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'Even God would find it tough to live a truthful life in this world'

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What does spirituality mean to you?

This little globe of ours is only one amongst billions and billions, there are worlds beyond worlds, we do not know the beginning or the end of anything, we do not know where we came from and why we came, all religions have tried to explain it, but nobody yet has come back to tell us.

So only one thing is sure: with more than six billion humans crammed on this little planet, we should at least try and coexist as best as possible, which means living within certain parameters. Those parameters imply trying to live an ethical life, and that is what spirituality means to me. You try and live in such a manner that those who interact with you are comfortable with you – and I do not mean human beings only.

When I grew up in Madhya Pradesh, there were countless tigers, panthers and other wild animals next to us. Today they are all killed and gone. Of all species, only humans kill wontedly. There is so much life on earth, and all its forms should be comfortable with us. That would be enough of an achievement.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

There is obviously a force holding this universe altogether, that created it and so on – but what is it? I would not know. Has it been there in an obvious way in my life? It would be hard to tell. I have had so many twists and turns which I could have never planned. But it could also be chance only. The words of Shakespeare or Thomas Hardy do resonate with me when they say that a destiny shapes our ends and fate, or when Guru Nanak explains that things are happening beyond our control and beyond our understanding. As the famous Indian line goes: "you should only worry if something happens that is not to happen, but in fact, everything happens as meant to happen – so why worry?". But ultimately, two things stand out for me: as Nanak would insist, nothing is permanent and one has to accommodate to everlasting change. And apart from that, as he also said, we just do not know. We cannot comprehend things so we cannot know.

Therefore, as I am a cautious man, I take some kind of insurance policy. No matter where I go, I visit the local church, or mosque, or temple, or Gurudwara, I shut my eyes and make a little prayer: "ô Shivji or ô Guru Nanak or ô Buddha or ô Christ or ô Muhammad, all of You, whoever You are, wherever You are, I am not a bad fellow, please take care of me, look after me". I need to be cautious because if I go up there, and I prayed all along to one gentleman, the other one may have gotten angry with me! So I'd rather keep Them all on my side.

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

I am not going to claim that I always had some particular desire since I was a child or that I had a burning ambition of saving or improving the world. But yes, wherever I have been placed by life, I tried to do the job with the best of my abilities, and leave a better situation than when I joined. And I tried to help anybody or any cause that would require it – even by pushing hard and with aggression if needed.

Also, I look at what Sikhism is. To me, being Sikh means two things. In this world, we must stand up to make it better and for anyone who is suffering in any way. And in the one above, if there is such a thing, and if a God almighty sits there, we should check out if He is completely perfect. If He is just, then I have nothing to fear – as I have not done particular wrongs. But if He is lacking, then He'd better worry, because we may wage a revolution there as we can do here.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

I am a Sikh, I read the scriptures, I go to the Gurudwara off and on, I do the usual things prescribed by tradition. This is the culture and tradition I am coming from. I am of a certain group, and I feel I should stay with the group.

But even though I pray, I do not believe that thanks to it God will take care of all my worries. At times of difficulty, I find the energy within myself, it is very much about trying to hold on and about self-belief.

Also, I have an intensely questioning mind, a perpetually sceptical mind. I follow Guru Nanak's advice: question, always question. I do not buy the idea of a big mighty Jehovah that would eat me up for doing so. So I keep arguing and exploring. When I travel, there is not a mosque or a temple or a church I miss. I am always very interested in learning more about those various human spiritual cultures.

Finally, daily spirituality is about Guru Nanak's prompting: be useful, earn with your ten fingers and share what you have. Never beg. Lead a householder life. At the end of his life, he went back tending to his farm. It never was about escaping the world into some emptiness or in the thoughts of after-life.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

After all those years in government, eight years in the Election Commission and so on, people know me well by now. They are aware of the fact that I always speak my mind loudly and bluntly. I never hesitate for a moment, I shoot out of my mouth the words I feel should be uttered. I find it very difficult not to be direct, not to be clear in whatever I want to say. I may get hurt or kicked out for it but on the overall I have been lucky not to be destroyed by it.

And here I think of what Guru Nanak said: he defined God as nothing else but truth (not someone sitting up there with a long beard for sure!). So truth stands above everything else, but higher than truth is truthful living. I think that even for God it would be tough to live a truthful life in this world. But at least we can try.

I once said during some elections that with the system we have, it is hard not to be tempted to find some shortcuts. The person in a position of authority (the Chief Minister for instance) is going out seeking re-election, it is obvious that he may try to twist things a bit (or a lot) in his favour. It is possible that even God Himself would find it hard not to be tempted, if He was standing up for elections in such circumstances! And so it was my job to prevent it. You can call it bluntness or seeking truth – in any case it is something I never shied away from.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

Frankly, no one marked me in that sense – I marked myself if I may say so. I grew up and shaped my own way of being. No one had that kind of strong influence on me. I never had an encounter or an experience which felt so extraordinary as to be life changing and shaping. I have a strong mind of my own I guess.

The closest to an inspiration I could mention was my father. I respect him much for the way he behaved with us and did his duty. He was a very strong man, very blunt and direct – I guess I resemble him in that way. He suffered from it while in the army. But in the end, he was appointed as a governor nonetheless.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

I am not sure reincarnation takes place. Maybe once dead we only go to dust and contribute to feeding earth's creatures. But if there is such a thing, I am not interested in choosing. Indeed, there is definitely something happening beyond our capacity to think, at a very large scale and on a much larger plane. And if within that plane this life is not the end, and I am to come back as another living species, it shall be as meant to be. I will be computerized as a snake for instance, my past will be gone, I won't remember I was a Minister for sure! And so it shall be.

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

Aren't You bored? I think at times that if there is such a thing as heaven with such a perfect force or person sitting there, He would be permanently self-contemplating. And the few who land up in paradise would also be in a perpetual blissful contemplative mode. So it seems to me it would be a very boring life.

What is your idea of happiness?

I do not like that word that much. Is it about the satisfaction of a good meal, or of a nice man-woman relationship? It is an overused word and I am not interested in it. As long as I can lead a normal life, that is all I aspire for. And I have always been leading one. Of course I am an imperfect man but I am fine with it. And of course there are problems coming up all the time, but that is not unhappiness. And I am lucky insofar that I never had a strong need for material comfort or things of the sort. When it comes to my career, I also was not prone to worries, as I always felt there is enough space for everyone in the world. So why would I want so-called "happiness"?