

Urvashi Butalia

Publisher

'If there were a God, it would be a female'

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Publisher Urvashi Butalia believes her career is not just a job and gets excited about every new book, even after 30 years in the field.

What does the word spirituality mean to you?

Actually, almost nothing. But I would say it is that moment in the morning when I am doing yoga, sitting in meditation, and experiencing an almost perfect stillness, an acute kind of silence. At that moment I am really alert and completely aware of everything around me, yet distanced from it. I can sharply hear every sound, every bird song but I can also hear the silence. And that is possibly the most perfect, the most spiritual moment I experience.

Without it I do not think I could survive. It is an essential part of my day. It prepares me to deal with the daily challenges of life, and to do so with calm and equanimity, which otherwise would probably not be there.

Did you grow up in a religious environment?

Not at all. My parents were not atheists but they definitely were not bothered by the practice of religion. The only time we focused on religion a bit was

when my grand-mother would stay with us, and take us to the Gurudwara. We would participate in the langar, do some seva, listen to the Sikh singing which is so beautiful. This was the only (and quite intermittent) religious element of our daily life.

How did you get drawn to the world of publishing?

I don't think I had any strong ambition to become this or that as a child. My mother was a teacher and my father a journalist. So the world of writing and teaching were very familiar. Once I finished my masters' degree it was somehow expected that I would take one of those professions. But teaching English literature was not tempting. By pure accident, a freelance job at Oxford University Press fell into my lap. I took it and simply fell in love with publishing. I decided it was what I wanted to do and have stayed with it ever since.

How did Kali for Women happen?

In the early seventies when I first joined publishing, the women's movement was just beginning to be strong in Delhi. I got involved in it. Many discussions and questions were being raised. But I found there was no reflection of it in the books published at the time – nobody was interested in what women were doing, saying, trying, thinking. The managers of my publishing house did not seem to be interested when I mentioned it to them. So I thought I should do it myself. That is how I jumped into it and decided I should start publishing on women.

It's been a rich journey, hasn't it?

Absolutely, it's been a very rich journey. And I would not change any of it. I must say that 30 odd years on, I still get excited by every new book, the whole thing has not paled for me and I know there is so much more to be done. I simply love it and never get bored of it. I find it completely fulfilling.

It is not just a job. It is what I believe in. It combines what I am politically involved in, my professional capabilities and my personal interests. I am so lucky!

I would like to do so much more with it. But I must be aware of my limitations. And I will have to push myself into retirement.

Why would you ever retire?

Because everybody at some stage has to leave space for new ideas. Maybe I should not retire from publishing altogether but at least I should step out. Especially if you created an entity, you have to let go of it at some point, as it outgrows you, you need to move back and let it take a life of its own. And I actually think that time is not too far off.

But your knowledge, experiences, ideas and energies can touch so many?

Yes. But if you stay in the same position for too long, you block the way for others who might be very creative and create new opportunities. I have been thinking about this for a while now. And I really think there is a moment to move out. So much is being done, lots of people with very different and very exciting energies are there. New ideas will always proliferate. There are many ways of doing things. So we will see.

You have been dealing with quite challenging issues for decades now, but cynicism of frustration never took a hold of you?

No. I am basically an optimist. And I am a very content person. I enjoy what I do. I do not have this burning desire to climb over the highest mountains. I am just happy with the fact that what I do has some value and meaning. I cannot remember the time I was angry or resentful or frustrated. Maybe I am fooling myself but this is how I am.

It rather sounds like wisdom to me!

(laughs) If you somehow can do that – just understand your capabilities and enjoy doing meaningful things – then you are fine.

What about the sense of randomness, or of preordained events in life?

Things are what you make of them. There is a randomness for sure. But there is also a way in which deliberate agencies can interact with that randomness to change directions. The randomness is the chance element, the accidental event. And the deliberate agency is the way you can shape your life. But I don't think those things are preordained. Only the fact of birth and death being inevitable are.

So there is no outer force interacting with you, a force that some may call God?

Do I believe in God or something like that? I find it very difficult to believe in something I have not seen and I do not know. There might well be other forces at work but I do not know them so I cannot guess. The only thing I know is that if there were a god, it would be a female, and not this old bearded robe-wearing white man as in so many images. Why not a naked black full-breasted woman? That is a failure of imagination.

What about the gods and goddesses in the Indian context?

Those thousands of figures are friendly souls you interact with every day. They are all so human! They steal, they fight, they are a mirror of our own struggles and desires.

At times of major challenge, where is your refuge, where do you find your energy?

Really somewhere in myself. Yes friends and family are there as a support structure giving me a lot of strength in a very deep way. But mostly in some inner core strength, relying on myself. That is where I hope I would find it.

If there were such a thing as a Goddess, would there be a mystery you'd like to ask Her about?

Is there a way to survive without men? Not that I dislike men, but it is a question I'd be interested in. Is creation possible without men? Technology is definitely changing the answer to that question. Then how do men get to the point of controlling everything?

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose for the next round?

I do not believe in rebirth. You spend whatever time you are meant to live on this earth and then you go, getting replaced by other human beings. But were there such a thing, I would definitely want to be a woman. For the rest, I would be happy with whatever I am given to experience with.

What is your idea of happiness?

Living a contented, full life. But it is difficult for me to itemize it. I know happiness when I see it. And I actually see it most of the time in my life. It is not that I do not see the dreadful things happening around, but small things are a cause of joy all the time.

Maybe it is wrong to feel that way and one should be upset or angry constantly! The whole trajectory of feminism has actually been one of anger against injustice, but the possibility of battling it also exists. That is why there definitely can be happiness.