

Raj Rewal

Architect

'God, soul are poetry not reality'

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Raj Rewal, architect of Pragati Maidan Exhibition complex and the Parliament Library complex, feels God, soul and rebirth are a form of poetic humanism.

What does spirituality mean to you?

When I was young, I thought it was very close to sensuality. As I grew older, it has meant connecting to nature, or probing nature and the nature of nature, through art or science.

I felt for instance an experience akin to spirituality while walking around the Iguacu water falls in Brazil, or when flying over mount Everest. These were overwhelming and illuminating contacts with nature.

Works of art like a statue of Buddha, a painting by Rothko, an image of Krishna playing the flute, geometrical patterns, some transporting music – they all move me intensely as they are human attempts to interpret our inner self.

How do you probe nature in your daily life?

It is a reality in my works, for instance when I merge the design of a campus with natural elements. Or even more specifically, I had an opportunity to design a project concerned with sacred space, the Ismaili Centre in Lisbon.

I looked at churches in Portugal and their immense sense of serenity. I tried to imbibe similar values through the use of space, light and patterns following Islamic precedents in my design.

Where do you go when you need to find calmness?

On long journeys. I recall going to the Khajuraho temples amidst gardens, Angkorwat in Cambodia, the Chartres cathedral in France, the Jamia Masjid in Ispahan and recently the marvelous rock cut images of Buddha in the Longman caves in China.

You mentioned the word sacred, is there for you such a thing as God?

I would rather use the word nature. The Ellora caves touch a deep chord in me because they merge the idea of divine with natural elements.

Your mother was a follower of Radhaswami, while your father was a questioning Hindu – what did it make you?

It made me a free thinker. Though you are conditioned by your parents whether you like it or not. Even now when I go on a long trip I say Radhaswami as my mother used to tell me. I don't believe in it but it is a conditioning, like good manners.

Where do inspiration and ideas come for your projects?

You go to sleep, spend the night thinking about it, and sometimes you wake up in the morning with an idea. Sometimes it comes in a flash. If you are really immersed in your work, ideas come like in a 'revelation' - though that is a pompous word.

What about the idea of destiny and things being preordained?

I don't believe in it at all. You have good luck and you have bad luck. I don't think it is preordained in any way.

And the idea of having a specific purpose in life?

That's a very varying thing. It's cliché to say that work is my worship, but it definitely gives me a lot of joy. So I could imagine that this is my purpose.

How did you decide to become an architect?

My mother saw or thought I could draw well. She encouraged it by getting me daily classes with an old-fashioned Rajasthani teacher. I then went to the school of arts and gradually, the idea of architecture emerged.

What is a building supposed to be?

When creating a building there is of course a functional aspect, an environmental one, and an esthetical one. But a building should also express something deeper. What I may call the probing of nature, and being compatible with natural elements.

While working on the Parliament Library design for instance, the idea of enlightenment was very much on my mind. After all, the library contains books that are supposed to enlighten us. I am also fully aware that the word 'enlightenment' has religious as well as secular connotations. Light as a source of knowledge, light that illuminates thought, light that leads us to higher spiritual goals, and above all light which shows the path for noble deeds was the basis of the design.

At the crossing of the Parliament Library's two axes, a central space ties up all the five floors in one volume and is covered in a glass dome. The glow of light from the glass dome defines the theme of the Parliament Library, which is the spirit of enlightenment and democracy.

At times of difficulty and challenges, where do you find your energy?

By immersing myself into work. I have no known formula to deal with suffering. So that is what I do.

If you could ask God one question, what would You like to know?

Why god's followers hate and kill each other?

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

I never believed in it, and still don't. I always felt that God, the soul, rebirth – all such concepts and ideas are a form of poetic humanism. They are poetry. They are a way to let one's imagination wonder. But to take them as reality is something else.

What is your idea of happiness?

It can be so many things – Innovative ideas, good food, playing with my grand-children, walking through natural wonders, intimate things of one's personal life, some achievement at work, a good idea which you manage to implement. Some mystics may spend thirty years of their lives trying to find enlightenment, solely focused on one thing. But for me, happiness is a variety of things through the journey of life.