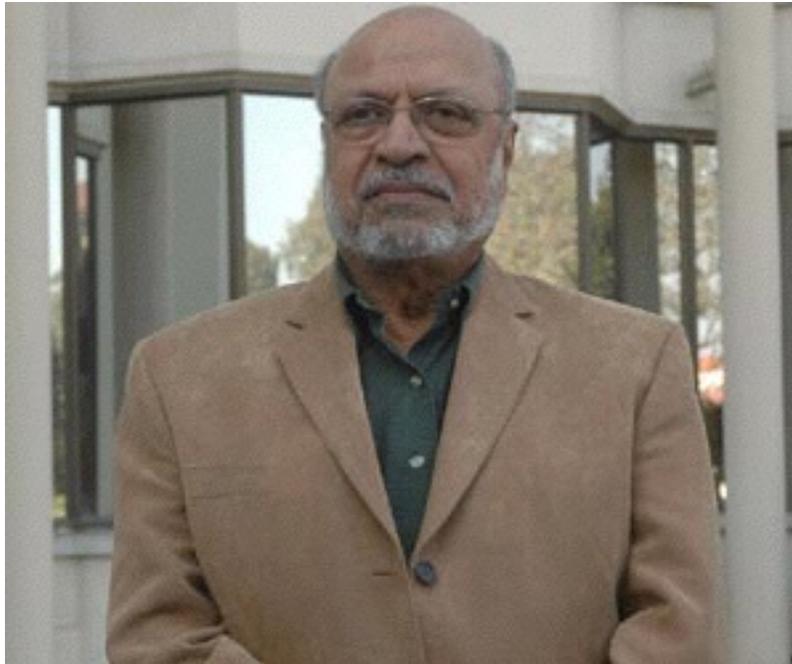


Shyam Benegal

Filmmaker

'I must keep reinventing the wheel'

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Shyam Benegal, Filmmaker.

What does spirituality mean to you?

This word is usually used in such a light-hearted way and in such different contexts, that I am not sure it means anything to me. I can only make a distinction between the material and non material, that which deals with the physical and non physical experiences. And actually, thinking about all those existential questions – the universe around us, life etc. – has always interested me, since I was a child.

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

This is not something I could ever determine with my own consciousness. Therefore, believing in it would merely be speculation, so why bother? I could tell you countless stories of coincidences and so on, but whether is it simply about probabilities or something else, I couldn't ever know.

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

I see life as a journey, on which we create our own ends and destinations, but every time we think we have taken a step forward, we find that the destination has moved further away. So I value the process itself and I believe that rather than walking on a road, we are the road itself. More than anything else,

I feel I must constantly experience life in every possible way. This is the purpose of life and what connects me to the rest of the world.

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

It is about experiencing life, enriching myself through people, friends, books, movies, music, travels... It is so easy to be judgmental and a complete creature of habits, therefore becoming closed to new experiences. So it is about trying to remain as open as possible instead of thinking that this is all there is to life.

What is the role of spirituality in making movies?

Making movies is one of my main ways of experimenting life. Through them, I can both engage viewers on a variety of subjects and delve into every aspect of human nature, politics, sexuality, gender issues etc. Since I saw my first movie at the age of six, I always knew I would make films, there was absolutely nothing else I could have done. I also knew I could never take the easy route of mimicking others. Every time I must reinvent the wheel. Every film is my first film when I start it and my last one when I finish. This gives me a constant sense of urgency, along with a constant questioning: when will I get over the mediocrity in which I am imprisoned, am I fated to remain in it? Also, I have found inspiration in an epic like the Mahabharata and translated some of its narrative in contemporary Bombay in Kalyug (1980). To me, the Mahabharata is the true foundational epic of India as it raises all existential questions you could ever think of, and is so profound in its understanding of human nature. If you think about it, you can find around you every single character of its stories.

What are your spiritual inspirations?

At home, the only religious person was my mother, but she would never force it on anyone. And my father was profoundly agnostic and suspicious of all God men, feeling there is so much manipulation and exploitation in it all. So between those two, we were left to figuring out our own answers, from the infinity of experiences of life, but also inspired by the great sages of Hinduism, Buddhism and so on.

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

Whether there is a life afterwards or not, is of no consequence or concern to me. And I feel it would be infantile to speculate.

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

I do not think I would ask God any question. But had I to do so, I would simply say: why? As I feel there is no purpose to life, apart from the one we ourselves impart to it, why all this?

What is your idea of happiness?

Kundera talked about the futility of pursuing happiness, as it always is about trying to re-experience an emotion you felt at some point in the past. So really, I do not think of happiness. What matters rather, is a sense of balance and calm in my life, as well as relationships, companionship, conviviality, which I treasure tremendously.