

Jyotsna Suri

Chairperson of Bharat Hotels Ltd

'I can introspect anywhere'

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Jyotsna Suri is the chairperson and managing director of Bharat Hotels Ltd, which runs the prestigious Grand group of hotels. Suri took over from her husband, Lalit Suri, after his death in 2006.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about connecting with my spirit, being one with it.

You will then ask what is spirit? It is not something we have ever seen. But to me, it is like an energy. It is what keeps me going. It is what makes me move on with life, get up in the morning, go about my daily duties, be happy, sad and all the rest.

I feel that spirit is purely and entirely in my own hands. I am happy when I want to be happy and angry if I allow myself to be so.

This energy, this spirit is in us all and can be moulded and used to make wonderful things.

It is for instance what got me out of my huge grief after Lalit died. I was walking the razor's edge and I could have fallen down. But I did not, thanks to that spirit. It was not about God, I did not connect with any God. I was not even counseled by any so-called spiritual guru. I connected with myself and

realized that if I wasn't transforming my energies to perform positively again, I would only destroy myself.

And destroying myself would also mean affecting my family, the 3,000 people working for us, their families and so on. So the very conscious will to connect with my own spirit is what pulled me out of that dark place.

Beyond that inner spirit, do you feel the presence of a superior force?

I have always believed there is an entity, or something, not necessarily God, but definitely an energy which is the reason why this world came into being. I have also always believed that this energy makes me do whatever I am doing.

And something inside tells me that if I do things the way that seems right, if I add value to other people's lives and get going, then I will be fine. Thinking too much about the reasons for our existence can go on for ever. If you begin dissecting those questions deeply, it can all seem so unreal. Why are we all doing this for?

When Lalit died, I was talking to my son, who was completely devastated and was refusing to get up, feeling he did not deserve such pain. I told him I had no answer about why his father was gone, where he had gone and so on. All I could say was that I am here, and he is here. And his smile makes me go, makes me tick, as much as my smile makes him tick. So just for that, I will smile, and he should do the same for me. But I have no answer about the "why" of it all.

So in the end, it all comes back to that inner energy which is pulling me through. It is my own creation, in the sense that it is my own conscious decision to channel it in a certain direction – for instance in taking this hotel business forward or helping my family to the best of my abilities. We all have this energy. It is just a matter of how we use it. It is like an athlete: we all can walk and run, but the athlete can do it much faster. Why? Because he has focused and channelled so much of his energies on this.

Are you channelling this energy for a specific purpose or mission in your life?

Ever since I remember myself as a child, I had a clear sense of purpose – not in terms of a specific mission, but in the very strong –almost obsessive– will to do everything as best as could humanly be, whether being a daughter to my parents, a student in my class, a friend to my friends. The purpose was always to do my best in whatever I was doing.

I do not know why I am like that; I actually find it very difficult to understand it. Inherently, I can't do wrong things. It is very odd. I am not saying I am holier than thou. If someone does injustice to me, I will never take it, I will defend myself vigorously. And I can lose my temper at times; but even when I do, I never wish anyone ill, I never have a negative thought, I do not want to win a race because I have pushed somebody off, I want to win it because I was the best. I don't want to pull anyone down to show myself higher. I sometimes wonder why they hell I am so "goody-goody". It is not fake, it is not put on. It is just me.

As a child, I never wanted to become a typical or clichéd engineer, doctor etc. As my father used to travel a lot and we would accompany him at times, I became enamoured by the announcements at the airport and felt I would love to do it, since I spoke well, had a clear voice and so on. Later on I wanted to be an air hostess, for the combination of glamour, poise, etiquette, and the opportunity to travel.

I ended up a housewife as I married Lalit when I was only 21 years' old.

And I continued with my obsession of being the best — I had to be the best wife, the best daughter-in-law, the best mother. I would not let anyone else wake up the children, I would prepare their lunchbox, drive them to school and back, do their homework till they were in class eight or nine. I had to know all their friends. I wanted everything to be just so right.

Later on, when Lalit and his brother split the business, I got involved to help him but did not want my work to affect my family (I had four children by then), or vice versa. So I would go back and forth several times a day between home and work, like a superwoman. The driving force was so strong. And of course I knew nothing about hospitality. I learnt everything on the job. Within two, three years, I was involved in all aspects of hospitality. I got into it as if I had always meant to be so. And of course, once Lalit died, I became responsible of the whole business.

Was Lalit's passing away a turning point in your spiritual beliefs?

His sudden death gave me a jolt and actually reinforced my beliefs. For a little while, I was overwhelmed with grief and a sense of loss at understanding the reasons for this sudden departure. I could have easily remained in that dark phase and fallen into total depression. But the sense of purpose and responsibility for my children and family, the connection with that inner energy pulled me out. And it reaffirmed my own confidence, it strengthened my will.

I gradually looked at this crisis as an opportunity. Before it happened, I had gone through a period of introspection and decided it was time to let go a bit of the "goody-goody" fixation. I wanted to enjoy life, to take some time for myself and relax.

We had actually had a conversation about this the day he died, just two hours before he went to the casino. I had told him I had done so much and now wanted to travel a bit, have fun, work only when I wanted to work. He promised it would happen.

Little did I know that it was not meant to be that way, and it would end up being exactly the contrary.

Lalit's sudden passing away was the most difficult setback of my life. I kept asking myself why it had happened, why I deserved such a thing when I finally wanted to enjoy myself. Then I told myself NO — how many people get such a second chance in their life? Look at me! I had lived a life brilliantly as a daughter, wife, and mother — and worked extremely intensely for years. I had performed every duty. And now I was getting a chance to lead a huge organization. I would have never done it had Lalit been there. So few people get such a chance. I felt it was an opportunity given by god, or that energy, or whatever it may be. And I had to grasp it. Where does a woman get a chance to become a man? I had lived the life of a woman and now I could lead one of both a man and a woman!

How did this transform you?

I have not needed to be the "goody-goody" all the time anymore. I have had to be ruthless when needed. As the CMD of the company, I have to be clear, logical and not let my emotions get in the way. Because every decision I take will permeate down and affect so many different people. So emotions are out and at times very manly decisions are in.

Also, I have learnt the art of patience, I have learnt to see through people much better than I ever did before. When someone comes to me with a proposal, I now see far more deeply than I used to.

But no matter what, I took a conscious decision from the beginning that I would never become physical like a man, or use bad language. I have stuck to it. And I have seen how it has permeated down in the company. You do not necessarily need to be abusive to be heard.

With such an intense life, how do you make sure you keep in touch with the inner spirit you were talking about?

I introspect. I do not set specific times for meditation, or rituals of any kind. But I can introspect anywhere, especially in the shower!

In those moments, I completely connect with myself and a lot of things come to my mind. I look at things, especially bad ones with the awareness that I have to set them right. I know that I could go on moaning, complaining, wondering why the elements are against me. Or I can look at them differently, and with the sheer force of my will, snap out of it.

I do my best, and I certainly do not like to give up, I am a fighter; but if it does not work, big deal! It is not the end of the world. And I know it.

As far as rituals and other activities that could be deemed religious, I very much respect them, but it does not appeal to me too much. Lalit was far more ritualistic than me. He connected especially with Ganesh. He was fascinated by this god whom he felt was an embodiment of himself. Ganesh was very prosperous and happy, spreading good messages and good luck, fond of good food and good life. Lalit was very much the same kind of person. He never crumbled, always full of life.

For me, I do not believe that by doing certain things, or paying my respects to a particular entity on a day to day basis I will get certain rewards. But if doing so, one definitely gets a lot of discipline.

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

I have led such a good life that it is difficult not to wish to come back as myself. Are there other things I would like to achieve? Well, in this life at least, I would want to make people understand it is pointless to fight with each other, that no religion or caste would actually want such things, that we are all human beings – we come from the same, we all go back to the same. So why are we constantly at war with each other? If only I could help get that in people's minds, I would have achieved a lot.

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

What is the mystery and meaning of all existence, what is it all about, why are we here? If there is such a thing as God, why are You doing this, what are You getting out of it? All those beings being born and dying – where it is all culminating?

What is your idea of happiness?

It is absolutely a state of mind. You are as happy or unhappy as you decide to be. For me, it can be my little grand-daughter's smile, or the satisfaction to impart some good to people around me.