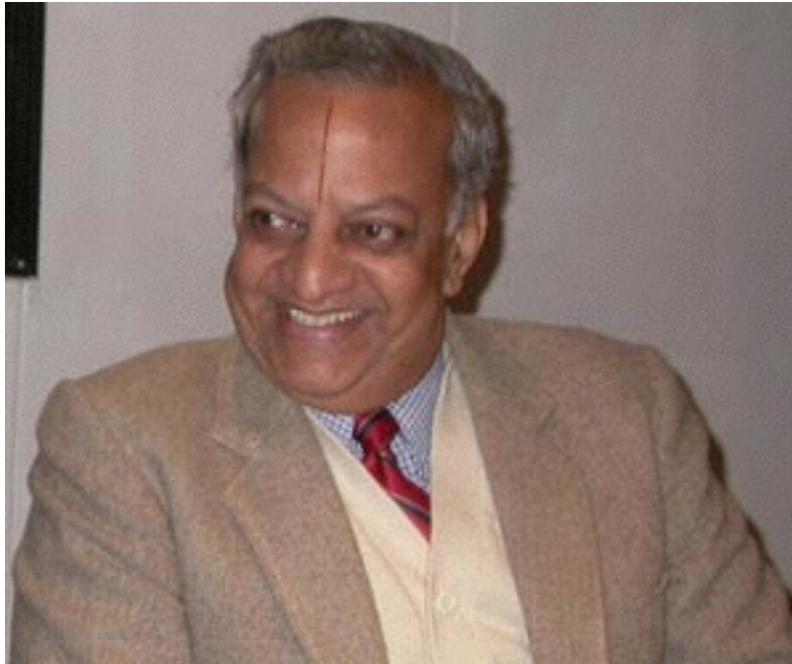


N. Gopaldaswami

Chief Election Commissioner

'Spirituality has kept me on a clearer path'

Sun Aug 19 2007



N. Gopaldaswami, Chief Election Commissioner.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is an inner feeling hard to define, but if I had to put words on it, I would say it is an inner peace which radiates. Among others, it is about improving oneself, and doing for others – humanism is by extension the essence of spirituality.

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

I subscribe to a basic belief which is that I must do my best, but there is something beyond me guiding or deciding things, something which some call fate. My grand-father was fond of a verse he would often quote: you are your own enemy as much as you are your own best friend, do not degrade yourself because you can only come up by your own efforts. Of course you do not control the end results, something beyond you is doing so, but you must do your utmost best. And then leave it at that.

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

I would not use the word mission, and I never fathomed I would become and do what I have done. I grew up loving chemistry and was about to dedicate myself to it when chance decided it differently. I

was all set to pursue my chemistry studies in the US when my college department's head discouraged me, asking me "what's wrong with this country?" and from one thing to the other, I stayed and sat for the IAS exams – and all the rest followed, in the most unpredictable way.

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

It involves daily prayers and at times, meditation. Also, the main deity worshipped in my family is Vishnu or one of his avatars, and the sign I wear of the forehead is of a Vishnavite group: the Namam Sri Choornam represents both a mother goddess principle and a sign of surrender to a superior force, as if telling God every day that I am at Your feet, I surrender to You. It reaffirms that I know there is something beyond me.

What is the role of spirituality in your public life?

It has kept me on a narrow and clearer path, particularly when tough decisions had to be made which could be damaging to others. It gave me more inner strength, especially at times of tough challenges. In those moments, as you realize that there is something beyond you, it helps you accept whatever comes as what is meant to be.

What are your spiritual inspirations?

From class two to class eleven I stayed with my grand-parents in a small town of Tamil Nadu. We had to come home at the latest by 6.30pm and do our prayers, before proceeding with others things. And my grand-father would never ask about homework, only about my readings. He encouraged me to discover the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and other books of the kind. At 5.30am every morning, I would hear him pray, starting by asking the Earth to forgive him for setting his feet on her. Another meaningful prayer that marked me was asking "I can do this, and that and the other, but what can't I do? I cannot achieve complete stillness of the mind, I can't just do nothing in the most absolute sense of the word". So the whole atmosphere I grew up in was constantly exposing me to spirituality. And when I went home to seek my grand-father's blessings after joining the service, instead of wishing me a wonderful career, he only said 'be honest and truthful to yourself'. Those were not only words, I had seen him live by them all his life. He was a tremendous inspiration to me.

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

Well obviously, the desired objective is not to reincarnate at all, and rather merge with the ultimate reality...

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

Peace – how may it be found really?

What is your idea of happiness?

My father used to live by the principle "simple living and high thinking", and though he led a quite modest life, he was a genuinely happy person. So I guess it is an inspiration in my understanding of that word.