

Jitin Prasada

Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas

'You need fear to keep you under control'

Sun Aug 09 2009



Jitin Prasada, Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas.

What does spirituality mean to you?

In the context of India, I would say that spirituality is what binds this country together. With all the states, languages, castes, cultures, terrains that we have, it still holds on – this outer, undefined force that makes it happen, I would call it spirituality.

At a personal level, spirituality is about connecting your mind to something that takes you away from what you are doing in your day-to-day life. To cut off from the routine, from the grind, from the daily pressures coming with your job. It is about going into some connect or thought process that would make you feel easier, lighter, better.

How do you do it?

Frankly, I am not forcefully trying to cut out from what I do. I would see it as escaping. Running to the mountains to find peace – I won't do it. I have to find it here, to try and simplify my life here and now.

But your life is extremely intense, like a constant race, so how do you make sure you don't get lost in that race?

You are right, the race of life especially in politics is extremely intense. You are not only competing with yourself. There are a lot of people opposing you and gunning at you constantly. You can't run away from it, you have to face it, you have to get used to the fact that people will point their finger at you, that all sorts of accusations will flow; you have to learn how to react, how to handle them and how to get above them. You need to try and do your work without getting bogged down by the nitty-gritty of people constantly trying to pull you back and pin you down, opposing you in some fashion or another. That's when you look at the larger goal and try to overcome these things.

How do you manage to do all that?

I try and control myself in not reacting to certain situations when technically you would, being human. You learn to restrain and get that kind of control over yourself and over your mind. You have to divert your mind to other activities.

How do you recharge from all this?

I have started to do some yoga these days. And I have to say, I have been feeling a lot of peace from it. It has been taking pressure off. I don't know why or how. But it has.

And the other thing I do, in practical terms, is that I go to my constituency, which is a rural one. It's a big responsibility. People there have a lot of hopes and aspirations. They look up to you but you are not only an MP, you are also family to them. It is not only about politics, it is also about being them. They have so many problems and I have to try and help them out.

So when I am in Delhi, I work on my ministry portfolio and the assignments I've got, I try and help my Party. When it gets too much, I run to my constituency and spend time with my people. It is such a different life, rural, simpler people. That recharges me.

Even though they come with endless problems to you?

But they are real people!! In big cities, some people are real, some are not. Many are conceited, or even crafty. So to get a reality check I go to those real people. They may have endless issues but at the end of the day they are the ones who stand by you in the worst of times. They are the ones I owe it to be in this government bungalow in Lutyens Delhi, or to get the importance that people or the media give me.

It is a great boost, it is something different. You have to experience it to understand what kind of emotions and hopes they have, and how much responsibility it gives you. But also what kind of satisfaction you derive when you do manage to help somebody. The gratitude they have is simply amazing.

But with such a masse of people and requests, how not to be overwhelmed?

First of all, you have to belong to them. You can't be on a picnic there, trying to do a few good things, get the media covering it all and then walk away. That won't work. If they feel you have made a serious effort, they will know it. It is not only the result of my work but most importantly the intention.

They can feel in a split second if you are genuine or not. And that travels faster than any word or any speech. It is not about the right coverage or projection in the media. I may have been educated in a public school and worked in the city, but win or lose, I am there. That kind of trust can only come when you do what you say and mean.

Your family has been in politics for generations, did you always know you would be in politics too? In India, politics is overbearing for any child. Because it is about people, meeting them, reaching out to them etc. So all activities since birth are about political people, and political associations. As a kid, you track your dad: what is happening to him, what he says, who attacked him, is he getting a promotion etc.

You don't face the pressure, you only see from the outside what is happening. It was very nice when my dad was there, when he was elected for instance – I would rejoice at seeing the garlands and so on.

But when I came to it myself, I did not enjoy it that much, because of the pressures involved, which you don't see as a child. When I used to look out of the window and see so many people waiting to see him, I thought how amazing for him to be so popular. Now when I look outside my window and I see all the people waiting, I also know the pressure it entails. They all expect me to do something about their problems.

So politics was nothing new to me. But I was doing something completely different. I did my B-Com, my MBA, I was working in banking. Somehow I must have known I would get into politics since I was in a political family. And I guess this is what I am best at, this is where I can have the maximum impact, where I can actually deliver, I can actually change the lives of some people, I can actually help. As you grow, your area of influence increases but initially it was my home constituency, and its people. Still, it never was an obvious thing. I took the plunge only after my father passed away. I could not walk away from that commitment to the people. Who would have taken care of their problems?

So you had to do it?

My heart told me I had to do it. So I left my banking job, in 2001. I did not become an MP immediately. My mother first ran and she lost. I struggled for three years. Then I got elected, in 2004. It is a commitment, it is a calling. You won't get that kind of support and affection anywhere in the world. It is about the sentiment, not about one or two lakh people voting for me. They stood by me in the worst of times, during those three years when I had no power, no position, no daddy. They stood by me because they actually believed in me and liked me. Otherwise people in the world are usually very pragmatic: they are with you if you have power, otherwise they disappear.

So you don't miss banking?

Not at all. This is much more of a challenge. I can do on a larger scale, for people, for my country.

So do you think that each one of us has a specific mission in life?

Of course, we all have a specific purpose. But it only dawned on me after my father passed away. You are assigned a certain role in life, and a time to do it. You live that and you walk away. You go, just like this, in a second! There is no continuity, there is no forever. You have a specific time to perform. And then it's all gone, all left behind. Nothing goes with you. You do your job and that's it.

So we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously?

For sure. Being too much within yourself and your ambition leaves you no time to enjoy the people who really care for you, you miss out on that aspect of life. It can so easily become mechanical and a routine. You wake up, you meet people, you go to your office, do some work, come back, and your loved ones go further and further away. And then you realize one day you haven't spent time with them and the story ends.

In the way the story unfolds, is there something as a guiding force?

You gain confidence when crisis happen and you can handle them, when you confront your biggest fears and manage to overcome them. The sooner you can confront your fears, the more successful you are, and the more at peace. That's the inner force.

Is there something as an outer force, or God maybe?

Of course, God is there.

What is God?

It is something you can't define, but you have faith into, and you feel it may be guiding you and solving your problems. You have to turn to somebody when you have problems! That's God. So I pray. I go to religious places during the campaign.

Faith is important, it keeps you under check. You need something you fear to keep you under control.

Did you grow up in a religious family?

Yes, a fairly religious family.

Are there moments when you feel God is not there?

No, even when bad things happen, I think it may be for the best in the end.

But when you see people's suffering, where is God for them?

I guess that's life. Some people have it better than others. I haven't really put my thoughts on that issue. But the point is that you were sent by whoever, you are in a position to help and you should do it.

So why are you in a good position and others are not?

Some people say it is karma, past actions. I am not sure. Cause-consequence makes sense to me. Whatever action one person has will have consequences. If you do good to others, chances are people will do good to you. And the challenges and crisis that come, the sooner they come, the better. You face them, confront them. If you haven't faced deep crisis as a politician, you are not a successful politician. You have to face them and come out of them. If you manage, then it is the mark of a successful politician. And the sooner, the better. Then you know where rock-bottom is.

Where do you find the energy, when you are at rock-bottom?

With the people who are close to me. Those who stand by me irrespective of me being up there or rock-bottom. Then you know who are those who really care for you. You can actually segregate. So if you face a crisis, you know who are the real people, and that's so important. So the sooner, the better. Because you obviously need to have your focus on those who have stood by you in the worst of times.

Is there such a thing as destiny?

Of course there is. The bigger things in life are preordained. I was not on a path to become a politician, even though I was born in a political house. I was in the corporate world. But the turn of events made it so – my father passed away, then my mother fought and lost. Had she won she would still be there and I would likely still be in banking. Then I worked, and got elected. I met people at the right place, at the right time and things unfolded. But again, I didn't go for politics. It came. That is destiny. Everyone is born with their own luck. And you end up wherever you are supposed to. I was in Bombay, in the financial world, with an office life, and now I am where I am.

Of course you then have to work hard wherever destiny has put you. You work your way up, you connect, you want to grow, you position yourself, you want to be useful to your party and leaders, you want to live up to their expectations and to the trust and faith they have put on you.

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

I don't believe in it. But if there was such a thing, the main point is freedom. I would need to be free, no matter where and what I am. I should have the freedom to express myself, movements etc.

But freedom is contradictory to the idea of things being destined and preordained?

Wherever destiny puts me – politics, bird, animal, whatever I would be, I must be free to express myself, move and so on. I can't be locked. Whatever I am, I need freedom in that sphere of life.

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

The whole being! What is this all about? What are we about? What is the mission, the goal of each person – live, die and then what? Why are we here for?

What is your idea of happiness?

First of all it's freedom, the satisfaction of helping people –which can't ever be the same as money or power– and peace of mind. The combo of all that with people close to you is happiness.

But how can you ever have peace of mind with so much pressure?

Nobody has peace. It is an ideal to strive for. And it's true, how can one have peace within such a race? You become an MLA, then you want to be an MP. Once you are in Parliament you want to be a minister. Once you are in government, you want a better portfolio. Then you want to stick to that better portfolio. So I must find a way to enjoy wherever I am. Otherwise it is never ending!