

Sunit Tandon

Head of Lok Sabha TV

'You have to invest a lot of effort and time in the things that you love'

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Sunit Tandon is the head of Lok Sabha TV, a theatre actor and a former Doordarshan anchor.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I see many manifestations around me of what people call spirituality. Especially in a country like India which has so many religions and ways of being spiritual. Actually people often confuse religion and spirituality. And it can all be extremely bewildering.

Personally I don't really believe in anything that other people call spirituality. I suppose I believe more in ethics and morality rather than spirituality because the latter would assume believing in some external force or power. And I believe that whatever is there is internal, you must cope with it, you can't lay the blame on something external to yourself. Either you accept responsibility for who and what you are, including your state of mind and emotions, or you try to escape, looking for some guidance from a book, a person, or some concept external to yourself. All these can help and

contribute to getting down the path towards morality and ethics but they can also distract you from that path. Therefore I tend to be suspicious of spirituality, until I know which direction it actually is in.

You always felt that way?

By and large, yes, at least ever since I began to really think for myself. As a child of course you accept whatever is taught to you.

You had a religious upbringing?

Not particularly, apart from the usual rituals on the main holidays. It was a very relaxed Hinduism, more a way of life than anything else. Hinduism was about choosing whatever god would suit you at a certain moment in time. The freedom of choice was always there, as well as the freedom not to believe. Hinduism is actually one religion with a strong atheistic tradition, it always had a space for atheism.

So would you define yourself as an atheist?

Intellectually yes. But maybe I shy away from spiritual questions too much. And emotionally I am closer to being an agnostic. Because there are emotional moments when I do want some external power, when I do seek some force I can appeal to and have an internal dialogue with. Basically, it is too complex an issue for someone as little versed in it as I am, to really have an opinion.

So at times of challenges, where do you then find the energy to cope?

I do sometimes appeal to some higher force but more for solace than energy. Energy has to come from within. It is more a dialogue to help reconcile myself with whatever is happening around. I tried to meditate once or twice, but it did nothing to me. I prefer to think things consciously, rather than let myself fall into a meditative state. I lead a very full life with very different activities. And I manage to compartmentalize very well. When I am here at the Lokh Saba channel, I am fully here. When I am rehearsing a play, I am completely there. And so on.

As a child, what did you dream of doing when growing up?

I never dreamt about the future. I led a wonderful life never knowing what I would be doing the next year. I never thought as a child I would do any of the things I ended up doing. Apart from thinking of becoming a bureaucrat. Which happened, but in a very strange way, as I never sat for the exams. I went first to a bank, then left when fed up after two years. And ended up being involved in a film festival. I had to become a bureaucrat for that. Subsequently, as a bureaucrat, I had a very strange path. I only got posted in fields I wanted to be in – never into fertilizers or some agricultural department! I first was in the film festival office for eleven years, then switched to the national film development corporation, which is more about production, distribution and marketing. And I was always doing other things on the side. For instance I became an anchor on Doordarshan. So I built up a considerable experience of presenting news, doing current affairs etc. And now suddenly it converged with my experience as a bureaucrat in this job where I manage a television channel. So life is wonderful and leads you to strange places which you can't ever plan. You just have to allow yourself to be led by your own interests.

Was any of it preordained, is there such a thing as destiny?

I don't think there is such a thing as destiny. Let us say that had I not had those interests, I would not have landed here. On the other hand I could have never planned any of this. But I could have landed very much somewhere else. So what is destiny? What eventually happens we call destiny. When it goes our way we say it is preordained. But when it doesn't, we don't say it.

What about theater, wasn't it very much by chance?

I was very shy but I had been prepared for it for a long time as I had been doing a lot of public speaking in school. When I tried it, and saw people liked it, I began feeling really good about it. Having discovered something that gave me pleasure, I did stick to doing it continuously. And in that sense I don't believe in destiny and preordained things. You have to invest a lot of effort and time into things you love and then things can happen. From the time I left college, I always made time to play. I actually left the bank because they wanted to post me in Jaipur. And I could not fathom abandoning theater, radio, television, all those other things I was doing. So I quit and waited till I got a job. Neither of those things like television or theater would enable me to live on it. But it was important for me to do them.

I always felt theater is about keeping me sane. It was not for money or fame. But if I was only stuck in my job, worrying about office politics, the advancement of my career etc., I would have become a nervous wreck. Yet, when I have to go to the rehearsal, I have no choice but switch off and be completely present there, in the moment.

This compartmentalization keeps me sane. Then when I come back to the earlier problems, there is more perspective and distance, and it helps in tackling them.

It also keeps me from taking myself too seriously, or stress too much about things. There was a moment for instance when I felt sidelined in my job and not appreciated by my superior. I was beginning to get depressed. But then I realized it meant I had a lot of time for theater and broadcasting. And suddenly I became happy. Then things turned around and I got satisfied with my job again.

So if you do only one thing in life, it might drive you insane, or unbalanced. But if you have other things to look forward to, it compensates. You don't get so caught up in one particular thing. But you must have that desire inside to put a certain amount of work, with no return in terms of fame or money. In theater, there is absolutely no money, and maximum 500 people in an audience. So no fame whatsoever. When I started Doordarshan, it was only on the Delhi station. Only later it became national broadcasting. And back then there was no competition. So we were like kings and queens.

What were some major influences in shaping your understanding of things?

Internally, I have a pretty bleak view of humanity. As a child, the writings of Jonathan Swift influenced me a lot. "Gulliver's travels" is so misanthropic. Bernard Shaw, who was an anti-romantic, who believed in trying to get down to basic human motivations, also influenced me a lot. Understanding that we are all extremely fallible creatures, very prone to greed and extremely selfish motivations. At the same time trying to overcome it, and hope for something better. These were influences early on in my life. So even though I didn't become a complete recluse, writing off humanity, I have had tremendous misanthropic thoughts. Human beings are really an extremely flawed race, capable of the worst.

So on the overall, I would like to think I can look quite realistically at most situations, without getting into romantic ideas or ideals. At the same time, I hope not to become a complete pessimist or cynic. I have a cynical understanding but not a cynical mode of action.

If there were such a thing as God, and if you could ask one question, what would it be?

There is only one question: why? Why do we have to exist at all?

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

I don't believe in it. We have one life and whatever we want to do, let's get down to doing it as soon as possible. Hoping to do it in a future life is the worst form of escapism.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is your own level of satisfaction about how you react to the world. You can be happy in the worst circumstances or unhappy in the best ones. It is entirely internal and definitely does not depend on external realities. I have been happy when I had very little money or a lot of it, when I was surrounded by family and friends or completely alone. So it's all about my internal reaction.