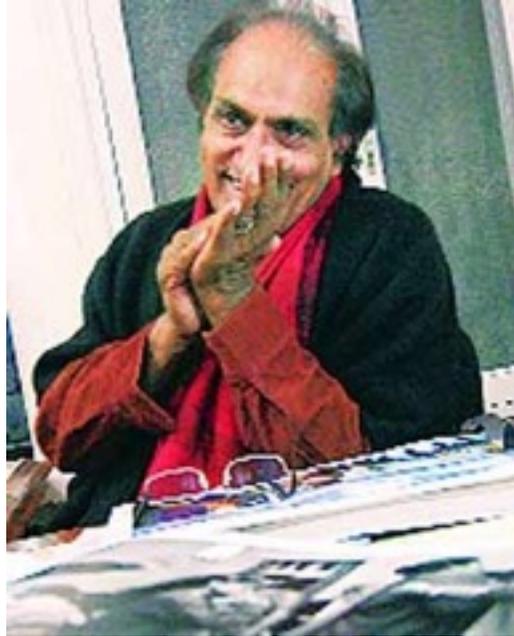


# Raghu Rai

Photographer

'I don't like it when people can recognize my work'

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**Raghu Rai is one of India's leading photographers.**

**What does spirituality mean to you?**

Most of us are like programmed machines, we are the result of a certain education and conditioning. At times though, something foreign to our conditioning comes and nudges us, whispers to us, and in that moment, if we do not hesitate for even a split second, if we completely flow with it, we can feel the alignment of body mind and spirit, fully connected with everything around. That connection and that alignment are spirituality to me. In those moments, we are liberated from the intellect, which I call the heavyweight champion, as it tries to control everything in our lives. And true creativity can take place. Indian classical music is a good metaphor for it. Its purpose is not entertainment, but uplifting. It is about reaching spiritual heights. When an artist begins a rag with certain parameters and so on, you close your eyes and gradually go with it. At some point, if the spiritual connection is there, something comes that has never been felt before and takes us higher, like spirituality raining on us. When that intangible gets discovered and seen, it is true magic. Only those moments will be remembered, all the rest, the predictable, is mediocrity.

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

In my youth, I used to believe it is all about me and my own doing. When unpredictable things began happening, I had to question my certainty and realize that there is something else indeed. I see it as a supernatural energy that controls everything. If you give it a name, say Ram, or Muhammad, or Christ, you slot, define and limit it. For me God has no name. Those names refer to those who went in the footsteps of the almighty, of the supernatural, who were connected with that energy, which they could then reflect on others, who got attracted to them. They were connected souls in the same way that Mother Teresa or the Dalai Lama would be. We can also feel this connection, if we are open and ready for it. Nothing is more precious than that.

It is like this famous story of a man lost and terrified in the jungle. He asks God for some sign. Some lightning comes and he gets even more terrified. He asks again for some sign, and a butterfly comes gently on his shoulder. He brushes it away with impatience. He was not ready or open to see the signs. When one is open though, everything and much magic can happen.

A nice metaphor for it was given to me when I was traveling to Oaxaca, Mexico. I was taken to an old woman, who had a walking wooden cross with the Christ. She put it on a table, nudged it and it moved. I tried several times until I managed to do the same, until I found the right alignment and connectivity, the correct amount of energy to be channelled: if too much, the cross would fall, if too little, it would not move. Similarly, when you come into alignment in your life, and give a push, things start moving and happening in the most amazing ways.

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

I had no clue when growing up that I would become a photographer. If anything, I thought I would be a musician. I did engineering, worked for a year in government and left, thoroughly unhappy. It is completely by chance that I then found myself one day in a village with a camera, taking a few photographs, which my brother sent to the London Times. One was published, and it was the beginning. Very quickly, I realized that through the camera, I could see the world more clearly, I could relate to it more closely, and understand it better. So photography has been my way of relating to the world. And my purpose has been to reflect the time we live in, in the most intense, sensitive and responsible way. Some people tell me they can recognize my photographs. And I do not like it. I do not want my style, my attitude, my mind, my intellect to be reflected in my work. Khalil Gibran wrote that "those children are not your or my children, they are life's longing for itself". In the same way, my images should reflect life for itself, not for me or by me. That is the purest form of delivery. And if at the end of the day my style is still visible, it is about "me, me, me", I am not free of myself and of my mind. Rather, I strive for my pictures to liberate me from myself, to take me closer to the connection I am seeking, to the discoveries I wish to make, to that moment called nirvana when I am fulfilled and connected with the supreme energy, with such a purity that I am not a seeker anymore.

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

For me it is not that mumbo jumbo of sitting in an ashram or in meditation, and making a connection at that moment – it is about finding the connection at every single moment, feeling centred, in alignment with everything. If you are a good observer of the world, the alignment can happen and gets proven over and over again. Everything else is a product of our vicious or anxious mind. My Guruji used to say "count your blessings". And indeed, the more I do so, the more I feel nurtured by them, and the more it makes a difference to every step of my life, even to the most mundane walk in the street.

### **What is the role of spirituality in your work?**

Feeling the alignment and the connection in my work is most fundamental. I often think of Satyajit Ray. I loved his work, he was a wonderful human being, but he did not believe in spirituality. So his initial films were magical but his later works were simply the product of a brilliant man's mind, of the intellect. The other possibilities, the unseen, the unknown, the unpredictable, the magic could not happen. The same process goes for my photography. There is the conscious work of taking a camera, concentrating, working – and then there may be a moment when you touch something else, you are uplifted, you can dance and sing in the streets, taking pictures. This is when I feel the alignment. I cannot sit meditating and feel it. But when I work, I do. Also, I could make a photograph that carries a lot of information and tells a whole story. As the cliché goes, "a good photograph is worth a thousand words". But a thousand words are a lot of noise. How about some silence? For me, a great work of art is when total silence is restored in me, when there is no more question, no more need to talk. I can just be. It reminds me of a story of the Buddha. Once, as he was traveling from village to village, he got late to a place where people were expecting him. They were all talking to each other. As he finally arrived, he sat down quietly. Gradually people began noticing him and silence spread, till it was completely quiet. He looked at them lovingly for a while, and when everyone was still, he simply went away. This is about restoring silence. And as there is so much noise inside and around us, it is essential and it also is spirituality.

### **Can you share a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?**

I first met Mother Teresa in 1970, still full of the arrogance of youth that makes us think that life is all about our own doing. She was hardly known back then. My editor sent me on an assignment to her hospices. After three, four days of photographing, she asked me not to come the next day, as it was Easter. She did not want me running around while they were doing their prayers. I was devastated. I looked at her and said: "you keep saying that when Christ was suffering, you were not there to nurse him, so now you serve the poorest of the poor, thinking you are nursing him. I have photographed all that. But the second important thing is for you to connect with Him and rejuvenate yourself. I have only done the first half of the story. I have never seen who this "guy" is. And I have this feeling that I could see Him landing in your eyes when you pray, I could see Him there". So she agreed, under one condition – that I would sit still and not move. The next day I was all joyous at six o'clock in the morning, sitting next to her in the back of the room where she always sat. At some point she entered into deep meditation and I could not resist but get up and take a photograph of hers in front. I even followed her when she moved to the front to kiss the Christ's feet. Later on, I went and asked for forgiveness for not obeying. She took my hands, looking intensely into me. Her eyes were so penetrating. And she said: "Oh, God has given you this assignment, so you must do it well". Who else would have reacted that way? This whole experience was such an eye opener.

Fourteen years later, she gave me another lesson when I went to see her, asking to publish yet another book about her. She flatly refused. I insisted, holding her hands and telling her I had prayed asking about it and the answer had been positive. So she agreed. It took me more than ten years to understand it: she considered prayer as the most precious thing, so she had that much respect for others' prayers as well.

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

There are many, the lights keep shining on my path, inspiring me in some way or another. But of course, I would mention here my encounter with Gurujii. It happened a few years ago, when the person

who built the house where I live took me there. I was a non-believer for a while, asking many questions. And I still do. But Guruji totally transformed my life. He opened up so many things for me. The work I did in the last four or five years, after meeting him, has had a vision that nothing I had done in the previous 35 years contained. He did not give lectures or sermons, but everything I experienced with him has been about miracles and happenings that only God can do. He has done so much, for so many people. With him, we felt showered with energy, and we believed our lives were sorted out. The day he left and was cremated, hundreds of people were there, crying. I had never seen that many widows and orphans in my life. By the evening, his signature fragrance was everywhere, and everyone was laughing, hugging each other, running mad.

To me, whether it is Guruji, or Ram, or Christ, it is about beings that connect with that supreme energy that controls and permeates everything. And they shower those energies on everybody else around them. Everyone thus gets connected, and things start changing.

Yet, I have to say that I am a greedy man. I never have enough of Guruji's love. I complain to him, feeling he should be connected to me all the time, he should give me more, and that I would be a better person if he did.

And at times, he comes to tease me and remind me of his presence. Two months back for instance, I was in my farm sitting on the loan, sipping a glass of wine with my family. My wife remarked Guruji had not visited us for a while. And so a butterfly came and began circling my head again and again. Someone suggested I give it some wine, and the butterfly sat on the glass, then went inside, touched the surface and resumed its rounds around my heads, for the longest time. And I can tell you so many such stories, when he came and reminded us of his presence, with his fragrance or some other feat.

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

I am a very wicked person, I could choose many things, so don't give me this choice, it could be too dangerous.

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

There are many things I do not understand and that I constantly question. And it is good, because that way, I constantly grow. But if I had to ask one question, I would say: how can You be so unfair? I am glad that nobody assigned me to be a God, because His creations are so amazing, breathtaking, unimaginable, unbelievable and yet, there is also in them so much poverty, suffering, ugliness, injustice. How could He do that?

**What is your idea of happiness?**

It is the joy that sprouts from within. Everything else is managed & mismanaged.