

General Joginder Jaswant Singh

Governor of Arunachal Pradesh

'Why remain a rat in a rat race? Become a tiger'

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General Joginder Jaswant Singh was the first Sikh Chief of Army staff, a position he held from January 2005 till September last year. He is now Governor of Arunachal Pradesh.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is a direct and very personal, very intimate connection with God, with my beliefs and my faith. It is something I derive my strength from, feeling the full spiritual force flowing into me or what I do. It is not something I have been carrying on my sleeve, displaying it to people beyond my most immediate circle and family. But it has always been with me inside. I do not look at it in a narrow religious sense. In fact, I feel a sense of contentment and peacefulness whenever I visit a religious place, no matter what the religion. In the army I could experience this a lot – very often I would participate in religious ceremonies with my soldiers. So many times also, the same barrack would have a Hindu temple on one

side and a mosque on the other, which I could both visit. But beyond places and shrines, what has always mattered is the profound connection to my faith deep inside of me.

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

Most definitely, and I have constantly felt so. My philosophy has always been to be a warrior and a winner. And God has been kind to me, I have been a winner most of the time. Also, whenever I faced challenges, I prayed and succeeded. But none of that has come easily. I believe God only helps those who help themselves. There is no shortcut to success. You cannot simply behold spiritual beliefs and expect to succeed. This is asking too much of God. You have to work very hard, which is what I did, and also I always tried to do things differently, to never go by the book or follow the sheep trail.

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

Well, I would definitely see a clear line and underlying theme throughout my life – thriving to choose the righteous path and a just cause, striving to be a warrior and a winner. Was that obvious since my childhood? When growing up in the fifties in India, there was very little industry or private sector. One had to choose between being a bureaucrat, a professional or in the army. Coming from an army family, it was natural to take the military path. My grand-father had fought in World War I. He was wounded when barely 20 years' old and spent the rest of his life, disabled, barely managing to sustain his large family. My father therefore grew up in the most humble circumstances, in a village next to Rawalpindi, in what is now Pakistan. He was a self-made man who also struggled to make ends meet. But my five siblings and I were brought up with very strong values, such as the determination to succeed and work hard, as well as with stories about our religion, our warriors, the sacrifices made by our gurus to defend the weak and the oppressed, to defend the faith. Part of it was also the understanding that beyond good intentions, one needs a weapon to defend the weak. So all of this combined in shaping my life and its purpose.

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

It is not about going regularly to a temple, praying every morning, or performing some ritual. It is about trying to be a good human being and constantly feeling the connection with my faith in my heart. With that spirit alive inside, I have always been pushed to do and be better. Despite the many challenges and difficult patches I went through, I never doubted God and never threw in the towel. I always fought on, determined to succeed.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

I would say it is about a number of values and an attitude I have always displayed. As Chief of Army Staff, I tried to emphasize the human dimension, bringing a greater focus on the respect of human rights. The days are gone when the sword was predominant, and even though terrorism must obviously be fought with an iron fist, the soldiers and their leaders must have a human dimension. Of course collateral damage cannot be zero. But the philosophy and the principles must be right. If you drop a bomb on a village to kill two terrorists who have moved away in any case, and instead kill twenty innocents, you create twenty families of sworn enemies. And what is the responsibility of those women and children? This attitude has proven successful as violent incidents in Kashmir and Assam have gone down in the last three years. Surrender of terrorists, peace talks and other signs of improvement have also multiplied.

My concept of spirituality and approach to life have also manifested in my leadership style. As the Army Chief, I felt like a father of 1.2 million soldiers and really did my utmost best to ensure an even level playing field between soldiers, and remove injustice as much as possible. I would also encourage them to think and shy away from yes-men attitudes, which enabled them to blossom and grow. I would often scold them and ask if they are keeping their brain for their next life!

To be a winner—and there is no such thing in the army or at war as being number two— one needs to constantly innovate, be original, do the unexpected. One inspiration on that topic came from spending time on the Normandy coast, on the beaches where the Allies landed in 1944 to defeat Germany. I noticed that the best beaches for landing were the largest graveyards of soldiers, because the enemy obviously knew the Allies would land there. On the other hand, the most challenging ones saw very little casualties as nobody expected an assault there. So a general who went the easy way, with no element of surprise and chose a place which in the end meant larger casualties, is for me a poor general. I would never accept a plan if there was no element of surprise, which meant harder work, but never an impossibility.

Can you tell us about a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

There were many such events. I always say for instance "when I go up, I will first salute the weather God". Indeed, so many times our plans would have been completely ruined by a bad rain, but we would be unexpectedly blessed with sunshine. Also, as a brigadier in Kashmir in the early nineties I was seriously wounded. But the spinning bullet went twelve inches through my body without touching a single vital organ, or bone, or main artery – had that happened, by the time I reached a hospital, I would not have been alive. Such an experience showed me again that there is some hidden hand seeing me through.

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

I would say it is up to God to decide! But, if a human, I would want to be in a position I can be of service to mankind.

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

How could I dare question someone so superior, who is running the universe? We cannot always comprehend His deeds, but at the same time, we cannot assume the role of questioning. He is the Creator, so He is the decider.

What is your idea of happiness?

Mahatma Gandhi used to say that the world has enough resources for people's needs, but not for people's greed. I think it summarizes my idea of happiness: knowing where to draw the line of what will give me inner contentment and not constantly crave for more. In the army for instance, I would often observe happy retiring colonels and much more discontented retiring generals. And I would wonder and tell them: what is the point of being a general if it is to be so unsettled? What have they done with their lives to reach such a state? Why be a rat in the rat race and a rat when reaching the top? When will that person become a tiger, a winner? One ought to know what will give oneself inner satisfaction and where to draw that line of happiness. Otherwise, we can be on the unhappy rat race forever.