

Neeraj Shekhar

Member of Parliament

'There definitely is somebody up there looking after us'

Sat Feb 13 2010



Nearer Shekhar is a Member of Parliament. He is the son of former Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is the way I live and interact with other human beings, how I work every day; it is my philosophy of life.

How did you evolve this philosophy of life?

It came from my mother. She was a very simple woman, she was not educated. But when people would come from Ballia, our constituency, she was always kind to them. Those in the office sometimes dismissed them, but she was there for them, talking to them, feeding them, consoling them. She thought 'they are from my village, they are poor so I should look after them. It's not because I am at a higher place that I should look down on them. I should help them in any possible way.' And she taught me all that.

Recently someone asked me if I was in politics to enjoy the applause and the high coming from people in large gatherings and so on. My answer is a clear no. I came to public life to help people, to work for them. Even if I manage to do so in a small way, it makes me happy. I am happy to help any poor person. There is so much suffering. My constituency is full of so much poverty. People don't have basic

necessities. They don't even have drinking water. I don't derive happiness from giving a speech in Parliament or seeing my name published in newspapers. My soul is happy when I can help them. In the last two and a half years since I joined politics, and even before then, when I would travel the country with my father, I got to see how much suffering and poverty there is. I got to know this country. We have about 70% of people living on less than 20 Rupees a day. So as my father said, if you have helped at least one person to be better, then you can be happy. You have done something good. And I work for it. People ask me if wealth matters to me. Really, it is secondary. The happiness I get when someone comes back to me recounting how his or her life has improved thanks to me, is immense.

I start the day by praying, because all my life I saw my mother do it, morning and evening. I pray for about two minutes morning and evening as well, thanking God for giving me an opportunity to serve.

What kind of prayer is it exactly?

It is what my mother used to say. I fold my hands in front of a small mandir she made in this house, asking God for its blessings, thanking him for what he has given me. And before I sleep I do the same. I don't need to go to a temple for that. If I go to a temple it is only to see the architecture, not to pray. As the Hindu philosophy says, God is everywhere. If I close my eyes and stay still, God is there.

What is God actually?

Nobody has seen God. But it's when I feel there is somebody up there looking after me.

How do you feel and know that?

There have been situations when I could actually feel it. For instance when my father died, I had nowhere to go. I didn't have a house in Delhi. I had my two daughters and wife. We had lived our whole life in my father's house. But he had actually never promoted me in politics. He used to say that I should do it by myself, that if I were capable enough, I would manage to get into politics on my own. So when he passed away, I felt nobody was there for me but God, and if I were to trust Him, He would help me. I felt that if I am genuine, he would help me. And indeed, I fought two elections in the last 18 months, and succeeded in both. It may sound easy, and people who don't know me won't understand. But those who know me and know the situation in Ballia understand it was a miracle. So many people wanted to compete for that constituency once he passed away. But the people of Ballia blessed me. I think it's the Almighty's intervention.

So there definitely is somebody up there looking after us.

Then what about all the poor people you were just mentioning — how come God allows their suffering?

That is what I constantly ask Him. Every time I go to a family in my constituency, with an absent or deceased father, a few children, and a mother who has no way of making a living. The government sometimes helps, sometimes doesn't. And I always ask myself, why does God let them suffer so much? Maybe because He wants us who are blessed to understand how blessed we are? Still, I am not sure I understand the logic behind it.

There is so much disparity. Here in Delhi you can have everything. A hundred km from here so much is missing. That is why I think all of us with so many blessings, we have to work for our fellow human beings. That's my one and only goal.

Did you always want to be in politics, even as a child?

Absolutely. I was seeing my father, and I always wanted to be in politics. I tried my hand in some other things, like business, but I failed. I went to Dubai to learn about manufacturing but it didn't work out. I ventured into some mineral water business but it didn't succeed. Because my heart and mind were not there. I always wanted to be into politics, not necessarily as a member of Parliament, but at least to do something for the people. Though, as an MP, I now see how much more impact I can have.

Do you think God preordains things, are they destined?

I don't think so. I actually think God changes the script according to His will.

I can give you a small example. I used to think I would never, ever go to a particular college for my studies. My whole life I thought so. And then I ended up going to this very college. Maybe it was written. But in fact, I think God adapts the script according to the way you behave in life. If you are good to others, God changes the script. It may take time, but in the end He will do something for you. Some people, especially when they are successful, think very highly of themselves and despise everybody else. But if they think that way, they necessarily go down one day, when God teaches them they are not the ultimate, that there is a power above them controlling things. A tree full of mangoes bends down. If you are higher and have greater power, you actually have to be more humble.

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

Why are people suffering? I am not saying give a private jet to everyone. But at least food, water, shelter, basic things.

We forget so easily that we are so blessed. When we go to someone's cremation we think about life from a different angle. We realize we are mortal, and that we should do our best, behave at our best and so on. The moment we are back to our lives though, we forget it all, go back to our ambitions, to the race of the circle of life, we pull others down, we actively scheme and so on. But especially thanks to my mother's humility, I think it is different for me.

How can you survive in politics like that?

You can! My father also did. He was alone. People didn't understand this. He survived though, and even became prime minister of the country. People of this country will help you. They are God fearing. If you do anything wrong, they believe God is looking at you and some day there will be consequences.

For some politicians though, having good intentions is not enough, politics are like a chess-game, and if you don't outsmart your opponents, you cannot survive --

I definitely don't feel that way. Of course some people oppose me. But I still work the way I do. I go to people directly. They are the ones electing me.

What about politicians feeling that those using the most awful means are those succeeding fastest and highest?

Well, a politician's position definitely doesn't reflect what kind of a person he or she is. You can be a minister and it certainly doesn't mean you are a good person. And inside, no matter how much you fool others, you cannot fool yourself. If you have stepped on many people to reach where you are, you cannot sleep at night peacefully. Your conscience knows it. And you cannot be happy. There are so many examples in Parliament or in government of people who are in a position of power but are not happy, they are miserable inside.

So it may take a longer time to reach the same place without such shortcuts, but you are happier, people genuinely respect you, they look up to you.

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

I would like to come back all the same, with the same mother, but this time she would be educated. Had she been educated, she would have been a much better politician than anyone else I know. She is like my idol. She was so simple and died long back, but she was an amazing person. Even as a wife of the Prime Minister, she only wore cotton saris, without any make-up, she was always God fearing, and helping people. She taught me everything. And everything I am today is thanks to her. My father was so involved in politics that we never saw him until she passed away – I was then 28 years' old. I would only meet him once a month before. I used to take care of her. She gave me the greatest thing – the love for other human beings. No matter how unclean or unhealthy the person is, he is the same as me and I must respect him. That's my philosophy. And one thing I have learnt from my father – whatever I set my goals on, I shouldn't change. I shouldn't compromise with my principles. My ambition is not to become minister, prime minister or president. My goal is to work for the people of this country.

What is your idea of happiness?

Whenever a person tells me that what I have done has helped him, it boosts me. If I have made a person happy, it makes my day.

The second thing is my two daughters. They are the joy of my life. People in my constituency, in the villages, always tell me I should have a son. But I tell them I am so happy with my daughters. I love them so much. And having never seen my father when growing up, I make a point of spending enough time with them.