

Deepa Mehta

Filmmaker

'In difficult times, I read a murder mystery'

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Filmmaker Deepa Mehta believes that making a movie is about touching people's lives.

What does spirituality mean to you?

What immediately comes to mind is some kind of a moral philosophy. Something that teaches you about the way of life, about your path.

I would definitely not connect it to religions, because I find them to be more limited and most of the havoc in the world has been perpetrated in their name. I prefer the idea of a philosophy, something you can think about and feel, that connects your body and mind, as opposed to going to what some call the "soul". All the alarm bells start ringing when going that way. Too often spirituality gets connected to all the new age stuff which I find to be psychobabble.

Did you have a religious upbringing?

My mother meditates and had a Vedantic guru, connected to the Ramakrishna Mission, but there was nothing formal. I don't remember having to go to temples or pray, there were no rituals at all, thank god.

And the concept of God or a divine force?

Well of course, there is the idea of atman, call it a divine force within you if you wish, and Brahman, the outer force – and the two ought to be connected.

But do you actually feel that force?

In some romantic state, I'd like to believe in it, because it feels nice to know that somehow there is this great energy connecting us all. I am sure there must be something. But I don't have the answer. That's why I am an agnostic and not an atheist. I simply do not know.

And I want to know. I want to explore. I am an explorer. When people ask me why I make the films I make, it's because those are subjects I don't know much about. And I am keen to know more about them, through the film-making process – whether it's about being a widow, or a lesbian, or an outcast.

The whole process of learning and spirituality are the same thing for me.

What about odd coincidences or synchronicities that seem to mean something?

Absolutely. For instance when no matter what I do, nothing goes right. Then I have to see that somebody is trying to tell me something and it's just not meant to be.

One such memorable moment was when I was trying to shoot "Water". Absolutely everything we were trying was failing. Then, of all people, the Editor of the RSS mouthpiece said "Deepa, a good general should always know when to retreat". When he said that, I knew I had to back off.

So of course, there are moments like that, when I ask "what am I being told?" But I do not think those are part of some grand scheme of the cosmos.

At times of great challenge, where do you find your anchor?

Within myself. Not because I feel I am that strong, but because eventually we have to be answerable for every decision we make. I really like the idea of responsibility.

So in difficult times, I will not go off and meditate or pray. But I will do something taking me away from the disturbing situation – reading a murder mystery novel, seeing a good (or a bad) movie. Anything that will give me a sense of objectivity. Because basic accountability has to be with ourselves. Otherwise it would be a quite depressing world.

Were you always an explorer?

I grew up in Amritsar, which was a very small world. I then went to boarding school, with high walls and girls only. Again a very limited world. Then in Delhi University, it was a totally different world, but still quite limited in its own way.

I always felt there must be something beyond this. Of course what was beyond, was actually myself.

But I had no idea how to go about this exploration. And it happened completely by chance, I was thrust into it by a coincidence.

Though I am not sure there are any coincidences . A friend asked me if I wanted to work in a small documentary film-making place, answering the phone and other such tasks. I was attracted by it. And I went. Quickly enough, I started doing editing, and sound, then wrote a 2-minute film. It felt so great, it felt so right.

I had actually grown up with films as my father was a film distributor in Amritsar. We used to watch movies all the time. But growing up, I had definitely not wished to be in that world.

My father's mood was entirely determined by the way a film had done on the Friday opening. And I used to think what a devastating line to be in – having your fate determined every week by factors completely external to you, and on which you would have almost no control !

When I actually decided to make movies, my father told me: "there are two things in life you never know. One is when you are going to die, the second is how a film is going to do".

So making movies became your way to explore yourself and the world?

Absolutely.

When writing or making a movie, do you feel sometimes like a conduit for something else, beyond you, transcending you?

Never. It's just not possible to go there when making a movie. Filmmaking is not a solitary affair. You are responsible for everything. So you have to be so aware. You just cannot get lost.

Some filmmakers are exceedingly experimental and can go through the whole process being aware that they are making art, but it is extremely rare. Because it costs so much, and generally it's not your money.

Not even at the stage of writing?

No. it's inspirational and I get very excited. But there's no self indulgence. And once it's on celluloid, there is nothing you can do. It's not even like a play that you can change every day. So you'd better be completely aware. You just don't have that kind of luxury.

Do you choose your topics also because you want to raise awareness about them?

Not at all. I don't make films because I have a message or because I think I can change the world. Standing and saying this is my message to the world actually really makes me cringe.

I make films because I don't know about a certain subject and it really intrigues me why things are the way they are.

Exploration is growth. A director typically spends two and a half years on one film.

That's a huge commitment in one's life. So I'd better become a more informed person in the process. Unless I can explore and therefore grow, why would I choose a particular topic?

Yet, does the impact your movies have matter?

Well yes, both exploration and impact are important. You don't make a movie only for you to watch it. Knowing and seeing people's reaction is important. But again, it's not about touching their lives. Because that is so subjective. If it touches somebody, wonderful ! If it doesn't, that's too bad.

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

The easy one would be "is there life after death?" But who cares to actually know it?

I would rather ask this: in [my movie] "Earth", one of the protagonists talks about the inner beast we all have, and how it can come out. What unleashes the beast in us? I'd like to ask God about it. Because it really makes no sense to me – how can seemingly normal people kill, torture, rape? I do not understand the divine purpose of that kind of behavior.

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

I'd be very intrigued to go through life as a believer, instead of being an agnostic. It would be a totally different space.

What is your idea of happiness?

Not having anxiety.

When does it happen?

Playing cards with my mother, walking in Humayun's Tumb early in the morning, eating a good meal, shopping with my daughter, watching a good movie, cooking, gardening. Nothing like exalted meditation. It's always about doing something very banal, something human - it's about simple joys of the moment.