

Manoj Mohanan:

Hello everybody and welcome to Policy 360. Today we are talking with someone whose TED Talk answers something I've always wondered about, but never thought to ask. How do people in some countries just seem better at some things than others? Like for instance, why do so many of the best runners in the world come from Jamaica? Or golf. If you haven't noticed lately, South Korea has turned out a lot of female golf champions. Or then think about a tiny country like Estonia. They have fewer than 1.3 million people, but they're churning out billion dollar software companies. Is it something in the water in these places? Well, my colleague Anirudh Krishna is a professor of public policy and political science here at Duke, and he has been studying this idea for more than a decade and he has some answers for us. I'm Manoj Mohanan, interim dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke.

Manoj Mohanan:

Welcome, Anirudh.

Anirudh Krishna:

Thank you for asking me to the program, Manoj.

Manoj Mohanan:

So Anirudh, tell us how you started thinking about this in the first place. It starts with a child in India, right?

Anirudh Krishna:

It's a long story, Manoj. For about 10 years, I was investigating poverty, why people become poor to start with, and why some of them move out of poverty. And one of those excursions led me to a village in Andhra Pradesh, India, and I was working with a team of young people and the inquiries were going fine. So I took a little walk in the village. All of a sudden, I heard this shout from behind and there was this kid who was inching his way toward me, pushing himself forward on a stout wooden stick because his right leg was withered by what I guessed was childhood polio. He comes up, I find out he's 13 years old, studies in the eighth grade at the local school, and his favorite subject is mathematics.

Anirudh Krishna:

So I think I know some mathematics. I fish out my diary and write three questions for this kid. He quickly answers them. I write three more and then another three harder ones. And he answers them all in a flash and then he whips the notebook around and writes three questions for me, which I find hard to answer.

Manoj Mohanan:

Nice.

Anirudh Krishna:

I get talking to this kid. His dad happens on the scene. I ask the dad, "What do you want your kid to grow up and become?" He says, "Ha ha ha. He wants to become an engineer. Ha ha ha." And I say, "What's the ha ha ha about? It's a pretty honest ambition." And the dad says, "No one from around here has ever become an engineer. No one ever can." So that got me going. So I changed the course of my research inquiry and over the next 10 days, spent a day each in the 10 surrounding villages, finding out

what the highest positions were that anybody in that village had reached in the last 10 years. And sure enough, that dad was right. No one had become an engineer. No one had become a doctor, a lawyer, an airline pilot, a star athlete, right?

Anirudh Krishna:

I mean, anything off note. The highest positions reached were those of school teacher and local official. Nothing wrong with being a teacher, you're one, but that's all they had achieved and that's all the kids growing up thought of becoming. Nothing else. And that moved me. How are larger achievements made in places where large achievements have not been made before? That's the fundamental question of development of progress, I thought. And we as social scientists didn't have good answers.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. So Anirudh, when you mentioned that nobody had become an engineer, the dad told you, nobody had become an engineer and that nobody can, does that say something about the formation of expectations? As a social scientist, how did you start thinking about the question? Is it about barriers? Is it about expectations or what was holding these kids back?

Anirudh Krishna:

My vague sense then, Manoj, because that's just the start of this journey.

Manoj Mohanan:

Sure.

Anirudh Krishna:

My vague sense then was they didn't have the right role models. No one ahead of them, no one like them had become anything else. And so they didn't know about those other possibilities. They didn't know about the pathways that would lead to those possibilities, how they could prepare themselves. And so they aimed only to become what was known and familiar.

Manoj Mohanan:

Right. Right. And so when you are thinking about these pathways into what's known and familiar, can you tell us a little more about the kinds of talent that you, in your research program, going beyond India, what kinds of talent spaces are we talking about?

Anirudh Krishna:

So then Manoj, I have to confess for several years after meeting this kid, Chandru was his name in Andhra Pradesh. I was at wits end. I mean, I didn't know how to answer this question of how are large and significant leaps of social mobility made. Everything I'd read in the theory said it's more of the same. More of the same remedies which produce small increments, will produce large increments. It didn't seem very satisfying until one day, quite serendipitously, there was a conversation I was having with undergraduates in one of my classes and Jamaica came up because Usain Bolt must've won one of his grand races and that stuck somewhere in my mind because I started thinking, how is it that Jamaicans like Bolt and others have been able to make these large leaps of achievement? I find out many of these kids had come from humble homes in the deep interior.

Anirudh Krishna:

When the kid I met in Andhra Pradesh wasn't able to make or even think of making a large leap, how were so many Jamaicans making these large leaps from humble homes to world champion status again and again and again? What was happening there? So I went to Jamaica. I went to Jamaica. I hired two Jamaican college students as research assistants. We interviewed dozens of sports people, the successful ones, the not so successful ones, coaches, managers, journalists, historians, administrators, virtually anybody who had an opinion. We dug into the archives and the story that emerged was fascinating.

Manoj Mohanan:

Tell us.

Anirudh Krishna:

It's got nothing to do with genetics. It's got nothing to do with geography. I mean, Jamaicans laughed at me when I mentioned genetics. They said, "Oh, if it's about the fast twitch muscle, then the Dominicans and the Haitians should have been winning more medals than us or people back in Sierra Leone or Cote d'Ivoire." And so it's not about genetics. No champion's kid has become a champion. It's much more complicated story of building an infrastructure of participation and competition.

Manoj Mohanan:

An infrastructure of participation and competition. Okay.

Anirudh Krishna:

Which I later in these same inquiries started calling a ladder of opportunity because it takes these runner kids with potential, with interest step by step. The first step, which is accessible to all kids, is the school level running meet, which happens every year, but not in any haphazard manner. It's organized on a calendar of the Jamaican Athletics Federation. The kids may be running barefoot, but the timing equipment is world-class. The judges report to the Jamaican Athletics Federation. Kids who do well here move up to parish and district level competitions where talent scouts from high schools are roving who pick up the best talent and take it up to the next step of the ladder, which is high schools. The step beyond that is professional clubs set up in collaboration with universities, which didn't exist until 1990, but then was set up first one and then several others.

Anirudh Krishna:

And the interesting thing, Manoj, is that each time a step was added to the ladder, Jamaican's Olympic records ratcheted upwards. They were winning two to three medals per Olympics before the professional clubs were set up, and then it became double digits.

Manoj Mohanan:

I see.

Anirudh Krishna:

So the performance is directly correlated to investments in the ladder of opportunity, and the inference seems to be that if you build it, people will come. You build a ladder of opportunity and the talent will arise to climb it.

Manoj Mohanan:

Time to climb it. So there are two things in there that you mentioned. As you know, I grew up in India. We didn't have that many resources growing up. I remember some of my colleagues, classmates, I was never athletic. Let's just be honest about this. But I had friends who were really good at athletics, at running and jumping, high jump in particular, but after that initial stage you described, there would very quickly come a stage where they would run into resource constraints. So like the district level or the county level meets you would go to, they didn't have the equipment. I noticed you mentioned that the timers were world-class and the equipment was world-class. So part of it, I'm also taking away from what you said is in order for this ladder to function, there is competition, but you also meant participation. And for participation to happen, is it true that we need infrastructure to keep this ladder functional along the way?

Anirudh Krishna:

You know, Manoj, it's interesting you mentioned growing up in India and people dropping out of athletics because the facilities weren't there, the coaching wasn't there, the equipment wasn't there, no one cared about the standards. Another big reason that people dropped out of athletics, even when those facilities were there is because their parents didn't think it was a risk worth taking.

Manoj Mohanan:

Taking.

Anirudh Krishna:

Right?

Manoj Mohanan:

True.

Anirudh Krishna:

Everybody can see that if someone starts out on a ladder, only one in several thousand is going to become a world champion, but that's not all they do in Jamaica. I mentioned that they'd set up professional clubs and collaborations with universities. That's a very carefully designed strategy because elite athletes in training are simultaneously taking college classes that prepare them for alternative careers. And these off ramps from the ladder, which I call soft landings, have given rise to alternative careers of coaches, managers, journalists, sports journalists, historians, chroniclers, managers of businesses related to sports. There's a huge sports tourism industry. So at a rough guess, among Jamaica's total of three million people, 50,000 people are employed in its sports economy. It's not just running, it's not just a hobby thingy, it's not just for glory. It's an absolutely important sector of the economy and there's a separate chapter about it in the national plan.

Manoj Mohanan:

Wow.

Anirudh Krishna:

Now that's what really attracted me to these ladders of opportunity. And as I researched the Korean golfers, you mentioned the Estonian tech entrepreneurs, Nigerian, many others. In each case, what's

happening is that the superstars are the visible face of the enterprise, but there are hundreds of others in their shadows who are the also rans, the lesser role models. And it's in observing how even those who don't make it to the top make good lives for themselves that parents and kids are more eager, less hesitant to enter and the entire talent pool gets attracted. To produce champions, you have to have, as it were, these opportunities of upward mobility for the also ramps, these off ramps.

Manoj Mohanan:

Absolutely. And I really like this, what you call the soft landing, the idea that it's really a path. Not everybody's going to make it till there. This also then reminds me, during the Cold War era, you would see countries specializing. These are not necessarily countries who had great levels of human capital development across the board, but then you would have the gymnasts from Russia, for example, from USSR. There'd be a handful of sports that you could sort of identify some countries are going to do really well in. I recognize that what was happening under these communist regimes was very different, but is there any sort of common thread there between the ladder you see and the state run infrastructure for specific sports?

Anirudh Krishna:

I'm very queasy about this question, Manoj, because of the 20 or so ladders I've studied so far closely, there are two, the ladder for hackers in North Korea and the ladder for civil servants who are also CCP members in China. And in these two totalitarian systems, the entire ladder, the production of the human capital is an enterprise of the state centrally managed to a design set by the state. I mean, there are hackers in North Korea because the supreme leader wants a source of foreign currency and wants to have this nuisance weapon at his command.

Anirudh Krishna:

But in every other place, the state is a bit actor and there's good reason why it should be so. I mean, every other ladder of opportunity is a enterprise of multiple independent actors loosely coordinated. For example, in Jamaica, these local races, the school races I was mentioning are organized by associations of school teachers. The high school level races are managed by the Association of Vice Principles. At each of these races, the Jamaican Athletics Federation is sending down its volunteers. And then the country's government helps by building the infrastructure of stadia, by setting standards, providing some supplementary assistance. The private companies step in by providing sponsorships and by sponsoring races. So it's a whole cast of characters.

Anirudh Krishna:

In Estonia, similarly, the government set the ball rolling initially in the early '90s when the country just came out of its post-Soviet ruin, but then it was private actors who stepped up and today it's a whole bunch of civil society actors who run this effort, thereby giving it rootedness and stability in society. Governments can be very fickle, you know?

Manoj Mohanan:

Indeed.

Anirudh Krishna:

And private enterprise too.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. I really like how you sort of took my question that was about thinking about the communist regime, but also then planted it right back into this idea of there's the good and the bad when states try to implement this in a much more authoritarian manner. So before I get to the good and bad, I just wanted to go back to an earlier point you made about these societies climbing out of poverty. You and I have had a small conversation in the past about this as well as so much of this is about poverty alleviation as well, but the research on poverty alleviation is often thought about thinking about the upward mobility of certain individuals or trying to create opportunities for individuals. What I've noticed in the work you've described so far is this idea that you're also creating a scaffolding. So for individuals who don't necessarily make it up the path, there is a scaffolding. And I wonder if you can comment about that. And then I'd like to talk a little bit about the pros and cons as well.

Anirudh Krishna:

Yeah. Yeah. I think the scaffolding is exactly the right image. I mean, what we are talking about, whether it's poverty reduction or whether it's progress on a grander scale is all about social mobility. It's about this vision of climbing ladders, right? Now, social mobility theory as it exists today has so far talked about a number of factors that can help with social mobility, but nearly all of them are agency factors or process factors which enhance an individual's capability to climb a ladder like early childhood nutrition, like better role models, like peer effects, like higher quality education, more cultural capital. All of that makes me more powerful for climbing the ladder, but you need the ladder. You need multiple ladders, right? Individuals are differently abled.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yes.

Anirudh Krishna:

Not everybody can ace the standardized examination, but people can be great athletes, people can be great artists, people can be great coders, people can be great musicians. And why doesn't a child growing up have an environment in which he or she can try out different ladders and pick the one at which they're happiest and most fulfilled and rise to the limit of their capabilities. To me, the whole underdevelopment and poverty that you describe persists because talents are squelched. They are not connected with commensurate opportunity.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. Thank you, Anirudh. And so now, if you think about creating systems, let's say ladders that will help individuals, not just one or two who are really talented, but also a broader group of individuals go up the ladder with the scaffolding. Are there any downsides to trying to implement an idea like this? As you think about it, what do you think could be potential downsides here?

Anirudh Krishna:

There could be two or three different kinds of downsides, Manoj. One could be a slipshod implementation of the idea. For example, someone's very enthusiastic say of creating a facility to train the best boxers or the best archers and they invest a lot of money in creating a national academy, state of the art national academy, which is terrific. But where is the pathway that a potentially talented boxer will take to come from a village in the deep interior of Jamaica, like Usain Bolt did, to Kingston, the

capital? Where is that link? Very often the effort of creating a new capability, a new activity potential is centered just on the top of the ladder and the rest of the ladder is forgotten. That's one big downside.

Manoj Mohanan:

I can see.

Anirudh Krishna:

The other big downside is when the seven core principles, which I induce from my study of ladders, there could be others, there could be a different version, but this is what I presently understand all ladders have in common when those principles are not observed. And one of those principles, the most fundamental one is open access, not just in theory, but actually going out there where the poor kids are and making it easier for them...

Manoj Mohanan:

To come in.

Anirudh Krishna:

... to try their hands and show their talents, right?

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah.

Anirudh Krishna:

And the third one is transparent and objective standards, so that there's no nepotism, there's no favoritism. In Jamaica, that's why the timing equipment is world-class because that's all that matters, your timing. The lack of not doing it properly, that's the big danger. And then the other kind of danger is of course using the same principles to build the wrong kind of ladder, like North Korea and hackers.

Manoj Mohanan:

Of course.

Anirudh Krishna:

They followed the same seven principles, but-

Manoj Mohanan:

People are doing something else with it.

Anirudh Krishna:

... look where it ended up.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. No, that's fascinating. So now that you have this research completed, you're working on a book, are you working on other extensions of this research as well? Is this still work in progress?

Anirudh Krishna:

I think I'm going to keep working on this for a very long time, Manoj.

Anirudh Krishna:

First of all, it's a very hopeful project. It shows you something that can be done, is being done, and is producing results, not right away, but after four years, five years, six years producing results, right? Even as I was researching the Korean golfers, Thai woman golfers arose to steal the thunder from the Koreans, brand new ladder, didn't exist before, same principles, right? There's a newish ladder of opportunity for chess players in Chennai, close to where you grew up, which has already produced several grand masters.

Manoj Mohanan:

Indeed.

Anirudh Krishna:

And that soft landings part of it has produced more than 10,000 good jobs for coaches, online commentators and so on, arbiters, which is now a sector of Chennai's economy. Imagine if a private employer were to come in promising 10,000 new jobs, that's what chess is doing already. So I think that a lot of people worldwide are already aware of the possibilities. They were not waiting for my book or for my enunciation of these design principles. They arrived at them independently. I mean, the Chinese built their civil service copying the Singaporean model, plus also drawing elements from their own Mandarin tradition. The Thais I'm sure learned from the South Koreans.

Anirudh Krishna:

And then in Kenya, as I was researching the athletics, the marathon ladder, I found a new cycling ladder being set up by a Australian and Singaporean entrepreneur. So what I'd like to do now is to build an international community where these folks can come together at least virtually and be in conversation with each other. And I'd like to involve our students in this effort. I'm teaching one experimental class this semester and they are very, very happy to be part of the idea.

Manoj Mohanan:

Nice.

Anirudh Krishna:

And I'd like to involve students either as validating and verifying someone else's candidate idea or to go out and research their own ideas. So yeah, that's what I'd like to do.

Manoj Mohanan:

So do you anticipate that in the future, along with the book, there'd be like a compendium of examples of ideas that would sort of grow over time?

Anirudh Krishna:

I hope so. I mean, a research assistant and I are working on building this website that will be the international community.

Manoj Mohanan:

Nice.

Anirudh Krishna:

At some point, I'd like that community to run itself and render me out of the job.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. That's wonderful. Well, I wish you luck. Thank you so much for this fascinating work you've been doing, Anirudh.

Anirudh Krishna:

Thanks, Manoj.

Manoj Mohanan:

Anirudh Krishna is the Edgar T. Thompson professor of public policy and political science at Duke University. His latest book is *The Broken Ladder: The Paradox and Potential of India's One Billion*, and he continues to work on this new idea of the latter based on all these successes he's just told us in this particular podcast. Anirudh's TED Talk that I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation has close to a half a million views. It's called *Pillars of Unlocked Potential*. We'll have links to Anirudh's book, his TED Talk and his ongoing work in our show notes. We'll be back soon for another conversation. I'm Manoj Mohanan.