

Jagat Singh Mehta

Former Foreign Secretary of India

'Spirituality is in my work'

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Jagat Singh Mehta is a former foreign secretary of India. He received the Padma Bhushan award in 2002.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I cannot say that I am a spiritual person, though I would not say I am agnostic. I would simply go back to one of the Gita's famous quotations: do your work regardless of what the consequences are – the idea of karam yoga. Spirituality is basically in my work.

So is there any place for a divine force or energy in your belief system?

I do not deny God, but God is through a good, selfless life. I do not dispute the existence of an overarching force, but the form it has taken in my life is public service.

And God is not completely in control. Man has so much in his hands when it comes to shaping his own destiny. We must exert it ourselves and act as if destiny was 100% in our hands.

It probably is not. But if you feel that even 5% is not in your hands, it becomes "scapegoatism". You always find that it is somebody else's fault. My suffering, the suffering of others and the suffering of my country are somebody else's fault. So I am very cautious about putting the blame on others or a

supreme force. I get irritated when people blame situations on circumstances. We make our circumstances and we must repair them. God expects everybody to do their duty.

What has been your duty?

When I was leaving school in England, my headmaster called me and said: "of course you must earn to live, but remember, you must live to serve". I have never forgotten that, and I always had a deep sense of obligation to society.

Yet, the moment you say "I am a public servant, my life is about serving people", it feels like boasting to me, so I'd rather not say it too loudly. Call it an inferiority complex or whatever, but I hate boasting and I am very conscious about it.

What has public service concretely meant?

I was coming from a feudal background and got emancipated from it thanks to my father. I went to a poor man's boarding school then to England and came back to India because of the War. After my studies and some time in the Navy, I was the first person to take charge in the government of India, on August 15, 1947.

From then on, I had more than three very rich and satisfying decades in the Foreign Service.

One's priorities and character show over time — do you want to solve the problem or please the boss? Many times I gave unsolicited advice, many times I took risks in doing things that were not asked but that felt like my duty.

In 1976, I was in Pakistan to negotiate the first opening of Waga and the railway line. It was not part of my brief to sign it but I felt it had to happen. Some senior chap back in Delhi chastised me for it. But within half an hour a telegram of congratulations came from Moscow and I never heard a complaint again.

When posted in Beijing, in 1965, the Chinese woke me up in the middle of the night with an ultimatum to India. That day, I sent a telegram to the Prime Minister saying that tonight at midnight, the Chinese will do nothing. I was the only person in India who said this in writing. I could have been sacked for it had it not been the case. But I felt it was my duty. And indeed, the Chinese did nothing.

On the overall, I believe the diplomacy is much nobler than many imagine. It is not crookedness. In the nuclear age, war is not a solution and diplomacy is necessary. It is the art of persuasion, and of understanding the other's perceptions and misperceptions.

In the span of my career, I handled eight critical and extremely challenging negotiations, whereas no one else was involved in more than two. I negotiated the biggest normalization with Pakistan (in the seventies), because I was convinced there is no point in India and Pakistan continuing on their path to mutual destruction; I went to Uganda to see Idi Amin to tackle the issue of compensations to Indians, when no one dared, and so many other instances.

I saw my mission as problem solving through negotiation, especially when there was a deadlock and no one could see a solution. The underlying and unspoken thought always was that solving issues

would in the end release funds for the benefit of the poor. It required going beyond accepted wisdom quite often.

Yet, as I was Foreign Secretary and at the height of my career, with much recognition and reward – and I was sacked.

How challenging of a turning point was that?

I had such a satisfying career, not for personal gain but for public service, and instead of ending on a bang, it finished on a whimper. Some people in the government thought that sacking me would please the Soviet Union. I was too independent minded. It was tough when it happened, but over time I felt proud of the fact I had stuck to my principles.

And it was not the end of my life. Harvard invited me and I became a professor of world peace. The course was about the roots of misperception in diplomacy. My first sentence was: "on behalf of the non-existent international guild of foreign service officers and diplomats, I confess that in the last few years, we have never been right". And the question therefore is: how come with so much more information than ever before, can we make systematic mistakes? On the one hand there is always more technology, on the other we are unable to marshal it for the universal advantage.

I taught for 15 years in Harvard, before being called back to Udaipur, to serve this voluntary organization which had been started by my father, Seva Mandir. Then I became involved in rescuing an institution owning schools, a teachers' training college and more.

So for the last 23 years, I have been involved without earning anything in voluntary organizations. Values matter in them, with a certain commitment to fight poverty and with empathy for the poor. And that gives me sufficient satisfaction.

This world can be made or destroyed by human beings, so every one of us must play a role. Protecting nature is therefore a kind of worship if you like, and it makes a difference in my life.

On the overall, if I do something based on a sense of equality, on secularism in practice, on the notion that people must be given their rights and dignity, it gives meaning to my life.

So at the end of my life, I have this satisfaction that I did the best for my country, while feeling like a world citizen all along.

What about doing your best for yourself and your family?

I have to say that my life has mostly been about my career and my family was not the priority number one. My family was very supportive and I owe them much for being so understanding. When in Delhi, I would often work till the wee hours of the morning, and sleep in a different room so as not to disturb my wife.

Today, I get a sense that my grand-children appreciate me for my ethics and it is a meaningful satisfaction. This love that comes through, the sense that this grand-father is worth imitating is important to me.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

My grand-mother was a Jain, my grand-father a Shivite, my aunt who brought me up since my mother died when I was very young, was a Vaishnavite, my uncle and father were influenced by the Arya Samaj, and we observed all of it. So basically, we were a Hindu home but not aggressively so.

Also, my father was very involved in education, social welfare, clean administration and so on. He was never callous towards the poor. I went to the same school as the servants' children. So this sense of equality and human dignity, of commitment to society was certainly imbibed from home.

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

I would like to come to a country with more social justice. And I'd probably be a teacher. I like to talk to others, share, learn from them.

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

I would ask God why there is so much suffering, why there is so much mal-distribution. But that is so unoriginal! And besides, I feel God expects everyone to do their duty, and that destiny is very much our own responsibility.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is a psychological sense of being content while not aspiring through jealousy. It never worried me that some other chap in my career got richer.

So happiness is a sense of satisfaction that one has been so fortunate, in order to serve. Even though some moments were difficult, such as when I was sacked, I feel I have done my duty, and that gives me contentment.