

# Jaya Jaitly

## Worshiper

'If there is a larger force in life, I would call it goodness'

Sat Oct 16 2010



**For Jaya Jaitly, trying to bring out what is core, human thing in her, is enough of a worship.**

**What does spirituality mean to you?**

From childhood till now, I never thought deeply about myself or my feelings. I always concentrated on outside things. But as one gets older, and goes through all kinds of experiences, you come to certain conclusions. And of course, those conclusions may change over time.

So now, for me, the essence of spirituality is the inner core of goodness which we have to search for. The goodness in ourselves of course, but also the pure beauty we see in nature, the forces and energies in the universe, the inner core of the earth and its fire, the movement of the oceans. All these things have an inner strength and an inner purity. So I can feel very spiritual when seeing a beautiful painting, or a person doing a very good deed. These are all manifestations of spirituality. And I don't at all believe that I must go to a temple or believe in a god, to feel a sense of goodness or of a greater being.

**So for you, spirituality is definitely not associated to religion?**

Not at all. I find a lot to laugh about in ritualistic religion, and I am very irreverent towards it. I look at temples or churches or mosques as places of cultural activity. Just as language is a part of culture, religion is part of the culture one might have grown up with. So while I may wear a bindi as a Hindu,

for me it is a cultural practice, a part of the makeup I use as a South Indian woman. Of course if I had to make a choice, I would say Hinduism allows me the most freedom – the freedom not to believe in god, the freedom to feel that the river and the tree are worthy of worship, and that I don't have to go to a temple at all, or bow my head to anyone. And this is what I don't find in other religions, which are much more restrictive. So if I had to believe in a particular philosophy, I would choose Hinduism for the ultimate freedom it gives me as a human being.

But trying to bring out what is a core human thing in me - that would be enough for me of a worship.

If I live my life consciously and honestly, without thinking of the self, and rather thinking of the other, I am much happier at the end of every day. If I can for instance sit for a whole day with ten craftspeople and inspire them in some way, share ideas, learn from them.

I am not a commercial person - I don't earn from my work, I don't make a penny from this. But if I can help them make a living then I think I have done what I should do as a human being. Then why would I need to pray to someone else in order to get me a certificate?

### **How did you figure out what you wanted to do?**

Because of two things: an instinct for aesthetic, and beautiful things; and a deep concern for people who suffer in society. So it is a combination of aesthetics and social work.

Right from 1965 when I was living in Kashmir, I was seeing craftspeople making the most beautiful things in the most miserable conditions. I thought I should try and increase their self-worth and status in society, and persuade them not to forget their skills.

### **When you were a little girl, what did you want to be when growing up?**

I didn't have any fixed thing in mind. I can tell you though that if I didn't have this life, I would love to be a dancer. If anything would make me feel really happy, apart from the work I am doing now - which often makes me deeply unhappy (but that is part of real life) - it would be dancing.

I see suffering all the time, and I have had to face many attacks in politics, awful things happen in public life, and there is much sorrow in it. But I haven't left it, because I know it is the real world and there is no escaping it. The real world means good and bad things happening all the time. How I deal with them is what ultimately matters. How I come out of it is what makes me stronger.

### **Did you ever dance?**

As a child I did. But for whatever reason it just didn't happen. I actually never forced myself into any career or any plan. Things just happened. And today too, they just happen, all kinds of momentous things.

I love exploring. We only have one life. So we have to do all the things we can, now.

### **When facing attacks in public life, where is your anchor to sustain them?**

In myself. I believe I am right. When they call me corrupt I know I am not. I know the truth. So self-confidence and belief in my value system help me to stand up.

### **When the Tehelka episode took place for instance, how did you deal with it?**

I looked at it as a challenge to fight back. It brought out more strength in me, and creative ideas. My mind started ticking and I felt I am not fighting for myself but to make sure the same thing doesn't happen to others.

The Tehelka episode was and is for me a political battle. Because what they did was a political attack. It was not a journalistic exercise in any way. I don't believe it for a minute. It wouldn't pass the test of honest or noble or truthful journalism. Why did they keep the tapes for a month and a half and then went on TV with it, instead of going to the police? And that, with bits and pieces edited out of thousands of hours of recordings?

So I learnt about forensic and audio editing, about sting journalism all over the world, about the legal issues associated with it. In a way it empowered me and I grew out of that experience.

### **How do you recharge?**

I cuddle my dog and go to sleep. I don't need to recharge with anything else. I like to be busy with work and don't feel like creating unnecessary leisure time. I can think of so many things to constantly do. Whether working with crafts, or writing – I bring out a monthly political journal called "The Other Side" - or spending time with my grand-children. I keep jumping from one thing to the other. And that change brings some rest from the last thing. At the end of the day, I cuddle with my doggy and that's it.

### **Do you think each one of us has a specific purpose in life?**

We have to create our own. I think it's pure chance why and how we are born. Why am I me ? What is this consciousness that makes me Jaya Jaitley and nobody else ? Also, at a very cynical or casual level, I would say that life is just a time-pass between birth and death.

So whatever the answer to it is my own choice. I could choose to marry a rich man and spend my life at the seaside, or go to Africa and work in some refugee camp, or be a good IAS Officer's wife, or a very ambitious politician trying to crush everyone around me to be on top. Or I can do things that come automatically from inside and develop each of those things to satisfy my own instincts. As far as I can go.

Sometimes I feel I need ten lifetimes to do all that I would want to. Other times I feel I have done quite a lot.

So if I were to die now I would be quite content. And would not cling to life.

### **Do you think things are somehow preordained or destined in life?**

It can't be preordained for so many people. Various people create different energies; they are all interconnected and you try to find your way within that maze. If there were such a thing as destiny, there would be no reason for me to do things differently. I would just sit back and do nothing. Instead, I want to change the things I don't like. I do not want to just sit and say it was destined.

## **How did politics happen?**

I never planned it. I just flowed into it. I really wanted to make a mark in the political world for the sake of craftspeople, empower them, have their voices heard, so the weavers don't die and so on. Plus, when I got into the socialist movement, it was about fighting injustice and inequalities, which is so engaging.

But I thought politics would be far more humane than it actually is, more about teamwork, more idealistic, less selfish. Power and money are now the same thing. You get money to get power, or you get power to make money. There doesn't seem to be any room for the finer things. Those are only left for speeches.

All these things I learnt over time. And either I would have to change and accommodate, or leave. In the end I chose an odd line – saying I am in politics, but not in a party.

Because in a party you have to be all those things I just mentioned and besides, women are looked at differently.

## **What do you mean?**

They are just expected to lay down the carpet for men. Cleaning up the place for others. Being part of the crowd. Unless you are a family name or a particular caste of course.

I come from a Kerala matrilineal line in a matriarchal society, where women are very progressive. So considering this feminist background, I cannot accept all those things.

Plus I have a very strong ethical and integrity bend in me. And I find it is absolutely not valued in politics. You just have to shout slogans, or follow the leader. There isn't room for creative activity unless you are a maverick and walk on your own. I haven't given up though. Because I want for lots of women to be in politics and fight from within.

But I found I was spending too much time fighting rubbish. There are so many things I can do outside. For instance I did Dilli Haat without being a member of Parliament.

I may have left a small mark in public life, but I am glad it has not been for selfish reasons. Because I haven't gotten anything out of it. So if I am doing something for a section of the public, that is good enough.

And whether it is a temporary sitting back or the way I will continue, I don't know.

## **Are there moments when you feel there is some outer orchestration or force in your life?**

I think the force comes from people's goodness. I don't need to call it God. God is more of a crutch. Goodness is tougher because we have to do it. We have to fight for it. And fight against all the bad that is happening.

### **Your mother was believing in God and you are not, when did you shift?**

I remember the day and the time I decided that: the day my father abruptly died, when I was 13. No God came to save him.

### **Was he a believer?**

He must have been religious, but in a very quiet and understated way. He didn't have my mother's superstitions. For her, I think those superstitions were a crutch. It was tough to be a widow at a young age, raising a small girl. And it was her culture from Kerala as well.

### **Do you believe in reincarnation?**

Not at all. It is a copout. We are like a leaf, it flowers, then it falls and goes back to the earth. It is just a natural cycle.

### **If there were a God and you could ask a question, what would it be?**

Why do you make people suffer so much? Seeing so much suffering never made you cynical though? That is how I became an activist. And even if I can help and teach five people, they will be able to transform 25 people around them. Or Dilli Haat for instance, it is a contribution. For whatever it can be.

### **What is your idea of happiness?**

It can be all sorts of things. But I have also been through so many bad moments. So I just coast along. I don't get over excited about anything and don't get miserable about anything. It is a level you reach, a medium, where you take in an experience and then just move on. I learnt this lesson in particular from politics. You celebrate so much when winning and feel so miserable when losing an election. Then you realize there will be so much of both, that there is no point being over excited about any.

What matters more is a sense of satisfaction that you haven't compromised your life and that you have done the best you can in everything you do. If you understand that this is happiness, you will be happier than chasing dreams too much.

### **It sounds like wisdom!**

Well, I am 68 years' old. So if I am not wise by now .... then when? If I can be content at the end of the day cuddling my dog, then I am fine. Tomorrow good things, or more bad things may happen so I cannot expand all my energies in being too happy or too sad.

I need to conserve them to do what I believe in and take things as they come. That is actually much tougher – not to crumble if someone attacks me and not to rejoice if I get an award.

That requires much inner strength - Well, with all the things I had to go through in life... So for me, nothing is ever unbearable. I feel I have no choice but bear everything.

My father was an Indian ambassador to Belgium, and suddenly dropped dead while playing golf. Our lives changed from one day to another. Once I had a baby who died within a few hours. So many

things! And all those political attacks. Plus all the recent events. It is ghastly! Those things normally don't happen to people, do they? You work with someone closely for 30 years and then suddenly he gets abducted and taken off. It is actually unbelievable. It is so bad that you have to be very, very calm in order to deal with it. So I carry on with my work. Carrying on is my way of fighting back. At the end of the day I have only me!