

Ramoji Rao

Found of the Ramoji Group

'I look at the sun as my idol'

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Ramoji Rao, is founder and head of the Ramoji Group, owner of ETV, Eenadu and Ramoji Film City.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It could manifest in two ways: one is a value-based life, the other one is a religion-attached life. I belong to the first category. God to me is a creation of man.

As a child, I believed in God. I would walk for three miles to school, barefoot, and pass each day a goddess temple with whom I bargained for good grades or some other nice thing.

Belief takes you a long way. When you feel you can do it, then you achieve it. So the belief in God may be a psychological way of achieving it.

It also often comes from greed as people hope they can get things from gods. Because as you can see, all criminals go to God and make ample offerings. If you go to Tirupati at Lord Balaji's temple for instance, you can see all sorts of people with notorious histories behind them. I am not sure what they ask for: do they actually believe they are committing sins and are asking for forgiveness to wash them

– so they can start afresh another set of sins; or do they believe they are doing right and want God to be on their side?

How did you come to believing that God is a creation of man?

In my student years, in the late forties and early fifties, I became a Communist party cardholder and was active in its students' wing activities. I was attracted to them because they were very sincere in their desire to serve society; they were not selfish, seeking out something for themselves in politics – instead they were value-based human beings more focused on service and sacrifice.

Later on though the Communist movement got split between the Chinese and Soviet versions. They were throwing mud at each other. Also, their ideology did not change over time, even though the world and Indian society were changing. Influences from Moscow and Beijing were more important than homegrown ideas. I gradually grew more disappointed and distanced myself from the Party. And remained independent ever since. That was the extent of my political life.

But in the meanwhile, I had read all the Communist literature, Marx, Lenin, Mao and so on. With it I had lost my faith in God and have remained an atheist ever since.

Your childhood had been religious?

Highly religious. My parents were tremendously devout, involved in pujas and rituals to the extreme.

So from that moment on, with no god as a companion & protector, you were on your own?

Well, I cannot explain all that happens in life, but I would never attribute what I don't understand to some supreme force or God. I try to explain as much as possible rationally and beyond that I just say I don't know.

Also, I realize I am part of a larger environment and I should live in harmony with it. But at the same time I always felt I can have my way and do things as I want them. When odd things or coincidences would occur, I simply call them accidents.

Is there such a thing as destiny though?

I do not believe so. But we are ignorant of so much. Atomic energy was unknown a hundred years ago. Yet it does not mean it did not exist. Today we can rationally explain it and it is a science. So I feel everything has some kind of a scientific basis. It just takes time to discover it.

So your achievements were not pre-ordained?

Definitely not. They were the result of my efforts, planning and vision, which also led at times to failures.

As a child, what did you dream you would do when growing up?

My environment as a child was so narrow, my knowledge of life was so small. I grew up in a small coastal village of what is now Andhra Pradesh. My father was a farmer. So initially, I probably thought I would end up as a farmer as well. Later on I sensed more opportunities – I could study and become

something else. I was attracted to politics. But village feuds threatened my life. My parents pushed me to leave. Somehow I ended up in a small advertising agency in Delhi. I used to devour all newspapers to teach myself English. My horizon and my understanding of life expanded there. I was offered to move to the US but because of family problems, I decided to stay in India, and try my luck in business in Hyderabad.

I was never inclined to be a "me-too" kind of person, doing things that others are doing.

I learnt it in the small town I studied in – when someone opened a successful shop, shortly after, a whole range of similar stores would mushroom in the same street. I never understood why they had to do the same thing, threatening themselves and others, instead of doing something else. So I always wanted to do something different.

I studied various opportunities. And I settled for a kind of mutual fund: people would come together, share savings monthly, one of them who borrow that money and give interests back to the rest of the group. I launched that company in Hyderabad and over a period of time it grew tremendously. Today, Margadarsi Chit Fund has a hundred branches, with close to Rs. 4,000 Crores turnover.

Gradually I got involved in other areas. I was searching for an ad agency in Hyderabad and realized there was hardly any. So I launched my own, doing most of the work myself, negotiating with local papers, doing the layouts and so on.

How did you get into the movie industry?

I was a movie lover since childhood. I noticed that because of its unscientific ways and greed, the film industry was like a gamble. I thought there ought to be a rational way of doing it. And I set out to prove it.

My way would not be about capitalizing on the name of stars, but about being a genuine filmmaker, touching the hearts of people through a genuine story. I have always used the same formula: small budget, a real storyline, new heroes and heroines – who subsequently frequently became stars and celebrities. I also often focused on women issues. I felt they were always abused in Indian society and deserved equal status, so it was important for me to take up social evils.

I launched my first movie in the late seventies and have made 85 feature films since then. Some of them succeeded, others failed. Sometimes people could just not absorb new thoughts and new ideas.

For instance, I had made a film called Mother. It was about the desire of a woman to be a mother, even though she was utterly disillusioned with love and marriage. Is it a sin to have such a wish? This movie was very carefully crafted to respect Indian sentiments, I took it up to a point and then retrieved. Yet, it was a flop and was not well received. It was ahead of its time.

So even though my success rate has been higher than others, you cannot predict a movie's success. Unless you appeal to the people's sentiments, you are sure to fail. You cannot influence them if it is about an idea repulsive to them. At best you can make them think.

What was your primary objective in making movies?

As a mass medium, it can play a very significant role. It has the ability to make people think. At times of course, I merely wanted to entertain, which society also requires.

Today, the public's needs have radically changed. As a child, the more we were made to cry, the more the film was a success. Today, nobody wants to see more misery. They have enough in their real life and want to escape in a make-belief kind of world.

what about your media ventures, how did they happen?

In Delhi, I became fascinated with papers and got addicted to them. One day I had gone to Vizag to launch a branch of my mutual fund company. I realized there was no local paper, and the only paper available was one day old. Radio transmission was very weak. There was no TV. So basically people had no idea about what was happening.

I suggested one of the leading papers to launch a local edition. Their sarcastic response hurt my ego and it occurred to me that I should attempt it myself.

My moto was always that if I get into a field, I must become number one. That was always my obsession. Vijayawada was a coastal town and the Telugu version of The New Indian Express was very strong. So I thought I should do like the Chinese when they aggressed India: they first invaded the no-man's land areas. In Vizag no one was there. So I would start there, slowly build it and then gradually take it to other cities.

Since I was always obsessed about doing things differently, I decided to set priorities upside down: local news would matter first, then state, then national, then international. I launched the paper in 1976. At first people were laughing at me as it was completely against the accepted trend. But local people were thrilled. They had never thought their news could be important. This success accelerated my launches in other markets. And I became number one in the State, which I am till this day, despite many political efforts to demolish me.

And the TV channels?

It was a similar idea. The government was opening the market for TV channels, national channels were being launched. So I decided to apply the same formula as for my papers, taking the regional route. I launched a Telugu channel, then one in Bengali, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, Urdu and so on. ETV today has 12 channels.

You also built the largest film production facility in the world, Film City –

Again, I wanted to do something different. I realized that when you need film shooting facilities, editing, sound, special effects etc., you end up going to many different places. I thought I should create a one-stop facility where everything would be available under one roof. This is the concept of Film City: you come with your script, you leave with your prints.

When I first came to visit this land, it was a godforsaken place, not a blade of grass would grow. But I fell in love with it. I acquired the first terrain in 1991 and opened Film City in 1997. Gradually it also became a tourist attraction and an entertainment area.

You were never tempted to go back to politics?

No, the moment I got into media, I thought two swords cannot cohabit together. You have to choose one or the other. Say I had gotten into politics, I would have had to compromise on my paper. I love media so much. It gives me so much reach – 1 Crore 30 lakhs people read my papers. I can communicate with them every day. Which political system could give me such a platform?

Also, politics has become over a period of time such a dirty thing that I did not wish to join it.

At times of hard challenges, where do you find the energy?

Though I am an atheist, I have one kind of belief: in the Gita, Krishna tells Arjun to do his job to the best of his abilities and not care about the results. I don't get fazed by success or failure. My objective is clear: my life ought to be meaningful. At the end of the road, if I were to look at my life and feel it was only about money, it would not satisfy me. But if I feel I impacted society in my own way, that gives me satisfaction. This is what I am doing now. It has its drawbacks of course. In the last five years for instance, I have gone through a number of harassment from the State government.

I opposed Indira Gandhi when she was interfering in the State's affairs and constantly changing Chief Ministers. I thought it was unfair for Delhi to constantly dictate things. I was a staunch advocate of more autonomy for the State. I thought regional parties must emerge and balance out national parties at the Center.

I opposed dynastic rule, I opposed democracy managed in an undemocratic manner. So as my harsh criticism accumulated, I got into problems with the mighty ones in power.

But I would only ask my conscience – is what I am doing right or wrong?

So the meaning of life for you is about helping society?

I am a huge fan of the sun. It is my idol. Because it is responsible for all life on this planet and does not get anything in return. It is pure idealism. I feel if I could be even a small part of that, it would be wonderful.

If I were only here for myself, what would be the difference with an animal? I am a thinking animal. I should extend beyond myself as much as possible. And I had clarity about it from very young. Seeing untouchability in my house was unacceptable to me and I had clashed with my own mother about it. This desire to change things and help was there from the beginning.

Yet very often those without values or ideals are those who seem to succeed most?

Yes, but I believe they cannot be happy. At some point or another, they have to give an account for what they did. To the rest of the world or to themselves. Throughout history you can see it. They are passing phases. They do not last.

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

I never believed in reincarnation so I never thought about what I would want to be! I believe that the moment you are cremated, you are just ashes and it's all over.

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

When I open my window and ask myself where I am in this vast universe, I feel how small of a spec I am. I therefore know how limited my understanding of things is. I try to know as much as I can and am conscious that I ignore all the rest. I accept it. So no question to be asked...

What is your idea of happiness?

It is a state of mind. If I feel I have done something good to people around me, it gives me happiness. If I make money it makes me less happy. Luxury does not give me happiness. Putting my time to its best possible use is what keeps me going. I am 72 and I know I have limited time. I want to do all I can before I leave this world.