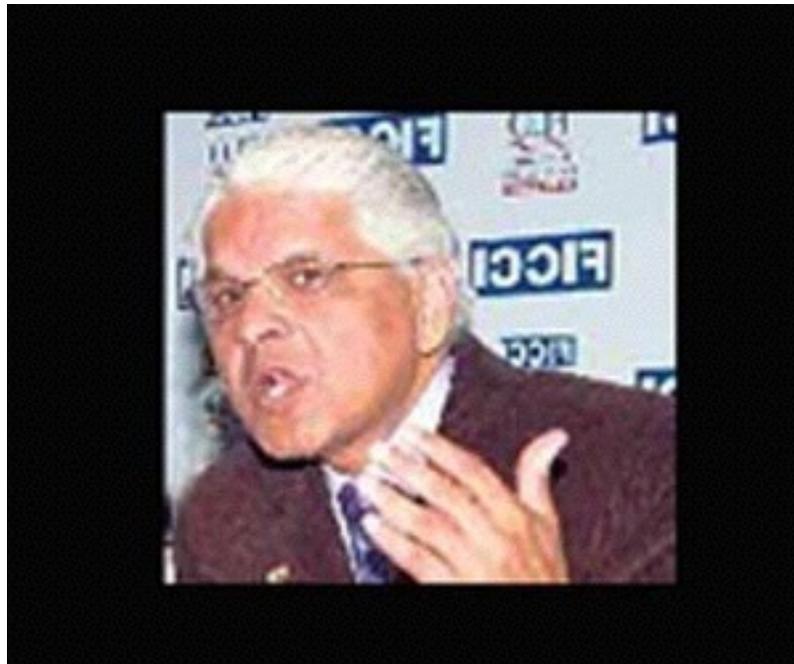


Ashwini Kumar

Union Minister of State for Commerce and Industry

'Happiness is living with a clear conscience'

Sun Dec 23 2007



Ashwini Kumar, Union Minister of State for Commerce and Industry.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is the pervasive recognition of a divine presence in and around me at all times.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

I believe there is some presence which I cannot see, but which I have been able to feel at every critical moment of my life. It is a force beyond the domain of human power, like an invisible hand, always around, warning me, dictating to me, nudging me, guiding me.

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

When I was a child, I wanted to be a lawyer, and nothing else. And I went that route with some success. But politics and the idea of public service were in my blood—my grandfather, my parents all went to jail as freedom fighters. And as the only son, I somehow felt I had to carry forward their work. So the larger purpose is to do good for those who cannot help themselves. I have been through many ups and downs, but at the end of the day, I am grateful to God for the opportunity to make an impact. Still, despite being a minister, I do not believe for a moment that this is all there is to life.

What is spirituality for you in your day-to-day life?

I do not go through long rituals or prayers, though praying is for me an important way of focusing and concentrating. I always feel a divine presence in and around me, and try to translate it through compassion and feeling—this I would say is day-to-day spirituality.

What is the role of spirituality in your life as a politician?

To me, politics and spirituality cannot be divorced. The former is a manifestation of the latter as I try to translate spirituality into doing good for others. Of course politics is full of compromises, but these should not be with the core. And obviously, people behaving otherwise seem at times to move ahead faster, but who has gained more at the end of the day, who has grown more—the one with more money and power or the one who has managed to retain his soul and dignity?

Can you tell us about a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

Since childhood, I have always had a sense of the presence of God. But subsequently, I had a large number of experiences that kept reinforcing my belief in the divine order. For instance, I went through the following pattern time and again: I would very strongly want something; I would do everything in my power to obtain it, yet nothing would happen. I would be so distraught. And then soon thereafter, something much bigger, much greater would take place. I had moments of utter despair and suffering but always it would wane in a way that strengthened my faith. It was the case for instance at the time of my father's death, to whom I was very attached.

Around the same time, I strongly believed I should get a Lok Sabha ticket to contest an election—I was still young and inexperienced. I could not understand why I didn't get the ticket. I was very upset and I had a difficult time. But something inside me was constantly telling me to keep going, no matter what, and in the end things evolved positively—to me that inner voice was the presence of God.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

From childhood, I have been exposed to all sorts of traditions and influences—the Gurdwaras of Punjab where we come from, my paternal grandfather who was a great Arya Samaji leader, my maternal grandfather, a very noble man with whom I spent my early years and so on. So all these influences and more are a part of my being.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be?

I would be happy if it were what I have had this time, but with less pressures.

If there were one question you could ask God, what would it be?

Rather than a question, I would have two prayers: first, as long as I live, I should not in any way be dependent on anyone else; and second, to give me enough strength to walk away from the limelight when at the peak, to fade away on my own terms rather than being pushed aside, choosing the time of my exit in a manner that promotes my dignity.

What is your idea of happiness?

To live as far as possible with a clear conscience—which is of course subject to human follies.