

Tarun Das

Chief Mentor of CII

'My spirituality came from pain'

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Tarun Das is the chief mentor of Confederation of Indian Industries (CII). He was its chief executive for 30 years, from 1974 onwards and developed it into a powerful industry organization.

What does spirituality mean to you?

First, it is about the existence of something more powerful than me. And I call it God. Second, it is a very personal and private thing. Third, it means prayer. Indeed, I have been through really difficult times, both in my personal and professional life, and I have found tremendous strength in prayer. Finally, spirituality is connected to my father. His death actually brought me closer to prayer and spirituality.

How did that happen?

I was extremely close to him. He was my best friend and my counsellor for all issues. When I moved to Delhi 34 years ago with CII, it was incredibly difficult. I knew no one, CII had no brand, no staff, no

office, no credibility. A few days later, he suddenly died. My umbrella, my support in life had gone, and on top of the professional issues, I had to deal with many difficulties at home.

So I sank. I kept crying as I was missing him so much. Until one day, out of the blue, it was like a revelation and I finally understood that my father was not about dragging me down but that he should be a source of strength. I learnt to pray, I learnt to ask him questions and no matter what, I would always get an answer. So his passing away forced me to grow up and through prayer, connected me with that benevolent force beyond.

Do you believe in a guiding force?

Most definitely. I feel that somebody up there is looking after me. And that somebody has also been looking after this organization. We have been through so much struggle. The first 10 years were really traumatic. We had such a lack of resources. Businessmen want to be with a winner, not with a guy or an institution which is a nobody. After a decade, we took off. By the time I retired in 2004, we were in 50 locations all over India and in 10 locations abroad, deeply involved with domestic policy and international relations.

Would you say there is a special purpose to life?

Well, I can say that I worked for change, and I was lucky enough to see change happen in my lifetime. I have seen an isolated nation, suspicious of the world, engage with the world, almost confident, and I think that CII has played a role in it. I could have worked in a company selling toothpaste. Instead, I was blessed enough to be with an organization that broke new ground, becoming a public service institution with an overall impact on the country in a way that had never been done in the world before.

CII used to be a narrow business lobby based in Kolkata and once we moved to Delhi, the ambition was very different: we wanted to connect India to the world and the world to India, which we did through missions and offices abroad, the partnership with Davos and much more. We also wanted to connect the business community, which can be so selfish, to society. Fifteen years ago, the CII board told me it should not be involved with social development. Today, nobody would dare utter such idea. So to contribute to all that has been incredibly exciting and fulfilling.

Has spirituality played a role in achieving all this?

Actually, daily spirituality to me is primarily about my approach to work. Inspired by my father, I learnt that motivating people is the key. And with the most ordinary people, you can climb mountains, if you know how to reach out to them. Also, it is about trust. Granted, one person out of 100 will not deliver; still, it is not a reason to suspect the other 99. Be good to people, give them a chance and they will deliver.

What other spiritual inspirations have you had?

My parents were Brahmos, so there was nothing religious in my upbringing – no temples, no rituals, no idols and so on. But I would say that most of my spirituality came from pain. I was an only child, spoiled, the centre of the world. My father's passing away was shattering, I had to grow up, become responsible and it happened by opening up to prayer and spirituality.

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

As a racing driver: I love speed and I love driving!

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

Why does India have every problem in the world?

What is your idea of happiness?

To be at peace with myself. It never was about money. I believe that too much of it creates misery. Rather, building a public service organization, or helping people grow within it has given me happiness.