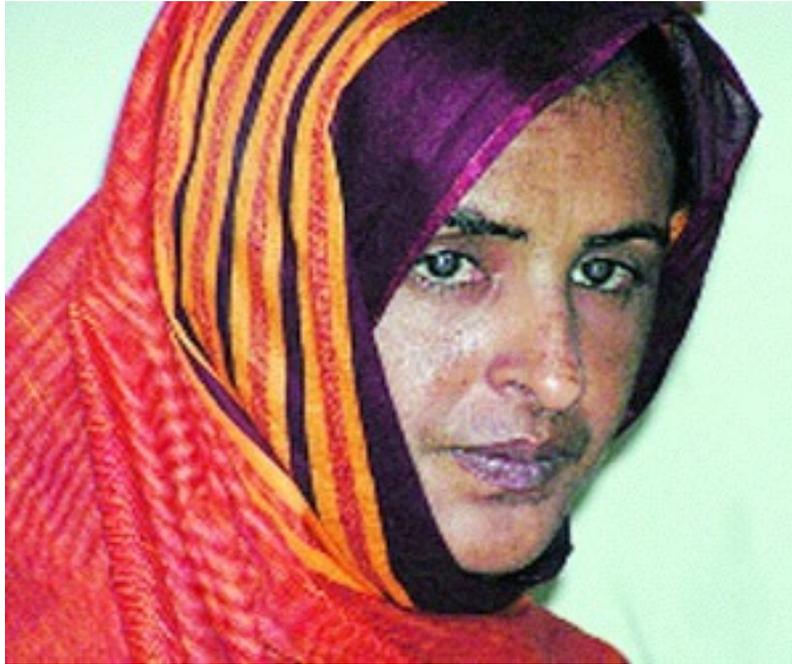


Mukhtaran Mai

'God had nothing to do with it'

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Mukhtaran Mai was gang-raped in June 2002, as a form of honour revenge in a village in Pakistan's rural Punjab. She became known internationally when in an unprecedented move, she decided to sue her attackers—and won. With her settlement money, she opened a centre for refuge and education of women in her village.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about all the things that cannot be done by man, but that are always achievable by God.

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

I have tremendous faith in God. He guides and protects me. From the time we are born, He controls our lives.

You may ask where was the protection in June 2002. But I should never blame God for what happened then. It was a sin committed by human beings. God had nothing to do with it. Rather, God gave me tremendous strength all along thereafter.

Was it an event that shaped or strengthened your beliefs in a significant way?

It actually strengthened my faith, which has grown ever stronger since then.

In the days following the rape, I considered suicide, which is expected most of the time from a girl or a woman who has lost her honour in that way. Those who rape her do not even need to use weapons to kill her. Rape kills her.

For days I did not eat, cry, or speak. I had made up my mind to kill myself. I would swallow some acid and die, putting an end to the shame that tormented my family and me. I begged my mother for acid. But she refused. She stayed by my side day and night, preventing me from any move. For days I felt I was going mad with helplessness.

And then finally, out of nowhere, I suddenly felt a surge of energy, like a divine force and God telling me I had to fight for justice and live. I felt that if I was to die, they would have to do it with their own hands – and I might just as well die trying to fight for the truth. All I wanted was for God to guide my path and give me strength, which is what happened.

At first, only my mother and my prayers supported me. My father initially told me to keep quiet. My elder brother even threatened suicide if I went public. But I did, and went to court, bringing the perpetrators to justice.

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

I am convinced that all human beings have a certain purpose in life. No matter what trouble we may encounter, we do have an aim. In my case, I have only one purpose and one mission: give education to young girls, make them aware of their rights, so that what happened to me does not happen to them.

I was an illiterate woman, unaware of my rights. During my case, only literate people helped me – lawyers fought my case, journalists publicized it. Illiterate people mostly threatened me. The courage that should have come from my father and brother mostly came from outsiders. To this day, many women in the area are afraid to empathize with me, afraid of men, of conservative social values and of a male dominated society.

So I felt that education would be the key and only solution. It would be the only way to make sure that no woman would endure what I did, that the cruelty I see around me every day would cease, that the next generation could have a better life.

With the money I was granted by the government in the case's settlement, I opened a school for girls, to kill illiteracy and help make tomorrow's women stronger. I hope that more and more such schools can be opened. This is clearly the goal of my life.

So whatever I went through obviously hurts much. Occasionally it even feels too difficult to live with. But when the pain is too strong, I just go to the school, look at the girls and spend time with them. And gradually, somehow, the pain subsides.

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

There is no timetable for remembering God. I feel He stays with me all the time. He is there constantly, I think of Him at every moment of my life.

My life has often been threatened since I have been back to the village, by landowners and others. But I feel He is with me: my life and death are in His hands.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

It is there all the time in my work. It is what motivates me and strengthens me to do what I do.

At the beginning, I had to go and beg parents to let their daughters come to my school. For weeks I went door-to-door trying to convince them, pledging to pay for uniforms and books myself. Many preferred to have them work in the fields or do housework. Also, they were worried the girls would be less docile and more difficult to marry off. But in the end, 300 girls' parents agreed. Today, we have several schools, teaching math, science, Urdu, English, Islamic Studies and social studies, with special chapters on women's rights, human rights and women empowerment.

We also have an ambulance service and a women's aid group.

My home and courtyard are full of women and girls who come to see me, not only because of rape, but also because of domestic violence – disfigured by acid attacks or beatings – and other misfortunes. Sometimes I can help them, sometimes I can't.

What are your spiritual inspirations?

Everyone in my family is a believer and we were all brought up that way, with a strong faith in God.

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

I do not have any question to ask. I accept life and destiny as they come. I only pray to God for my children, so that they achieve their destiny and goals in life.

What is your idea of happiness?

Happiness lies in helping out anyone who seeks any kind of help from me. That is what makes me feel peaceful. When I look in the eyes of those children, I feel some happiness. When they score good grades at their exams, I have immense pleasure and pride.

Beyond that, I have never ending dreams. I feel I am living a dream after hell. And I do not want to see it finish.