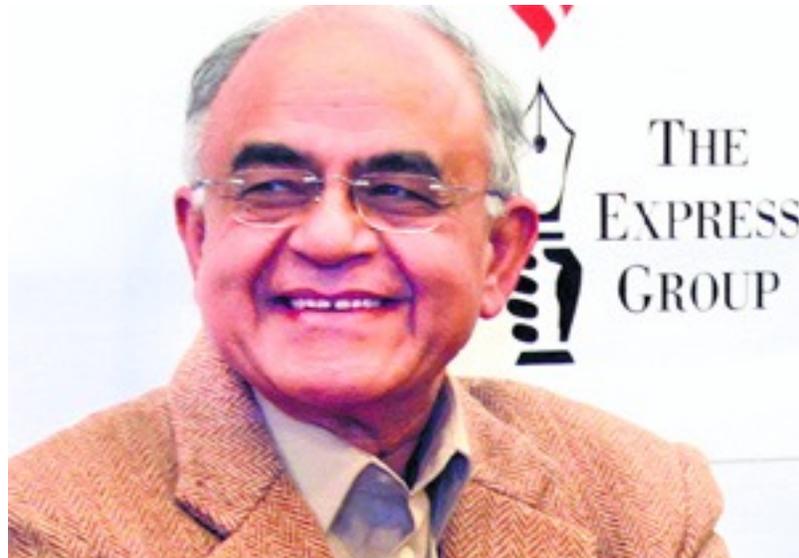


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'Spirituality is about forgetting myself in one way or another'

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What does spirituality mean to you?

Usually people oppose spirit and matter. I actually think they are very linked. For me spirituality is not necessarily the other, transcendental world. You can feel quite spiritual even without believing in God. Looking at a beautiful painting can be a spiritual experience, listening to a beautiful work of music, forgetting oneself when working – being "in the zone" as the athletes say.

Basically, one way to think about spirituality would be when you forget yourself in some way. Time gets distorted, you are no longer aware of your ego and the usual details of life. When you are so totally absorbed, you are living authentically. Artists, scientists can stay in this state for long periods of time. Artists are much better at self-forgetting because they are driven by something outside themselves.

Does it happen to you?

Yes, when I write for instance. Which is why I developed a routine, so as not to completely lose myself in it. I write from 6am to noon and during that time I do not answer phone calls or emails, I do not read anything, I am only writing.

At the age of 50 you left your corporate life to pursue your personal quest, especially through writing, was this quest always in you?

Yes of course. I think being on this quest is part of the human condition.

And I have to give credit to my father because he was a mystic. And to my very rational undergraduate education at Harvard. I was on my way to becoming an engineer like my father and slowly I moved away from it, towards philosophy, and discovered the importance of the "great questions". I did not become a philosopher because once you become an academic, those questions are no longer a living experience. But I give a lot of credit to the books I read at that time. That's really when it all began.

Not as a child?

Well, my father was a mystic and a follower of Radaswami's. So meditation, vegetarianism and so on were fully part of what we saw as children. And instead of going on vacations like every other child, we used to be taken to Radaswami's ashram. So I guess that through osmosis something sipped in. But for my father the purpose of life always was to serve God, whereas for me it is more about secular ethics, and a secular approach.

How did you end up in the corporate world if those metaphysical questions were so important?
It was all by accident. I was all set to undertake a PhD in philosophy. But one summer evening just before starting it, I was looking at the sky, and wondered if I wanted to spend the rest of my life in that dry stratosphere. I was missing India and decided the answer would be no. I came back. And to assuage my parents' anxiety about being unemployed after all those years of expensive studies, I applied for a company job at Vicks vaporizers. I became a trainee thinking I would quickly go back to school but I stayed on for the next three decades. And frankly I liked it. I liked the joy of making deals, the intellectual challenge of solving problems, it was a different experience from the very austere intellectual sphere I was in before.

At the beginning, I was constantly traveling from town to town to survey the markets, meet dealers in the bazaars and so on. That is when I started writing. And this led to my first play. It got a prize, and was performed on the BBC, which gave me much confidence. I wrote two more plays to quite a lot of acclaim. In parallel, by the age of 37 I had become the managing director of the company. It was more difficult to find time to write but I always knew this is what I would do.

So the first part of my journey was this quest for arta, understanding the way the world functions. When arta was over, I got pretty depressed, even though I had written a bestseller translated into 17 languages and so on. I was very concerned by moral failure, by corruption. What really hit me was that every interaction of the Indian citizen with the State was morally ambiguous. That is what drove me to the desire to explore Dharma. Why did I choose the Mahabharata to do so ? Because it is unique in engaging with the world of politics. It is unique in being obsessed with Dharma. And I thought it may resonate more with people -coming from our own tradition- than to speak about some Western governance ideas.

Opening people's consciousness about it would be part of your life's purpose?

Absolutely. Every other day I go and talk to some audience about it, whether schools, or colleges, or Rotary Clubs ...

Another reason I was attracted to the Mahabharata is that none of the characters says "let's ask God for the answer". You are left to your own devices.

The idea or the quest for God has no resonance for you?

The desire to do the right thing, to see a world with less pain, oppression, injustice, corruption and poverty are much more the driving quests of my life. You could argue that in some way they are spiritual pursuits. But the quest for God or a spiritual being has not been a driving force for me. Moksha is still far away. And what is more interesting to me at this stage, is Kama, the second of the four stages. I think all human beings have to come to grips with desires. We often gloss over it, we are embarrassed to talk about it. It is not a part of us we explore. Literature explores it of course. But as a project of self-cultivation, I am not sure who has done it. This attracts me. And it is a spiritual pursuit in the sense that being a Hindu, there is a place for Kama also. It doesn't leave you with guilt and shame. The approach to human sexuality does not have the contemporary human embarrassments about it. It is considered as a very natural human thing. But of course all texts are very clear that you'd better know how to manage it, because otherwise it will manage you and then you are in trouble. So before Moksha, there is Kama.

Is there a protection or guidance in life, or is everything about chance and probability?

I do not know. Sometimes it seems like luck and accidents, other times there seems to be a certain trajectory from childhood.

But on this trajectory, I certainly am not at the point I could leave everything to seek God. There are four aims of life, and not only Moksha. It is a problem actually that the fourth aim became in India the superior and ultimate one. And we forget about the others.

Life can seem very absurd. And if ultimately there is no logic, it is actually much more difficult to live without this certainty of God. It seems at times that life is a rigged game of dice. You are like Yudhishthira, the most incompetent of players, and you know you will be losing. The only thing you know for sure is that you are going to die. In between you don't have any certainty. So this path is more difficult.

Sometimes I wish I had been blessed with the grace of feeling that sense of communion with infinity. But even though I wasn't, since I can absorb myself in various quests of self-cultivation, I don't get troubled too often. And I still feel that my book "India Unbound" for instance gave hope to many young people. So I had an impact, which means there can be a meaning to my life, a reason for me to be here.

If the only thing we know is that we will not come alive out of this life, and if we decide not to commit suicide, we might as well make something out of it, isn't it?

Yes, we should attempt to make our whole life a work of art.

And acts of goodness is one of the way to achieve it?

Yes, an act of goodness is probably one of the best things that can give meaning to life. When Yudhishthira insisted to take that stray dog to heaven, it was such an act. Even if we cannot achieve it,

we can at least strive for it. That's what the human condition is. We are in the gutter but we can look at the stars.

In the absence of a recourse to so-called God, where do you find your energy and anchor at times of great challenges?

In an incessant curiosity and quest. That search, that self-cultivation is where I always go back to.

Books were prime guides on your quest, what about people?

Less so. Books are my most natural companions.

If there were such a thing as God though, what would you like to ask?

The big question – where do we fit in, in the world? What is the meaning of our life? I do not wish to be immortal so I am not interested in what happens after death. But we are all seeking for the same answer, what is the meaning of life? Why are we here? We all want to live a perfect life in between. It is very hard for people to accept that there may be no reason to be here.

But if there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose for the next round?

The biggest flaw I find in my own character is self-absorption. Too much concern for myself, too much ego, always wanting to be "somebody". So assuming I would come back as a human being, I would like to be more relaxed so that I could easily fade in the landscape and not feel the need to shine, to be "important". That actually comes in the way to truly enjoying life. Self-forgetting is so central. A little bit less of "me" would be wonderful no matter what I would be.

What is your idea of happiness?

Precisely, when I forget myself.