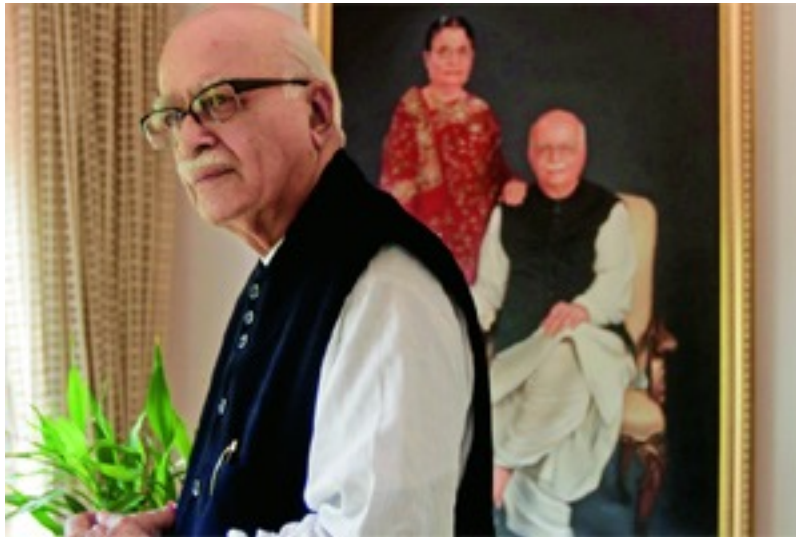


L.K Advani

Senior BJP Leader

'My idea of happiness is good books'

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Senior BJP Leader L.K. Advani talks about what spirituality means to him.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I never really thought of it like that in words. But my upbringing, and my subsequent association with the RSS made religiosity and spiritualism part of my make-up. Some people may associate spiritualism to spirits, séances and all that. But for me it is closer to piety and religiosity.

Let me give you an example. At the end of every Parliament session, a picture of the 540 members is taken, using a rotating camera from 1910 or so. When it faces you, you are supposed not to move of course. When the picture finally comes, we always first look at ourselves. If my picture happens not to be very good, the whole photograph becomes meaningless. This is instinctive in men - to think of oneself first, of the "I". To me, spirituality is something that raises you above that "I", and makes you think of others, of society, of the rest of the world.

Today, at the age of eighty-two plus, I look at the road I have been traversing, a path I chose when I was fourteen, and I have the satisfaction that at least in my own conscience, I have been honestly treading it. It would not have been possible without a commitment to something more than what instincts say. And that derives from spirituality.

What was spiritual in your upbringing?

My upbringing was mostly about religiosity. We used to go to the temple and celebrate the festivals. In Karachi, even the non-Sikh Hindus went to the Gurudwaras and we followed Guru Nanak. At home we had the Guru Granth Sahib.

Most people find it strange that I have not subscribed to rituals as most pious people do, particularly among Hindus. Having a daily puja is not part of my routine, but I respect those who do.

What about God?

That is in-built. Because of that upbringing. I always took it for granted.

You never questioned it or revolted against it?

No, I never did. Maybe because I had an abundance of both happiness and meaning in my life. If I didn't have happiness, maybe I would have revolted against it.

When Partition took place and you saw all those deaths, did you question it, did you ask God why people had to suffer so much?

Frankly I didn't. I didn't see many people die that way. The Partition trauma affected very badly Punjab and the Northwest Frontier Province. In Sindh those tragedies came later. We left in September. There had been occasional killings but not the kind of huge massacres that took place in other parts. And when I heard about them, I was engaged in positive activity, for example seeing that the refugees would be settled properly etc.

Today, when you see suffering in the world, how do you explain it?

I do not explain it. Because I do not think God does it. God is a power beyond the normal powers we can comprehend scientifically. But one of the principles we have come to accept as Hindus is that you shall reap as you sow. Karma is the consequence.

Karma is very important for you?

I accept it. This life is not the only one.

And is it all preordained?

I don't think so. Because at least as far as human beings are concerned, the supreme power, call it God if you wish, has given human beings understanding and rationality to chart their own path.

There is free will?

Yes.

What about astrological charts, would they mean anything if we have free will?

I cannot say about astrological charts. But there are certain influences for sure. For instance, the word "lunatic". It comes from the word moon. As a child, a friend of mine lost his mental balance. One day we went on a walk on a full moon day. He had been fine and balanced for a while but suddenly that night, he had an outbreak of "lunacy" again. This obviously shows the influence a planet can have. So how planets influence human beings in different ways, I cannot say. Astrologers who are real experts can judge. But I always thought I should decide for myself if to do something or not, and not let that decision to others, with them telling me if something or some moment is auspicious or not etc. I take my own decisions.

Do you pray? What is the influence of that higher power in your daily life?

I do not have a regular prayer practice. I pray when I go to a temple. But rather than pray to God, I would believe that He expects me to act properly and ethically. If I conduct myself well in life that should satisfy God.

When you face major challenges, huge difficulties, where do you find the energy, where is your anchor?

In my fate in God and in doing my work correctly, and very much in my family – I always go back to them, they give me so much sustenance.

At the age of 14, hearing about the RSS, you felt it was your calling – why?

A friend took me to the RSS branch. There, I heard that we owe something to society, that it is everyone's duty to repay what he has received from society, and in this case the biggest challenge was to liberate the country from foreign rule. That is how it started. Once India became independent, it was a commitment to the country. It became the biggest thing in my life.

At home your parents were interested in politics, nationalism?

Not at all. One of my maternal uncles was active in the Congress. But that's all. Nobody else was active in such ways.

So at that time you decided that this is what your life should be about?

Yes. So much so that I joined engineering college but never completed it and left it in between.

Many people never find their calling?

That's true. It's a blessing no doubt. And I never questioned that calling. I had problems of course. But nothing to do with the basic path I had chosen.

How do you feel about being in politics and how they evolved?

I can frankly tell you that I do not feel very happy about the way things are. Naturally politicians aspire to come to power and want to ensure that the party they belong to would rule the country. But I have again and again stressed to my party colleagues that we must also change the image of the ugly Indian politician. And that can only happen through our own behavior.

How does one avoid being hurt in politics, how does one develop a thick skin?

I guess I have developed it over a long period of time. And I sometimes think I may not be very good at giving the right image. When people criticize me, it's never about me being corrupt, or impudent. It's always about me being communal. It's always about Ayodhya and so on. And on those topics, I have the satisfaction that some people know what really happened. For instance Dr. Koenraad Elst, a Catholic priest who followed the yatra from Somnath to Ayodhya, wrote that there was not one sentence which can be regarded as anti-Muslim. That gives me satisfaction. So I have gotten used to the attacks over time, and I am fine, as long as my own conscience is fine.

What were some of the spiritual influences in your life?

I used to go for Swami Ranganathananda's lectures on the Gita and followed them for years. He was the head of the Ramakrishna mission. He is actually the one who drew my attention to Jinnah's speech at the Constituent Assembly in my last meeting with him.

The Gita says you should make efforts regardless of the results, how do you explain failures, losing an election for instance?

I don't explain them. I try to see what I did wrong and what are the shortcomings on my part. For instance when I returned from Pakistan and found that my speech on Jinnah had created such turmoil, that my own colleagues were so unhappy with me, that my party was up in arms against me, there was a point I felt alright, let's call it a day. After all, I had tried to do my best. And still I don't think what I did in Pakistan was wrong. But then a gentleman came to see me. He had written a book on the Gita and wanted me to release it. When I read the Gita again I felt I should not quit.

What about meditation or introspection?

Meditation is not part of my daily life. Had it, it would have been of great help. It strengthens the ability to concentrate and to stabilize your mental processes. I tried it incidentally with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar for instance. But not regularly at all. And only regular practice can help.

But life is a race, so how and when can you introspect?

I have tremendous discipline in my daily life.

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

I think I have spent a proper life and I am satisfied with it. Do I get salvation after it or do I have to go through other births again ?

If you were to come back, what would you choose to be?

I wouldn't mind it to be with a family like mine and a life like this one, it's been a satisfying one on the overall. Except that the purpose I had in mind in my early age didn't fully come to be - namely to liberate the country and make it one in which people are happy and content, a country reckoned as among the prime ones in the world.

What do you tell people who think religions are one of the core causes of unrest and violence between people?

I disagree with it. It's happened mostly because of democracy. Democracy is the best influence. But in India's recent history, religions and especially Hinduism and Islam got mixed up with vote-bank politics, which is heartbreaking. Vote-bank politics created the problem, not religions in themselves.

When I went to Pakistan, they were surprised to hear me. After all I was there only for six days. And in those days I was able to transform an image I had acquired in four or five decades.

Do you think it will get worse?

It is bound to improve with education and the eradication of extreme poverty.

What is your idea of happiness?

Good books.

Not human beings?

By temperament, I enjoy being alone. I am more of an introvert.

How can you be in public life being an introvert?

I know, people are always surprised to hear this. But I even remember as a child, in Karachi, if my parents had a function at home with many people, I would be depressed for at least two or three days after. I just didn't feel good. And strangely enough, my calling has been such that it has always put me in crowds...

So I must say that the most satisfying period of my life may have been those 19 months I spent in jail during Emergency. First of all because there were no crowds. Secondly because I could read books. And on the overall, I was satisfied to be doing my duty.

Do you feel content ?

Yes, I am.

Do you have inner peace?

Definitely. And I do not hold grudges against people.

How can you do this?

I always think it's small stuff.

Even if people whom you have trusted fully betray you?

I always think there must be something I did wrong.

Can humans be bad?

It's very difficult for me to think that way.

When you meet someone for the first time, are you very sensitive to their energies and if they are good people or not?

Everybody is a mixture of both good and bad. And I try to look at the good side.

How can you survive in politics that way?

I have, and for many years!