

# Priya Dutt

Congress MP

'In my work, I can't really be myself.'

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**Priya Dutt is a Congress MP from Mumbai.**

**What does spirituality mean to you?**

It is what comes from within, from my heart, from the kind of human being I am.

It is not about religion or any ritualistic behaviour, even though many people equate the two. I am not the kind of person who goes to the mandir every day, perform pujas all the time, engage in regular fasting and so on.

What matters to me is to try and do the right thing as a human being, do what my conscience tells me, have the right values. In Hinduism, as long as you follow your duties and the right path, you are doing the work of God. So spirituality is about the way I feel inside, how I conduct my life, how I affect others, how I make a difference in the world.

**How did you find out your way of making a difference in the world?**

It took me a long time. I was a quite confused kid.

I started off wanting to be a doctor, then a journalist. I got involved in the media, through some short documentary. But I never felt like making a film just for the heck of it. It had to make a difference, to create some impact, to spread some message, to reflect society in a way or another. Additionally, I began working with my mother for the spastic Society. Later on I became a Trustee and worked there for three years.

Essentially, what matters to me is that whatever I do should affect people's lives, even in the smallest way. I realized over time that more than anything else, contributing in that way is what gives me genuine satisfaction, and therefore is my calling.

I never was an ambitious person, nor am I today. I left the media because of it – I never had the aggression and drive required to thrive in it. Often I would wonder how I can lack ambition to such an extent. But this is who I am, for the better or worse. I do things because it makes me happy and I am satisfied with it.

### **So why politics?**

Politics came to me by default. It definitely was not a choice of mine. I was pushed into it after my father's demise. I was four months pregnant at the time and I most certainly had no intention whatsoever to enter politics. I had never thought of it before. My father had never encouraged me in that direction. Quite the contrary. He had been involved with it for 25 years and had seen every side of it. He knew how cut-throat it is and how much "in your face", ambitious and aggressive one needs to be to survive in it. He knew me better than that, and saw that I am not that kind of person.

Today, I try and look at it as an opportunity to serve the people and have an impact, to contribute much more than had I not been in politics. I look at it as access which I can use for the right reasons. Some people pursue it for power, money and so on. They think of success as the growth of one's political chart – reaching from point A to point B, then C then D, from member of Parliament to other responsibilities and so on. I do not see it that way. If I can influence some lives in a good way, for instance as an inspiration for the youth, it is pretty good for me.

### **How do you find the energy to stay in politics?**

It is pretty tough. But I try to prioritize. Some people eat, breathe, live politics. I don't. I am Priya Dutt, an every day girl in my normal life. I go to the market, I do my groceries; it gives me a semblance of normalcy, and the feeling that I am still grounded. I like the simple things of life, spending time with my family and my kids.

Besides, I do not look at anything as permanent. I know that everything comes and goes. Fame or money are here today; tomorrow they may not be here anymore. So you can't become too dependent on anything. Do you work and keep your feet on the ground. That is what will help you survive through the ups and downs of life.

Tomorrow, if I don't have all of this it won't make a big difference. My life will still go on, I will still have my family, I will still be who I am.

So I prioritize and my priority will always be my children and my family.

Therefore, I don't travel too much, I try and work as much as possible from Bombay. Also, I don't do too much of political lobbying because I can't afford to do it – I have enough responsibilities, I should only take as much as I can handle and deliver.

**All along, have you felt the presence of a protective or guiding force in your life?**

I completely believe in this, especially looking at the way our family lives have unfolded and all that we have gone through. It's been crazy, right from the time of my mum's illness and her death, my brother's illness and recovery, and so on. We have gone through huge ups and downs.

Many, in such a situation, would have lost faith in God. But I give credit to my father from keeping us faithful: he kept saying that had there been no God, we simply could have never faced all of it; we would have become so broken and bitter, so negative. Instead, we have come out stronger, more positive in our approach to life.

It was not always the case though. Immediately after my mother's passing away, we went through a really rough time. Before her demise, while she was undertaking treatment in America, I kept praying, hoping God would listen to me and save her. After she died, I realized I had prayed so much but to no avail. So I was incredibly angry. My father also was very angry. We dismantled the mandir we had at home, took all the pictures of gods and threw them into the sea. How could she have died? Why so soon?

That period was terrible.

And it was such a strange feeling. We use God or a superior being as a crutch, something to hold on to. So suddenly if it is not there anymore, it feels so weird, so empty. You feel disoriented, your confidence level falls, you feel so insecure.

But I was 12 or 13 years' old and I had to connect and relate to someone, I had to vent out my anger. I had felt close to Shirdi Sai Baba since I was a child. So I talked to him. I would speak out, complain, lash out. And it felt good. Gradually life came back. I felt life must go on. I started to understand what life is about: we come into this world but one day we have to go, and it could be any day.

One day we were on the terrace with my father, and I told him: you should not feel sad, because even though mum is not here with us anymore, look up at the stars and see that she is there; she is always there with us, looking after us.

My dad later told me that everything changed for him that day. He realized he had three children to take care of and could not throw his life away.

Yet, it was a tremendously challenging time. Sanjaya was twenty and on drugs, which was another big project dad had to deal with. Relentlessly, we had to face one test after another.

All throughout though, I felt my mother was around to look after us. Sanjaya went through so much and if he is still around, I feel it is very much thanks to her blessings. Also, there were many instances when I very concretely felt her presence – for instance one night I felt her in my room, sitting on my bed, and I could see the blankets bend down. I believe in spirits, and I know that when they leave their loved ones, they hang around a bit to see that they are fine.

I also felt it extremely strongly with my father. He had been our rock, he had protected us and shielded us from everything. He would bear the brunt of life and only the trickle would fall at times down on us. We were so happy. He never brought home the pressures of politics. I don't know how he did it. Home was his fortress. So when he died, we were suddenly exposed to so much and out of the blue had to relate to so many people we had no clue about. I was four months pregnant, I had barely married a year before. And got forced into politics. I kept asking "why me?" I was just starting my life for God's sake, but everybody was insisting. I had always accompanied my father for his social events and so on. So many people automatically thought it should be me.

So the only way I managed to get through was thanks to some special guidance. I delivered by caesarean and four days later, I began a gruelling campaigning schedule. Every two hours I had to be back home to feed the baby. There were all those men around. It was so uncomfortable. It was awful. I have no idea how I managed to do it. There had to be some force taking me through it all. I always say it was my mother's and father's guidance. Everything flowed and worked perfectly. I had to constantly make decisions regarding things I was completely clueless about. I could not ask anyone about it. It was so tough on me. But I would close my eyes, ask my dad what to do. And invariably, the decisions I made were the right ones. The flow was perfect. Until one day, I distinctly felt he was not there looking after me anymore. I felt something amiss, as if he had said: "as of now, you are ready to be on your own".

So there definitely is such a thing as a guiding force. And also, I feel that whatever happens is meant to. And no matter how much you love or hate it, you can only try and do your best given those circumstances. I had so many plans in life and everything worked against them. My husband and I had just gotten married, with our first baby, I was working in the spastic society, doing little things, loving my simple life. And suddenly we were thrown into that extremely intense life. Within the five years of our marriage, we have gone through a complete lifetime. So much has happened. As if we went from the A to Z of life within the shortest fathomable timespan. And that is how life goes. The only thing we can do is adjust, adapt, try to do our best and flow with it, trying not to stress about it.

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

We were brought up in a quite ritualistic way. And sometimes I feel guilty not to perform all those rituals. I only say a quick thank you to God in the morning and evening. I ask for strength and courage to face life. And that's all, nothing else.

I do not believe in all those astrologers telling me to wear this and that kind of ring or cloth, do one puja or another, for particular things to happen. I have actually kept a record of all the astrologers we had gone through. And nothing came through. What happened in my life has nothing to do with what they said. I was supposed to get married at 26 and of course I didn't, nobody predicted I would get into politics, nor that I would have two sons, and so on and so forth. It all is rubbish.

### **So how do you resource yourself?**

I draw energy from nature. When I look at the trees, at the birds, at the sky, at the expanse of the universe, then I feel there is God. Those are the moments I connect with spirituality. When I go to my farmhouse, it is so peaceful and beautiful. I find rejuvenation in that quiet and calm atmosphere, with something more precious than anything else: the freedom to be myself.

In this work, very often, I feel I can't be myself. You constantly have to be a certain way, talk a certain way, be politically correct. You are constantly judged. You are abused if you can't do someone's work and you are abused if you can do it. I try not to let it affect me too much. I feel there is so much to life, so much beauty.

I also find tremendous energy from my children, from the simple things of life, like sitting with my three years' old who keeps asking me about the how and why of things.

My work is grueling. There are endless functions, events, meetings. It is a constant race. So I must make it a conscious effort to take moments of reflection, of peace, to refuel and connect to myself.

### **What have been your main spiritual inspirations?**

First of all, I would think of Brian Weiss "Many lives, many masters". I related to it so much. It explained so many things in my life, my relationships, certain events etc.

Then, I would think of Swami Mukthananda, who was my mother's guru, and Gurumai who succeeded him. Not that I often go to the ashram, meditate or chant. But it has been a tremendous source of inspiration and strength.

When Sanjaya was in prison for the first time, I found a lot of solace in the ashram. It was ten years after my mother's demise and I had never gone back. One morning, I just got up and felt I had to go. When I reached, it felt I had come back home. And I burst into tears. I simply sat, and cried, and cried, and cried. It was such a huge release. There was so much love around. I went back when my baby was born. And it feels so good. There I feel such a sense of peace and so engulfed by love.

It comes as such a stark contrast and balance to all the sadness, anger, violence, greed I see in my everyday's life. People are so negative. And worst of all, this profession has obliged me not to trust anyone. Too often in those three, four years in politics I have trusted someone who ended up betraying me. And it is so terrible, so sad that I would become such a distrustful person. It so much is NOT me. I am not that kind of a negative person.

So when I need some peace, I close my eyes and imagine Sai Baba or Gurumai's face and it calms me down, it centres me.

### **If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?**

I would not want to be born again. That would be the best.

### **If there was one question you could ask god, what would it be?**

What is more real – this life or ours, or after death? I am extremely intrigued by what happens after we die. I know that this reality is very transient and feel that death is a more permanent thing. What happens to the spirit after it leaves this body? Isn't the spirit form more real than this human manifestation of it?

**What is your idea of happiness?**

Contentment. Which comes from very, very simple things in life. Not from material things, but from the love in and around you.