

Rajeev Chandrasekhar

Entrepreneur

'The suffering of children puzzles me'

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Rajeev Chandrasekhar is an entrepreneur, Rajya Sabha MP and former President of FICCI.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about my personal faith and what I believe in. I am a Hindu and a lot of my beliefs were shaped by my grand-mother. When I was a kid, she taught me the prayers and a belief in God the old-fashioned way. To this day, I spend every night ten minutes reciting the same prayers. When I travel, I always have a picture of our God, an avatar of Krishna revered in Kerala, by the name of Guruvayurappan. I derive a lot of strength from it.

What is fascinating to me is that without teaching or imposing my kids anything, they picked it up on their own. Every morning before they leave for school, they go to the prayer room, put the tika and then push off.

Basically you need some core sense of who you are and what you want to be at the heart of all that you do. Whether you do right or wrong, there must be something that defines what you live for and what drives you. So in the absence of anything else, religion and spirituality are what centers me.

What then is your centre?

It is a sense of self-confidence and self-belief. I am an entrepreneur and a politician. All my life I have gone and done stuff completely new. I took risks and went down a path that was brand new to me or to my family.

Yet, I know that success did not come only thanks to hard work and competence. There is a third dimension, call it luck or fate. And to reinforce it, to make sure it aligns in your favor, it is important to constantly reiterate your values and what you are about.

So would you say there is a protective & guiding force in your life?

There is indeed such a thing, but I first and foremost associate it with the blessings I got from my grand-parents and parents. I grew up with my maternal grand-parents. My grand-father was a very tough, self-made man and basically he is the one who shaped me into what I am. So I guess I can associate this divine, mysterious force as something that worked through them all.

What is fate for you?

Fate is something that walks past you and you don't even know or realize it. When I look back at my life, there were so few odds that I would do what I did and be where I am. I can hardly believe it. I am the son of an air-force officer. At best, my fate would have been to do well in school and join some government body. But my dad insisted I go and study in the US, even though I did not have a scholarship. This was the first twist of fate, something that got me to excel. As a kid, a most normal of kids. I had no particular inkling for sports, academia or even business. But once I reached the US for my post-graduate masters, some transformation started. I had to defend myself and start performing at a better level.

The second twist of fate happened with the job offers I got once I graduated. One was from a start-up next to Milwaukee, in a town that had no non-whites. The other one was from Microsoft and the third one from Intel. Microsoft back then was way more famous, prestigious and attractive than relatively unknown Intel. But Vinod Dham, the father of the Pentium chip happened to be the brother of my childhood's doctor, a man who had served under my father. Vinod Dham is the one who wooed me into the Pentium team at Intel. And it clearly was the most satisfying and important professional decision of my life. I was there for six years, I did some great work, it gave me so much fulfillment. The third twist of fate was my meeting with Rajesh Pilot, during one of my visits to India. I was then a typical arrogant NRI. And in the few minutes we spent together, he just asked me "why are you going back to the US? You should come back. Look at what we are trying to build here!" There was nothing special in his words, but for some reason unknown to me to this day, it was enough to trigger something in me and I moved back to India. I then proceeded to found BPL mobile.

Looking at the way your life unfolded, would you say it has a specific purpose or mission?

I think I am very clear in my head. The purpose is to do stuff which is personally satisfying and transformative, at least for the community around me. The values I want to advertise about myself are not about being flamboyant and so on but that I mean well and am trying to do some good.

It was also my purpose in the telecom. I took on fights with the government even though people told me I am a nut case as I could have cut a deal with them, simplify my life and grow tremendously. But I

never did. Because it never was for me only about making a fortune. Maybe because I don't come from that background. The rat race of making always more money leaves me cold. Rather I am driven by wanting to do good for a business, a sector, a cause.

Jupiter Capital today is the way I remain solvent. I do stuff that keeps me excited and financially secure. But only in sectors that are thrilling, never something obvious or boring. For instance I am very big in the media in the south, but I stick to the south, I don't want Hindi or English.

At times of challenges, where do you find your energy, your anchor?

I am a bit of a loner. I communicate a lot with myself. Recently, it has become more about my family. My wife is as feisty as me and tremendously supportive. My dad and mum have also been a very strong influence for me. They are not cheerleaders but I have their essential basic support with some shared basic values. So I have a reasonably decent support system.

But at the end of the day, I am a loner, so a lot of the support comes from inner talking, spending lots of time on my own, reading and so on.

It actually is extremely difficult for others to influence me, even the most positive influences hardly get to me. This frustrates people around me a lot. Especially as I make almost all decisions on my own.

Can you share some experience that shaped your spiritual beliefs?

I have had so many. Basically, anything good that happens to me, I never take it for granted. I always feel there is something else at work that is dealing these cards. And each such instance is another reinforcement of my beliefs.

Are you ever angry at God?

No, my conversations with Him are only one way. He is there to help me, and derive some strength and inspiration from Him. But He does not owe me anything.

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

The suffering of children is a bit of a puzzle to me. Older people can manage, but why should kids suffer? I believe that in the ecosystem of humanity, there always was and always will be the oppressor and the oppressed. There will always be some men dominating others. That is the balance of life, it is part of the human chain and I don't question it. What is not clear to me is why kids get dragged down into it.

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

I would do the same, but with more public service type of things, earlier on.

What is your idea of happiness?

Currently, it is about hanging out with my kids. It gives me a high like nothing else. Ten years ago, I would have said it's about flying; twenty years ago, about writing ten thousand lines of code to run on a new chip. At different stages of life, different things give you a high. I have a great car collection for

instance, and five or six years ago I used to wake up on Sunday mornings and just go for a ride. I haven't done it for more than three years...