and are creating a body of knowledge constantly. Our kids will continue to learn and adapt to it very fast.

S: So, do you think it is absolutely necessary to know, because there is no end to knowing ...

Guha: I call it functional reality. It is what you really need to know. But if you are looking to solve the problem which is not born out of knowledge, then it's an exercise in total futility. Every instrument has a specific function. I have to use a saw to cut a piece of wood, a bucket to fill water or a vacuum pump to suck out air. Each instrument has its own utility. And thinking is the only instrument you have. Thinking has a targeted, specific goal but you are using it to solve a problem which is very different. The problem about your being and things like that. So, you acquire more knowledge, read more Vedas, Upanishads and their instructions and you want to get more clues about how to solve your problem. What is actually happening is, you are just collecting information and are still involved with thinking. Your effort to meditate is also the same thing.

S: They say that there are four yogas that you need to go through ... raja yoga, karma yoga , etc.

Guha: I did all of that!

S: And you arrived at nothing?!

Guha: I arrived at nothing, since I discovered that the promise of achieving clarity in future through knowledge is false. You will never be clear. What they don't tell you is, whatever you do, you are using thought and expectation which came to you through thinking. It's just a sales pitch, you know. None of this actually helps.

M: Would you say it didn't help you but it could help somebody else?

Guha: Maybe, but I cannot generalise.

S: I personally feel there's nothing that needs help.

Guha: If that is so, then why all this reading and practising?

S: It is for further enquiry ...

Guha: Okay. So, what is required for enquiry? How much can you read? Then you can go and study comparative religion.

S: Enquiry keeps the drive going ...

Guha: Yeah. Now you have to ask the fundamental question. Why are you gathering information to keep the drive going? To me, there is no such thing as knowing just for the sake of knowing. We always want something out of it. But there are many aspects of knowledge that we really don't know that well. Like, how we are born with a lot of abilities and this brain accepts and utilizes them so easily or how the belief structure of my forefathers is going to affect my future actions. It seems a baby's brain is already waiting to receive instructions from the human language.

S: Genetics!

Guha: Exactly. So, that means, it is not just my conditioning that is there, but the brain has already acquired a lot of things that my ancestors have handed down through generations.

M: That is by complete chance! That's the base state before it starts accumulating information ...

Guha: If I have a baby and I move her to China, she will go to school there and be conditioned by that language. You see, the language itself carries a lot of cultural conditioning. Language has already defined the emotional responses for the ways in which you understand or express anything. How you respond to words, is already present as an effect of cultural conditioning in you. Language carries the baggage of the entire civilization. My feeling is that, learning is subject specific and as a part of the solution, the brain discovered the method of learning to find a way out of this mess.

M: So, you're saying that for each person, there are many different probabilities and factors unfolding which result in that person's particular reality ...

Guha: Yes. In a way, I like that part of Hinduism which says, you have to ultimately discover for yourself if the way you perceive the world and the belief structure born out of that perception can together form a way of living which has minimum conflict. For example, if I know this is fire and I will burn if I touch it, then it is a functioning knowledge. For that I don't need any faith. Then I am not afraid of the image. So, if the knowledge operating inside you, and the way you function, are in harmony then you are slightly better off in a dynamic balance. But there is no reality that you will discover at the end of the day, which you can call an absolute reality. If there is anything remotely close to that, the scientists will know it first! Ultimately, all realities have to be accepted through logic.

Scientific logic came out of the thought process of very sharp individuals, who could ponder systematically over long periods of time to see if a model is working. If somebody comes up with an alternative model which is better than the previous one, it is accepted. There is no obstinate belief structure there.

M: I want to raise this point that a model works only at a small scale. But when it comes to the aggregate the model fails.

Guha: Exactly. At this stage of our evolution this brain is singularly incapable of creating a model that can mimic all the aspects of life. When you have a model, you assign certain attributes or properties to the model and see if you can connect points A, B and C. Then you use the dynamic properties of this model to predict through an equation, that A follows B and C, and using that you can create the future points D, E and F. We have seen the power of this kind of analysis in the prediction of planetary motion. So, the model works very well there. But in the same way, if I use a model to connect the past incidents of my life, and create a psychological profile of myself, and try to project a future out of that, it will be an exercise in total futility. I can guarantee that. Since there is no equation to predict the future, I don't have a future!

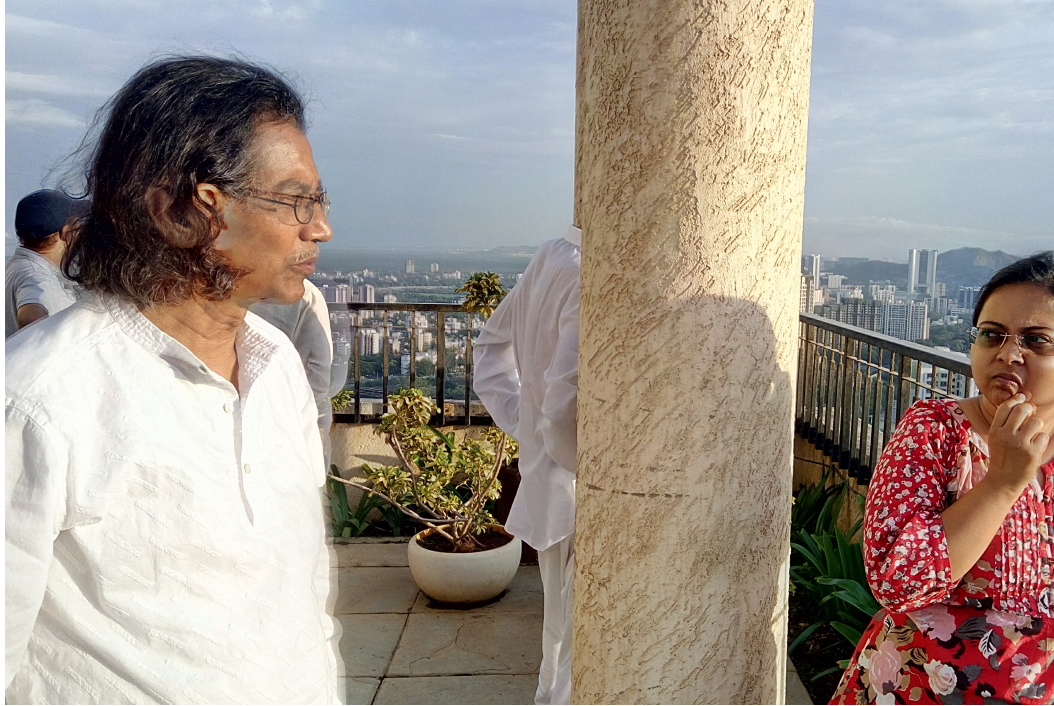
Laughter fills the room and people get to loosen up after an intense hour of discussion! I notice for the first time that I am drenched in sweat although the air conditioner is pumping cold air right above my head. It is time for dinner now. Guha usually likes to eat around 7:30 or 8 at night. He was full of laughter and lightness and it made me a little heady. He lights up the atmosphere around him, I thought. Then I wondered why the room still felt so hot. Was it just me? Anyway, it was time for everybody to leave for the night. I went with Sanjiv to his house in Mulund. There I met his wife Suchitra and his mother. They were so unassuming and warm that I felt at home in no time. I hit the bed soon and my thoughts drifted towards Guha. What is it in him that attracts people? How do people listen to him for hours without getting bored? Why does he seem so light and carefree? What is the mystery behind this man? He is definitely not like anybody I have met or known before.

I got up early next morning and remembered I had to go back to Pune today and join my new office tomorrow. The very idea, that I was about to get stuck in a job again, acted as an instant dampener. I pulled myself out of bed and took a shower and got dressed. We had coffee and then drove towards Powai to see Guha. He was in great spirits! He greeted us asked us to have breakfast with him and Julie. Other friends also started arriving. Guha started narrating how the mother of the apartment owner had met him privately this morning to discuss spiritual matters. "You are welcome to stay here as long as you want Guhaji. You say the same things my revered Guruji used to say," she had said. He felt he had nothing to say to her after that and the conversation ended! The day passed quickly and it was time for me to leave. Guha wanted to make sure I left Mumbai early enough to reach Pune before dark. He said to me, "I wish you all the best for your new job. Give it your best shot and I will see you soon in Pune. And call me after you reach home." He came down the building with his friends and saw me off as I got into a cab. My chest felt just a little heavy as his face vanished

from my sight. The next day, I joined office and sent Guha some photos of my swanky workspace. He was delighted. A few days later he asked me to recommend some good hotels in Pune where he could stay. He finally decided on Ginger which was about 30 mins from my house. Back at work, I met all the top executives at the Pune office. They told my boss they were impressed with me and believed I had a lot of potential to make a real difference in the Quality and Project Management department. Well, time will tell, I thought.

Guha was to arrive in Pune on Friday, the 10th of March from Chennai. He called me on 9th and said, "I will call you after I reach Pune, no matter how late." On Friday, I kept waiting for his call after finishing dinner. It was getting late and I felt sleepy. At 11 pm my phone rang. It was him! "Hello Tanusri! I just reached my hotel. Sorry I kept you awake," he said. "No, no, it's okay, I knew you would call! Thank you for taking time out from your busy schedule to come here. What time should I meet you tomorrow?", I asked. "Come as early as you can, I have come here just for you," he told me in Bengali. His words startled me and his deep voice kept ringing in my ears long after the call had ended. Next day, I reached his hotel around 7:30 in the morning and found him at the breakfast lounge on the ground floor with Julie and Golda. He invited me to have breakfast with him and started chatting with me about my work. We then went up and he showed me his room. He asked me if I had any pictures of my parents on my phone. I showed him a couple and he looked keenly at them but said nothing.

Soon a group of friends and their wives arrived from Mumbai and joined us at the outdoor seating area next to the hotel's entry gate. I saw many new faces this time. There was a lot of chattering and jokes flying right, left and center. Then someone mentioned something about Guha's Bengali poems which he had written almost two decades back. Suddenly, and I still remember this vividly, Guha pointed at me and said, "If there is anyone who can translate my poems into English, it is this girl" Everyone looked puzzled and surprised. I myself could not believe what he had just said. But then I forgot about it quickly. The chatting and merrymaking continued for the rest of the day. We went to a friend's aunt's house for coffee and drove around the city a bit. The next day started early as usual, and I was at his hotel early morning. Guha wanted to go visit some nearby place before driving to Mumbai. We started looking and picked the Lohagarh fort. On the spur of the moment I decided to travel to Mumbai with him even though it meant I would have to come back early morning tomorrow. He said, "Of course you can come, it will be very nice!" I felt a prick of sadness when I bid him farewell and returned to Pune the next day. Something in me felt empty and a little lost. He flew out of India a day later.



On the private terrace of Guha's apartment in Powai, Feb 2017

Guha's quote:

People want to hear what they like to hear. Basically, they want to guard the conditioning which they hold sacred.

15-Jul-20
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Kolkata - 29