

Mrinal Pande

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'I was clear I was never going to be a self-sacrificing mother'

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Mrinal Pande is an author and chairperson of Prasar Bharati board. She was, until recently, editor of Hindustan

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about creating a sacrosanct space inside your mind.

As a writer, it is extremely important to do so. Without it, you cannot write. Even if a writer may say he or she is an atheist and does not believe in the life of the spirit, I don't think you can really create unless you have that space available within you. When you talk to serious artists, sooner or later, the conversation will come to this – the space within us which we guard with our lives and where nobody, nobody, not even our closest loved ones or our children can have access to.

That is the reason most women find it so hard to create, because they are so used to their lives being shared and end up feeling guilty about not sharing a part of their inside. But you have to be so if you are driven by the creative bug. You have to come to this space and only when you have completely dissociated yourself from everything else, then you have the basic rock under your feet on which you can stand and start creating something.

I have seen it with my mother [Hindi novelist Shivani]. When she was writing, she may sit on the dining table with all of us running and shouting around, but we all knew that at that point, she was not

available to us. Some resented it, but I loved it because I knew it was the only thing she was doing for herself. And I hate the Indian notion of self-sacrifice.

Even in our mythology, the three great goddesses are childless: Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati have no physical progeny. It is a very strange way of pointing out how a creative woman has to give up the thing she loves most, her child, in order to create.

In astrology also, I heard that the conglomeration of stars for the birth of a child and the birth of a book or some work of art are the same.

Different people touch this sacred space differently.

Where you tempted at times to go to that sacred space and not come back from it?

Absolutely. And my daughters often accused me of being there physically but not listen to them. It is a very strange position to be in. When I started writing, my mother felt very scared for me – she didn't want any of her daughters to be a writer, since she had had such a hard life. I have had it easier. But it is definitely a strong master. If you write or paint or sing in a serious manner, you have to be ready not to be connected to other human beings the way ordinary people are.

When did you first feel you HAD to write?

I never decided to write. I think it just pops up out of you. I never wrote for college magazines or things like that. It just somehow happened. I wrote a story one day when I was 20, I sent it to a publication in Bombay, it got accepted and that's how it all started.

As a child, what did you dream of doing?

Children are very whimsical and I don't think I had any clear idea about what I would do. I was very clear about one thing only: I would not be a self-sacrificing mother. The family was large, and full of these tight-lipped, sad looking Brahmanical women who had sacrificed everything, not wearing any make-up, wearing only simple clothes, talking whispers, walking on toes and everybody saying what grand creatures they were. In contrast, my mother was like a tigress. She strode with a manly stride, she was a very good-looking woman, and was aware of it; she wore sleeveless blouses, she had male friends, fellow writers. She had gone to Shantiniketan, a co-ed college, so for her all those things were very natural. Most family members were very embarrassed about her while I was very proud of her. I hated it when she tried to cover it up and appear to be meek and mild like other women. Because I knew she couldn't keep it up for long and there was that flash in her eyes when she really gave it to people, and I loved that. So I knew what I didn't want to be, but I didn't exactly know what I wanted to be.

So I did all the usual things, went to college, got good grades, got a job, got married and children came.

So how did you find that sacred space?

The same way my mother did. It was a little easier because my family was smaller. And my two daughters are now grown up and gone abroad. So it is only my husband and me. The only reason we have stuck together for 44 years, is because he just moves himself out of the way when he knows I

want to be by myself. I have given him his space and he has been giving mine. It's been a bigger sacrifice for him because in a traditional society, in a country where being a man is associated with being aggressive, he has been criticized a lot for being such a self-effacing man. He was basically born a refined soul. He does not necessarily understand much of what I write about but he knows I need the space and gives it to me. That is enough for me. I don't need to have profound conversations. We talk about matters of the house, or my work as a journalist and so on. But I never had the need to talk about my writing. He knows I trust him implicitly, even though I don't trust too many people.

How come – have you been betrayed too often?

Basically you never know what people want from you. In most cases, they want a favor. I don't socialize too much or lead a glamorous life because I have only limited energy and want to spend it on things I really like. I am weary on people. I have a few friends and they are lifelong friends. Many are simple housewives who have never stepped out of their environment and are beautiful human beings. They talk to me like to another human being and I love it. Basically I am a loner and am happy that way.

What about the role of God in your life?

I believe in God. Even as a child that's the basic trust I have always had. When I was very small, I used to have those nightmares and scream in my sleep. My mother taught me to chant a few shlokas to the goddess Durga and for some reason it worked. So I began trusting the goddess as the warder off of bad dreams. When I was a little older, my mother taught me to read the Durga Kavach, or Durga's armor, which would work any time I would be worried. And it really worked. In a way, it gave me companionability with a goddess with whom I could talk and share in that little space. There are times when I quarrel with her, and times of silence. But no matter what, I am a believer and it is the most beautiful, soothing, calming influence in my life. I am a very highly-strung person and the only reason I somehow look calm and haven't broken down is probably thanks to that space – when I am worried or even overwhelmed by something, I can always retreat there and hold a dialogue. It is a sacred space. I say my prayers once in the morning and once in the evening. I don't believe in too many rituals. But occasionally I take a break and go on a pilgrimage. I find it really helps me. I can't really explain it logically. It is the essence of gods that moves you. And idols help us focus our thoughts.

I find that those of my friends who are believers in some way or another, are much better and deeper individuals than those who call themselves atheists. Somehow that is my experience. No matter what religion or belief they follow, if they are religious in the right sense, I find it easier to talk to them. Whereas that hard-beaten acid cynicism which I find in atheists very often eats them up and they become both very brittle and intolerant people.

Also, people who practice religion somehow understand the deepest human emotions, which cannot be put in words.

Does God orchestrate your life in some way, are things destined or preordained?

Religion teaches you to accept life and death as part of a bigger whole and therefore I do not fear death. Sometimes I feel there is something as destiny, and others I very much doubt it. Life often takes inexplicable turns. But I do not think things are preordained and we can read it in a horoscope according to the way stars are arranged at the time of our birth.

Do you believe we all have a particular destiny?

I believe we are all part of a whole. It's like music. Every note in a raga has its place. Without the raga they are lost, and no note alone can explain the raga. So I am happy to be a note, I believe it is a grand raga, and I am happy to be part of it, to dance around it.

Touching people or transforming them through your writing – is that part of your role?

When a bird sings I don't think she thinks it makes me happy. She just sings. I write because I want to write and if somebody catches a meaning, all the better. But most of the time you don't know how your writing is affecting people. When you give birth to a child, you may be attached to it, but when he grows up you have no control over. Same with my books, I publish them but I have not bothered too much how they have affected people.

What about as the Editor of Hindustan for instance, you had the potential to impact a lot?

Of course, but it was as part of a team. And I did not try as an Editor to mould public opinion. Rather, my objective was to inform people, give them information they were denied or too lazy to get, and force it on them in a manner of speaking every morning. I also tried to get my team to perform the best they can, standing guard for their honesty of writing and presentation, not succumbing too much to the "money ethics".

It is a hard vocation. I am happy I am out of it, and I now actually feel very relaxed. Because it is like running to stay still. There is so much more money in the vernacular medium now. Readers are multiplying every day. Till the eighties, we used to wonder if a Hindi paper would ever sell a million copies. Today there are at least half a dozen Hindi papers selling over a million copies. That also brings fresh challenges to the editors. When you are launching so many editions and sub-editions, for them to all have the same authority on things, it is a lot of work, a lot of monitoring, a lot of ethical questioning of yourself.

So many people laughed at me for focusing on the ethical aspect of journalism. They would ask, "isn't it enough to bring a successful paper?" I do think there is an ethical aspect, because it is about giving information to people consciously, telling them it is all vital and pure information. If that begins to get diluted because of pressures from the managers or from advertisers, you have to stand out and protest against unethical practices. It is becoming increasingly tough now because people want more and more money. Papers are now mostly owned by big conglomerates with shareholders, rather than single-person owned. Managers are answerable to shareholders, editors are supposed to be answerable to readers; so the clash between editors and managers becomes inevitable. In that clash, very often, one is forced or tempted to let the market take precedence. The way I grew up wasn't like this. So I see tough times ahead for vernacular editors.

What about the impact you can have now with Prasar Bharati?

I am a part time Chair of the Board. We can give micro-guidance. So to the extent we can cleanse the system and make it answerable, we will try. But the miracle has to be really given shape by the full

time people in Doordarshan. There are some excellent people there. Again, in media, you have to run to stay still. You can't say I have done it, now I can rest. Every day you need to work hard at it. And somehow, I find that we Indians are not very good at sustained monitoring. We are very good at grand dramatic gestures. But when it comes to the tedium of daily grind, day after day after day, standing on the desk and keeping an eye at the threats, after a while, most people tend to let it go and let their guard down. That is dangerous. Editors are becoming stars way too much. Whereas I think they should not be seen too publicly. The more faceless we are, the better. But it is easier said than done.

At times of real challenge and difficulty, where do you find the energy?

I revert to my sacred space and I find that it really helps. Several times in my career, when I had to make some basic, fundamental professional slash ethical choices, I reverted to my space, without taking anybody's advice. I then came out and announced my decision. At that point, I never cared if people disagreed or were angry at me. If a decision has come from within me after being in my sacred space, then I know it is the right one.

So it does help me. As I said, I am weary of people and I am a loner. I never looked for a guru or desired to make disciples. I think we all have our inner guru, our own sacred space. I am very weary both of advice givers and advice seekers. I could never stand it when people called me an iconic editor. Just read what I write and find your own path. Don't follow the footsteps of others.

I always told my mother about it and how tired I was of being told to follow the footsteps of others. She was worried for me. The last words she told me before falling into a coma and leaving, were that I should not become so angry at injustice, because it always was there, and would always be there; and second, that I should learn to forgive. Because then, I could have peace. In the end, nothing matters except forgiveness. All her 79 years she never ever preached, never ever came out with quotable quotes to her children and was very cynical about the 'sage advice' mothers were supposed to come up with for their daughters. But her last words were such.

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

Why are You so self-effacing, be a little bit more prominent!

If there were such a thing as reincarnation, what would you choose?

I would not like to be reborn. I only think about this life and then that's it!

What is your idea of happiness?

To be free of anger and be able to forgive. These are the two things pointed out by my mother and what poisons perfect happiness. Besides, interestingly, happiness always strikes you in retrospect.

Did you manage to achieve those two things?

I have tried, but it is very hard. So I am still trying...