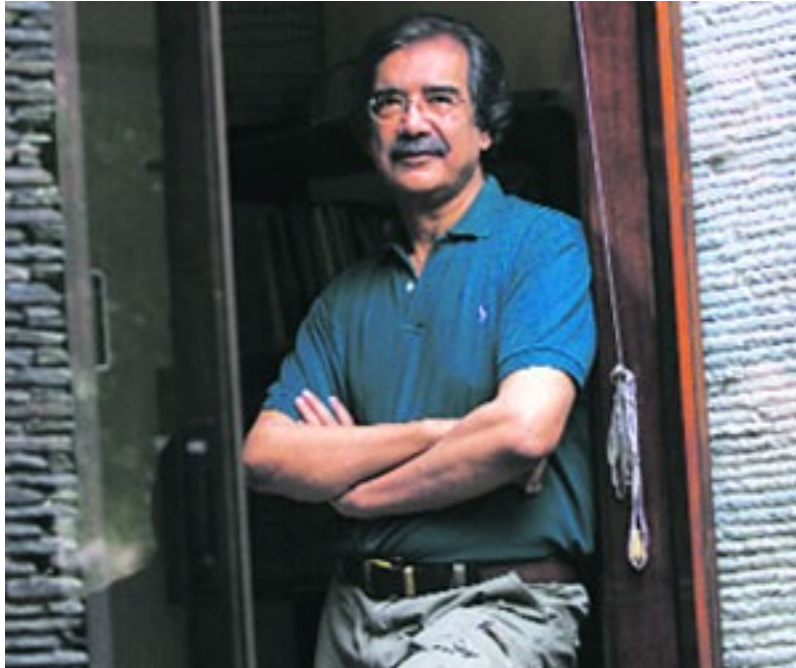


Mike Pandey

Film-Maker

'Our planet has a survival instinct like all other organisms'

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Mike Pandey is a celebrated wildlife film-maker and conservationist.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about being one with nature, with a supreme intelligence, a superconsciousness that permeates the universe. Because I believe we are actually driven by a more powerful supreme intelligence.

If we are not frightened to let go, it drives us to where we actually must go. It is not necessarily a question of it being destined. It is another level from where we see and observe the world we are in. It leads us to a place where we feel part of a bigger system and in synch with the energy that drives the whole solar system.

And when we flow, when we are one, it is a blissful state. Even if a tragedy or loss occurs, we feel it is part of a learning system we have to go through. When we understand that these are the designs of a larger force, instead of mulling and weeping over it, we can take it in our stride more easily, grow, adapt and subsequently face larger challenges. Basically, the idea is that if there is darkness, get up and light a candle.

Do you actually manage to have that peace?

I have largely managed, through and beyond the losses I have gone through – loss of dear ones, as well as loss of special opportunities.

Let me give you an example. I make films. Four or five times in the past they have clearly made a difference. They have contributed largely or fully in protecting species, for instance when a documentary led to a legislation banning a very lethal drug that was killing vultures.

How did that happen?

Vultures clean cattle's carcasses. A new medication, banned in other countries, had been injected to the Indian cattle. Within three days of ingesting their carcasses vultures would die. So within a decade, 99.5% of them had disappeared in India, millions and millions.

I made a documentary about it. And within weeks, the Parliament banned the medication in India. We then took the film to villages all over the country, to sensitize villagers. It had a great impact. It was shown on Doordarshan several times and it reached every village. Now the vulture population is slowly returning. But a vulture gives only one egg a year. So it will take five or six decades at least for the species to be visible again.

In any case, I meant to say that I know I am capable of effective communication, of having an impact. Mostly because I speak from the heart, and work both on sensitizing grassroots people and those in the corridors of power. The same goes with Earth Matters, a program I do on Doordarshan. Nothing pedantic, simple communication from the heart, the raw language of humanity. And it works. I get so much feedback, from villages, from prisons, from everywhere.

So I wanted to do a film on tigers. Forty years on, "Project Tiger" is a failure since tigers are still dying. Why? Because no law can protect the tiger. You have to involve the common man in the conservation movement. Especially the communities around the sanctuaries and parks. When are we going to engage and inform those people? Education about the role of a species brings understanding, understanding brings respect, respect brings love. And what you love you protect. For now, those people watch rich people coming to see the tigers, spending Rs.30,000 a day in hotels, and nothing comes back to them. When will they become partners? It is important to make them stakeholders. So more than 60% of the staff in those resorts should come from the communities around. And then things will begin to change.

But as I try to make a film on tigers, I am being asked exorbitant fees to get into the park. And I am an NGO. This effort is a collaborative effort to bring about a change to help the tiger and beyond that, help the country. It won't do anything for me. But still I haven't got the permit.

The same thing happened with the whale shark when I decided to do a film on them. Nobody even believed there were whale sharks in Indian waters. Within three months of the film's screening though, the whale shark was put under the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act. It was the first time a marine species was put under this Act. Fishermen used to kill them for the liver only, dumping all the rest as they were not eating it. 19 human beings had been killed trying to capture whale sharks. All of it for Rs.750. Once the law was passed, we took the film and showed it in 270 villages on the coastline to educate the fishermen. And it worked.

The Film then went to a global forum, CITES (Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species) and thanks to our lobbying, thanks to our distribution of the film to delegates, a ban was enacted globally. And subsequently the film got the UN Award for Outstanding Achievement for the Conservation of Global Heritage.

So the film worked. Fishermen have been compensated for cutting their nets lose and not catching those sharks. The sharks can roam around freely. One small film managed to affect an entire species! It is so encouraging, isn't it?

Going back to this supreme force, did you always feel its existence?

I was always a sort of free-floating agent. There was a lot of parental guidance. It was a religious yet a liberal home. We were not forced to go to temples or wear the sacred threads. My parents always said gods are not trapped in temples and homes. They are in every living cell and being. And somehow with the free-floating I developed the sense of a guiding force and an aura. I could feel it for instance through odd coincidences and synchronicities. With delays that enable me to live something magical. With instances of being at the right place, at the right time.

And then I feel like asking this force "where are You?". I want to hear a voice or see something because whatever orchestrates it all, must be so completely amazing.

There are 20,000 ecosystems on the planet. Magically orchestrated by this force. But in our ignorance and greed, we are destroying it all. Why? Because too many people are consumed by their own power. Yet look at the most powerful conquerors of all times, Alexander the Great and Chinggis Khan – where are they now? Nowhere, long gone. Why can't we learn from them? I just read about an extremely wealthy man, who worked so hard all his life, racing to always make more. And then suddenly he died. He did not sit for a moment along the river, with a sandwich, enjoying the sound of the water and the birds, breathing fresh air and laughing from his heart with his family. Instead he always lived in fear – whether of the tax people or guarding his wealth and so on.

Why would someone do that?

One is arrogance. Those people think they are the supreme commanders of the universe. And also, they live with the illusion of eternal youth, as if they were never to die.

But you said there is a supreme intelligence orchestrating everything in the wisest way, so why would it create such people?

If you look at any process in the world, when you start you are pure. Like an apple: if you leave it out overnight, the percentage of negative qualities increases. And gradually it gets worse and worse. Fission then happens. To eliminate it, worms come up and regenerate it. So those people have their usefulness in the grand scheme of things. You must have a balance. Those people have their usefulness in the human ecosystem but they are not so evolved. They are still at the infantile stage. They come into money or power, yet they do not know how to use it. They were brainwashed since birth into the need of making money. Others are brainwashed into killing for religious purposes.

Conflicts and killings in the name of religion abound – why would the grand wise orchestrator of the universe allow for it?

Evolution is the key. All conflicts, all challenges are opportunities for learning. And also those people destroy each other. For them, there is no vertical growth. It is only about horizontal battles. It was not a wasted life, because at least they helped contain others of the same kind. All like-minded parasites consume and erase each other. Same for people at that level of consciousness.

On the overall, I feel we are still in our infancy, like three years' old children, unconscious, so unaware. Some are driven by greed, others by power. And we end up cutting the branch on which we are sitting. We have no respect for what we need most – water. Look at the waste. The richer the man, the more educated, the more he wastes water. I know a person who just came back from Harvard and bought a Hummer, which he washes every day with a hosepipe. So what is he? A parasite, a mutation on this planet, a planet killer, or is he an intelligent man who will control the future of mankind? Parasites and viruses have their role too, since they eliminate carcasses. And we need them to keep us on our toes. But still, it is tragic. And there is an urgent need for those who are aware of that supreme intelligence to act.

Do you manage to be in touch with that supreme intelligence all the time?

It would be very pompous to say so. Basically, I am a simple man who has let go. Because I feel the universe has its own design.

I get caught of course at times. I do function in this reality. But I try not to get involved in too many things that fix me, bind me, root me too much to a place. Because I know I must transcend this reality and be without excess baggage, travel as light as possible, whether problems or possessions.

How did this flow take you to India, making films?

I had a very good job in England, with the BBC. And then suddenly I felt I had to drive from there to India. And then I met my wife here and many other things flowed right. The place is tough. Really. But in spite of all the odds, the clutter, the chaos, I felt I should stick here. If you just look at it for a moment, had I stayed in England, would I have been able to impact the way I did? Lots of friends of mine make wildlife films. But none of them makes conservation films. Actually these were not even heard of when I began making them. So the question is why did I begin doing it in the mid seventies? I had never planned it.

I started with the tigers but there were too many people dealing with it. Instead, I moved to other areas, the whale shark, elephants, vultures, the horseshoe crab. Regarding the latter, I have been trying for 13 years to knock on so many doors to get help from the government and protect it. It is the oldest creature on the planet. It can reverse osteoporosis, diabetes. There are nine pharmaceutical patents pending in India. But it still is not protected. It is being smuggled out of India for 50 Paise each. And India is the only country apart from America with a sizeable population.

We are playing with nature. But we cannot actually temper with it. Our planet is a living organism. It also has a survival instinct. And if it shudders even once to protect itself, it could easily wipe us out in seconds. And nothing will go wrong on earth without us. Are we really needed on this planet? We mostly consume and destroy. We cut trees and make them into furniture; we boil the earth and drive our cars. Are we parasites or mutations?

On the other hand, I do think there has to be a purpose to us being here. Nature would not have created us without a reason. So are we programmed to destroy the earth? Then leave it and fly into the universe? It is also possible.

A few decades ago nobody could have fathomed that a message of mine could reach someone in the USA within seconds through sms. Telepathy enables me to contact people half a planet away in a second as well. There are so many capabilities of the mind and heart which we have not developed or explored enough. We cannot see magnetic fields whereas bees can. We really are still only at an infantile stage. When understanding this, you can imagine that we could travel at the speed of light. Because you could teleport the moment you think of it. That is when physics and quantum physics in particular will merge with religion. A few will lead. And the rest of us, like goats, will follow.

The same goes for the idea of reincarnation. The memory of things past is stored in genes. Science now recognizes that. One day it will understand the concept of souls carrying information.

And what would you choose for your next life?

I really love my life. So I'd want to be with nice people who help me grow, like this time. But we are forms of energy, so we will meet each other again anyway, because we are so totally bound.

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

When are we going to meet, buddy?

I'd like to sit down and ask what is this great magic that creates bees and if they die, mankind will disappear from the face of the earth. 87% of our food grows thanks to them, because bees and butterflies pollinate them. And yet we destroy them. For instance in California they planted vast surfaces of almonds. Nothing else grew. And bees ended up dying.

What is your idea of happiness?

When you can laugh from the heart, be tranquil, be relaxed without any fear. Of course I do have fears. For instance, I fear of running short of water, of earthquakes that could destroy Delhi. I fear for the next generations. I feel we are about to face terrible times and I am not sure we are equipped to deal with it.

So do you still manage to laugh from the heart?

When I go to the village, with simple people, without pressure, there I can laugh. When I come back to the chaos and corruption of cities, fear grips me. No matter how connected to the supreme force I may be, it is impossible not to be emotional, not to react and feel something when seeing misery and suffering. Then only do I manage to rationalize, thinking it is all programmed. And that I should let go.