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'Leaving behind a small mark is the reason to be alive'

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Amit Mitra is the secretary-general of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI).

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is an inner power, a connection with energy, a force beyond the material which I sense. And this force has articulated itself in a number of core values, most importantly karma yoga, as a result of an interesting mixture of influences in my childhood.

What were those influences?

I am a midnight's child, born in December 1947 to a father who had headed the secret service of Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army. He had been death sentenced for it and it is only my mother's plea to Gandhi that saved him. Her father was Subhas Chandra Bose's eldest brother and Gandhiji had heard her sing at their house in Calcutta. He wrote as much as forty five letters to the British Viceroy until his death sentence was commuted into life imprisonment. In the meanwhile, unbeknownst to all, my mother had replaced him as head of the secret service and was never caught.

She was an extraordinary personality. She would wear her boots and ride horses in the morning, then morph into the perfect Hindu space performing pujas, chanting, meditating. In the afternoon, she would drive around and cater to her social development work. It was a complete schizophrenia, a mixture of absolute modernity and deep religious sentiments to the point of being superstitious.

She died young though, and the atmosphere at home was then mostly political. My father was the prime example of karma yogi. He had inherited a few houses in exchange for all the properties lost by the family in Bangladesh at the time of Partition. He simply sold them one after another, in order to fund his campaigns. He never made money out of politics and always won his races. Why did he do all this, as money was never the point? For power? There was never that much of it. For recognition? I wouldn't say. Originally belonging to the PSP which then merged with Congress, before walking out and becoming Bengla Congress, he became Deputy Speaker of the West Bengal legislature. At home, there were always crowds of people waiting to see him, often the poorest of the poor, smoking biris on the stairs.

At the same time, I was sent to a Christian Methodist missionary school, in the most sophisticated English speaking environment, where I would attend church and sing in the choir. The school opened my mind in indescribable ways. It was a centre for inquiry. It was a very stern one though, and the Principal was known for caning as much as for his staunch anti-Communism. When he learnt I was reading Marx, I was put under coventry, meaning I could not talk to any one, for a total of eight months. As a reward for my stubbornness and capacity to stand up to him, he made me principal monitor! And over time I became a committed non Marxist. This was mostly due to my uncle's influence. He belonged to the Democratic Socialists, typically the most anti-Communists in India, because they read Marx and deferred with him. He introduced me to Arthur Koestler's "God that Failed" and I began to think. He would constantly feed me with books as a counterforce to a regimented undemocratic society.

In parallel to all this, another influence added up: Vivekananda, his karma yoga and advaita Vedanta, the Hindu Reformist movement. My mother's guru was a direct disciple of Abhedananda, the second most famous of Ramakrishna's disciples. He was a physicist by training who moved to the United States and took care of the Vedanta mission there, for about 25 years. He was like a super-spiritualist, and was perhaps the philosophic guide of Vivekananda. His very scientific approach definitely influenced me. He tried to explain the sum total of energy that we are and how microcosmic of a part of that energy we are. Being such a minute element in the world, what is life about, why bother at all? This is where Vivekananda's karma yogic approach came in and deeply influenced me, as he said: "since you were born, at least leave a small mark on the seashore of time".

One more influence was the challenge posed by the Gita's most famous lines: one's efforts should be detached from their results. I have not managed to reach that detachment, even though my father definitely did. He grew up in it. His family was very wealthy, but his father treated him as one of the hundred students he brought from his village in a dorm behind the main house. My father was never allowed to sleep in the main house until he finished his matriculation. My grand-mother even used to secretly send him food.

The last influence I would mention is the Western one. I spent twelve years in the United States and found there such different spaces of tradition. And the question is to what degree should one adopt Western Aristotelian values and how do they gel with my Indian upbringing; what is the appropriate mix of contractual, consistent, open, pluralistic, non feudal traditions of the Anglo-Saxon world, and Indian traditions?

So on the overall as you can see, I am the result of a great many influences, sometimes contradictory, definitely enriching each other, from the poorest Bengali villagers to sophisticated Missionaries to Marxist ideas and democratic ideals, mixed with Vivekananda's approach to spirituality.

Was there much religiosity in your childhood?

We attended my mother's puja every day. And I would sit with her Guru also. But I rejected over time all the forms of superstition it involved. I would go to temples at times and felt pulled by them but definitely not by ritual processes. I would go to Vivekananda's temple, almost Protestant in its bare simplicity with no idols, no priest, no flowers, no bell, no chanting, only a huge prayer room and a replica of Ramakrishna. And then I would go to the other side of the river to Ramakrishna's temple, most traditional with its rituals and idols – yet with no priests.

You mentioned the existence of a force, is it also a protective and guiding one?

Anything that my rational mind cannot explain does not appeal to me. So the idea of an external protective or guiding force does not talk to me. It is enough for me to think of an inner force, and the interconnectedness that advaita Vedanta describes. Despite being this extremely minute piece of energy in the universe, there is no reason not to use it to leave a mark.

How then are you leaving that mark?

The consistency in my life has been the karma yogic dimension which some people call workaholism. But I never did it for money. I still make very little of it. And that part is actually not that logical. I do assume that humans make rational judgments based on their circumstances and if so many people seek wealth and higher standards of living, you could argue that it is the most rational and logical choice to do so. But despite thinking of myself as a very logical being, I have not been pursuing that route. I have always been disconnected from material things. And even though some people think that everybody is purchasable, that it is only a matter of price, I have proven not to put material rewards as my primary goal. Instead, what always mattered to me has been policy change, liberalization, calibrated globalization. I have had a very deep commitment to pluralistic democracy and a long passion for economic change, as much as for social change. My wife says I am the most committed pro-market, pro private enterprise socialist. Somewhere, inequality, large differences don't make me feel good. I wonder why they are so. And obviously it's about opportunity and the need for our society to present the right opportunities to the poor. Wanting a nation with equal opportunity over time is what drives me. Therefore, another passion of mine is enterprise. The poor are actually the most enterprising. They have to do the biggest adjustments, raising resources to survive in the most novel ways.

And the third passion would be about seeing India become a compassionate and yet massively strong democratic and economic force in the world. I cannot do it alone of course. I can only make that very, very small mark.

So I keep going back and forth with this contradiction in my mind: I look at the stars, I think of the galaxies and distant solar systems and ponder about my nothingness. I wonder why I do all this. Globalization, liberalization and so on – they all feel so insignificant and irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. Yet leaving that minute mark is the very reason and justification to be alive.

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

Why? Who are we? How do we fit into this cosmic process? I don't know – explain! Why are we born and die without our own will? Why this whole process? What is the meaning of this process? Right now it is karma yoga to me. But am I fooling and deluding myself? Is all this Maya?

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you choose?

I do not think there is any reincarnation. But was there such a thing, I do not see any inadequacy in my life so it could be the same. What I strive and quest for seems to be alright. Maybe in quantum it could be more – more diverse, less focused. I don't get leisure to pursue my deeper interests in literature, theatre, films, and I know that at some point, I will be in search of a balance.

What is your idea of happiness?

Music is one happiness I enjoy fully. With it I lose myself to some degree; when with a musical stream, I completely light up.

Also, I am lost in ecstasy and awe when at the ocean. I love the music of the ocean. And there, as in nature in general, I realize once more how infinitesimally small we all are.