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Cinema Superstars Share Their Celestial Side of Life

Interviews with Five Famous Film Celebrities Describe a Spiritual World

Jyothi Venkatesh, Bombay

They have everything most women want-fame, fortune and a talent to die for. Who'd ever expect they're smart, sensitive and spiritual, too! I did, and knocked on some star-studded doors to prove it. Do you know that actress-turned-director Hema Malini rises early for daily puja, allowing no Bollywood booking to impinge on this sacred appointment? Or that Sri Devi quietly and faithfully treks down to Tirupati temple for Lord Venkatesh's blessings before each new film? Or that vivacious idol Ritu Shivpuri was raised on daily worship and devotional stories by actor father Om Shivpuri? Probably not.

Trade magazines emphasize the sensuous and the sensational, seldom hinting at the deeper musings and concerns of the stars. A corrective lens was needed for this myopia, so I chose five Hindu stars and gave them a chance to talk to the world about deeper matters. We spoke in their homes, away from studios and frenetic fans, so they were all very much at ease and patient with my sometimes overly supernal inquiries. I found proof, if it was needed, that great people in any profession got there because of something deep down inside.

Meenakshi Seshadri

Meenakshi is currently studying for her second year MA in ancient Indian history while also working on two films-Dilip Kumar's Kalinga and Rajkumar Santoshi's Ghaatak. Though she offered me only a strict one hour, she became so inspired by the soul-searching queries, the interview stretched into a cool two hours

at her modest, middle-class residence in Bandra. I asked her first about her childhood religious impressions.

"I have wonderful memories of cultural experiences as a child. During Pongal I used to feed the rice bowl to crows. During Navaratri I used to love to pose with the kolu. Mum used to make lovely rangolis. During Gokulashtami, she would draw white kolam of the baby feet which symbolized the coming home of child Lord Krishna. This left a vivid visual impression in me as a child. I am proud to be a part of that traditional upbringing. I love belonging to that but at the same time not being limited by it.

"Basically, being born in the South, into a traditional Hindu brahmin family, I was brought up to appreciate and understand all kinds of religious beliefs and practices. Of course, as a Hindu girl I have had a tremendous amount of input on Hinduism-its literature, festivals, rituals, even many of the various philosophic and scholarly interpretations. Also, having been trained in classical Indian dancing and music, which abound in tales of Gods, mythological fables, parables, the works, I have come to believe a lot in the virtues of bhakti and karma yoga. I especially like Shiva's dancing prowess. Our shastras say dance was given to us divinely by Nataraja himself. Dance has always been very close to my heart, not only as a vehicle for my self-improvement but as a springboard for trying to live beyond the materialistic plane.

"Lord Muruga, different in nature from Shiva, always seemed to me to be very street-smart. All these impressions about the Gods and Goddesses seeped into our consciousness when we were kids.

"But ultimately, I have always been left to make my own choice as to which way I want to spiritually express myself. In essence, I believe in a supreme energy which is manifested in all forms, and in each of us, too. God is in each of us. Do you know that the word religion is derived from a Latin word, religare, and means "returning to God?" I came to know this only recently. A lot has happened in my life in the last four months.

"We each have to discover what we call the 'truth' for ourselves. Regardless of what your economic status is, all of us are the same. I believe this perception is the

essence of Hindu philosophy. Whatever you achieve in life, make it a means to achieve a higher goal, not the end in itself. Be true for yourself, not for the world.

"Did you know that I have been a student of Sanskrit in school? From my mum I have picked up the Swami archanas to Goddesses Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvati. She is very regular doing pujas. I don't do them myself, but I join her sometimes. She always sings prayers in the morning with slokas which describe Goddesses and their beauty.

"I attend pujas on special occasions. Amma makes it a point to celebrate Pongal, Lakshmi/Saraswati puja, Navaratri, Deepavali and Kartikkei Deepam. We also observe North Indian religious festivals like Raksha Bandhan, Holi, Baisahki, Danchak and Bhai Dhooj.

"Though I have no Ishta Devata or Devi, I believe in Shakti because I myself am a woman. I have to believe in shakti, the divinity that manifests in each one of us. I believe in moksha, that enlightenment exists, and that it is the goal at the end of the tunnel that is life. You can achieve this by believing in universal love.

"I am keen on going to Vaishnodevi temple in the North. That place has given me a lot of strength. It is said you need something called bhulawa, 'spiritual invitation,' from God to return to this temple.

"Certain postures of my yogic exercise regimen are hatha yoga postures, but I not do any form of formal meditation. When I get time, I sit and introspect, question myself, and get answers. I have had a lot of spiritual growth this year. While performing several bhakti-based dances, I have felt strong vibrations in my body. This experience helps affirm my belief in the reality of spiritual energies. I remember once when I was performing at the Chinmayananda Mission, portraying Vishnu's Viswaroopa 'Universal Form,' in the Kurukshetra battle scene, I felt these spiritual vibrations in my body. I like the concept of a universal religion which I see elucidated in the teachings of both Vivekananda and Buddha. Of late I have learned a lot about Swami Vivekananda, especially after I worked in the new film Vivekananda being directed by the eminent G.V. Iyer.

"I just cannot fathom why on earth there is such a thing as gender bias. Granted, the males of our species do not have the specific biological problems of the body we have. But if we females are able to overcome this aspect by practical measures, I see no reason why females should be considered weak. Moreover, I feel females are mentally and emotionally stronger than males.

"The traditional husband/wife, parents/children dharmas still hold relevance. But gender prejudice is narrowing and binding and goes against a basic humane outlook. The cruelest extreme of gender bias is female infanticide. I am sad to be part of a culture where this exists.

"It may surprise you, but I confess I do not know why I am in films. My first love has always been dancing. I have no answer as to what I have achieved as an actress. Out of 70-odd films, I have acted in only one or two that have been good. In the others, the social message was warped. Damini though had a sane, simple message with which I could empathize-all about following your conscience, provided you have one!

"I am totally against violence. Whether in self-defense or righteous war, it's bad. Rape is a form of violence. To be non-aggressive you have got to be stronger as a person. It is easy to slap a person in anger but difficult to show your right cheek when someone slaps you in anger on your left. Even Swami Vivekananda said this."

Bhagyashree

"Ganesh is the kuladev of our family. We used to do pujas regularly in the family temple at Sangli. Since we hail from a royal family, dad and mum used to do pujas in front of the entire city. We have been brought up with belief in God. When I was a child, I remember seeing Saraswati in a temple looking so beautiful and divine with the sitar-like vina in her hands. So inspired, I then decided to learn the sitar.

"My Dad, Vijay Singh, a producer, director and music director, strongly believes,

even in his worst of times, in Lord Ganesha pulling him through any crisis. He used to exclaim, 'Why should I worry when Lord Ganesh will see me through?'

"While in school, I learned prayers like Twameva Mata Cha Pita Twameva... and Guru Brahma, Guru Vishnu, Guru Devo... On Diwali, we do Lakshmi puja at home and during Ganeshotsav we recite slokas regularly and do aratis. Until I got married, every year I used to go to Sangli with my parents and sisters and worship Lord Ganesh for five days during the Ganeshotsav. But still, I believe you do not have to go the temple. God is right within you, and also pervades all forms.

"My Dad and sisters pray every day. In fact my mother-in-law would love it if I were to pray to God every day, but I do not feel it is possible when your mind is wandering. Isn't it?

"I tell my son, Abhimanyu, fables of Ganesha, Hanuman, Krishna and also Ramayan as I was told. My mother-in-law tells him about Mahavir Swami, because my husband, Himalaya, is a pucca Jain and a vegetarian. I now also do Namokar mantra to salute all the creatures of the world which includes even insects and plants. Did you know that Jains do not even eat green vegetables? After one-and-a-half years of my marriage and being a vegetarian, I again started eating some non-vegetarian food-but only outside the home, of course. Recently, my husband is learning hatha yoga at his gym and is now teaching me.

"Do you know for nine months I did not eat any outside food, stuck to only home-cooked food and everything fell into place? Even a crisis through which our family was passing blew away when I finished my course of nine months.

Regarding women as priestesses and sannyasinis, Bhagyashree opines, "What difference does it make whether it is a female or a male imparting religious instruction or officiating a ritual? Times have changed. We are not living in the caveman era where just because men had the brute strength they went out to hunt, and the wife stayed in the cave and cooked. Are we? Did you hear what Beant Singh the chief Minister of Punjab said when his grandson was arrested by the police for molesting a young girl? He said why make it a big issue because the girl was only molested, and not even raped! Until at least the educated section of society stops looking down on women as second-rate creatures, how can her upliftment come? I

have a baby son, but even if I had given birth to a daughter, my husband and I would have been more than happy.

"Both sex and violence are present in films and in our society. Rapes are cheap gimmicks to sell films. But they also dramatize how heinous the crime is. It shows men degrade themselves to the lust of an animal who does not even have the brain to think what he is doing. How can you treat a fellow human being as just a piece of flesh? Anyone who commits a rape should be publicly hanged. Life used to come to a standstill for a girl who is raped. Even her own parents wouldn't give her love, support and sympathy.

"The aspects of Hindu society I want to see change is casteism, looking down on sudras, and the preoccupation with ritualism. My highest message would be: turn within, churn out the best human qualities you can. Help the poor and needy to whatever possible extent, not necessarily by spending money but even by spending just an hour with the children of an orphanage. It means so much to them. Mark my words."

Pratibha Sinha:

Pratibha is the daughter of the veteran actress Mala Sinha and, like Manisha Koirala, is also a Nepali in the sense that her father is a Nepali. With the popular film Mehboob Mere Mehboob, Pratibha breezed in on the film scene three years ago. Since then she has had another release, Kal Ki Awaaz, which flopped. Today, Pratibha-who asserts that she is not Pratibha Sinha but Pratibha Lohani-(Lohani is her father) is determined to bounce back into the film scene with a bang after her brief hibernation. She is a real nature-lover and her idea of total bliss is trekking in the forested mountains of Nepal, leeches and all.

Of her family and upbringing, she tells me, "My Dad is a Hindu brahmin in a rajguru family of Nepal and mother is a Christian. My maternal grandfather was Albert Sinha. I was bred and fed on Hindu cultural and religious thoughts and beliefs. Hinduism is a golden bowl of rich culture and heritage. But, to tell you the truth, when I was young, I found the religion more as fantasy, fables, an escape route for me.

"My favorite God has always been Lord Shiva. As a tiny tot, I was in awe of Lord Shiva because He is such a non-conformist and what's more, so care-free. Vishnu and Krishna too are favorites. The story of Lord Vishnu converting himself into Mohini, the Enchantress, enralls me even today. An aunty of mine who was related to the pujaris of the Mahalakshmi temple in Bombay used to tell me all the traditional stories. I listened with rapt attention to stories of Anirudh and Usha, Jharasand, Krishna and Sisupal, Pradumna and his birth. Ramayan, I feel, is the greatest epic which teaches the virtues of sacrifice, calmness in the face of adversity, obedience to one's parents and elders, resilience and sanyam, patience.

"It might surprise you to know I was always more inspired by and identified more with the male mythological figures rather than female ones. The one female character with whom I did identify with was Jhansi Ki Rani, the Queen of Jhansi, but not Sita or Mirabai. I remember back home in Nepal, during grandfather's or grandmother's shradh, we used to have yagnas and havan kunds in the house. But here in Bombay, we are not that ritualistic.

"Unfortunately, almost no one seeks real companionship with God. It is almost always need-based, which is a sorry state of affairs. What God would like this kind of a selfish association? When you set out to pray, you should devote your whole attention and concentration to it.

"The best principles which Hinduism has propagated are dharma and ahimsa. The two temples I mostly attend, when I do, are the Pashupati temple in Nepal and the Mahalakshmi temple in Bombay. Do you know that in the precincts of the Pashupati temple there is a Bhagwati statue actually coming up out of the ground? I do not practice yoga at all, although I read a lot of metaphysical books."

In these sexually permissive times, Pratibha retains a conservative stance: "I believe in sex after marriage. The psychological effects of pre-marital sex often have sad consequences. And having sex outside marriage, or without love, is like being an animal.

But regarding cinema violence in films, she equivocates. "It's there in world cinema. You just cannot curb it and there are worse instances of violence in real life.

Regarding rape, I do not think Hindi cinema legitimizes rape. Rape exists in our society. Can you deny it? But Hindi cinema cannot teach you how to rape. Indian men are all basically male chauvinists.

"These days girls are as good as boys and women in step with men. They ought to have an equal place. Moreover, a woman is stronger morally and emotionally than a man. But God does not believe in having women officiate as pujaris and priestesses because of biological reasons."

Ritu Shivpuri:

Ritu Shivapuri is one of the brightest discoveries of the 90s, gaining instant popularity with the Hindi film Aankhen, in which she starred opposite Govinda. Currently, she is working in Rock Dancer with Kamal Sadana and a host of other films. She is hip, cosmopolitan and independent-minded, but still holds subtle ties to her religious upbringing. "My parents, the late Om Shivpuri and Sudha Shivpuri, belong to a very cultured, civilized Hindu family. If I am religiously rich, the entire credit ought to go to my late Dad. He was very religious and used to sit with me and my younger brother Vineet every day on puja paat and inculcate in us various religious teachings. We have even our own small temple at home for Goddess Lakshmi, Sai Baba-I believe a lot in the powers of Sai Baba-and Lord Ganesha. Right from a tiny tot, I have been taught that my day would go off well if I first prayed to God. I don't know any specific Vedic prayers. I just pray from the heart. Though on the one hand, I don't believe in idol worship, I confess I overcame a severe problem, very personal in nature, after a visit to Tirupati temple some time back. I go to the temple once in a while but am more of the belief that you can pray at home.

"As a child, I was fed all the miracle stories of Ramayan, Geeta, Ganapati, etc. We used to celebrate Ganapati festival for seven days religiously. During Diwali I was mostly keen on burning crackers and eating sweets. I believe in karma, that a good human being benefits from his good deeds, and vice versa. One should learn not to hurt and harm others if you want salvation.

"Really, we should consider ourselves lucky that we have such a beautiful, deep-rooted culture. Hinduism is so deep. Few understand it fully. It brings all castes under its roof. The very word means warmth and caring and nurtures the

importance of family unity."

Ritu laments the rise of AIDS in her country and shares: "What is most appalling is treating the poor AIDS victims like social outcasts. I feel schools and colleges should have compulsory sex education to insure safe sex through contraceptives.

"Sexist bias arises because men are the family's breadwinners. This loads the situation against the poor women. Also, because daughters are supposed to leave their natal home after marriage, they are treated in most Indian families as "outsiders." But I think more and more of these prejudicial attitudes are waning. At least in my case, when I was born, as the first child, my parents thought that Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity, had come home.

"I have never understood why producers feel that a rape scene is mandatory in each and every Hindi film they make. It was invented just to show the male lead as a hero. Sadly, it is only when the heroine is raped, that the hero can come, save her and validate his valor at the cost of the poor actress who fakes her way through the rape scene and undergoes a lot of trauma.

"Also I cannot understand why there is any debate about women serving as priestesses or being a sannyasini. If men can do it, why deny the right to women? It is high time we got practical and left behind senseless, unenlightened prohibitions made centuries ago.

"My message to my fans? Don't get carried down by all the ugliness you see in society or influenced by destructive, negative forces. I am proud of being a Hindu, and if you ask me what I have set out to achieve as an actress, it is to serve as an ambassador of goodwill all over the world spreading the message of peace, harmony and unity."

Manisha Koirala:

Both Manisha's parents are ardent Nepalese Hindus who do pujas daily. Her grandfather, B.P. Koirala, was once Prime Minister of Nepal. Manisha is far less orthodox than her parents and follows more of a universalist frame of Hindu thinking. This is typical of her generation who are noticeably distancing themselves from mainstream Hinduism because they perceive it increasingly tainted by a fundamentalist mentality that too often triggers violence and tramples on the sacred ethic, ahimsa, noninjury. She feels what is needed most today is just more basic human brotherliness and tolerance-not religious rivalry, ritualism or lofty pedagogy.

Says Manisha, who debuted in Subash Ghai's Saudagar four years ago, "I think the unique beauty of India is that it has so many religions together. It welcomes them all. I condemn riots in the name of religion. The riots last year were engineered by politicians who then manipulated them to achieve their own goals. It is the poor Hindus and Muslims who suffered. A doctor friend told me that Babar had destroyed Hindu temples several centuries ago and hence Hindus had taken revenge by destroying the Babri Masjid. I was aghast. I asked him whether he had not developed mentally over the years. How can an educated person justify killings and rapes?

"I play a Muslim girl in Maniratnam's Tamil film Bombay which is based on the Hindu Muslim riots in Bombay in 1993. I experienced the trauma of those who were affected by the riots and even got goose pimples on my flesh.

"Religion to me is something very pious and personal. God is a being who forgives unconditionally. I pray to God. I don't feel He is just one idol, deity. As a daughter, I do not like to hurt my mother. If I do not follow the rituals at home my mum, who is very religious, gets hurt. She does hawans and pujas to ward off the evil spirits to usher in prosperity at home and ensure good luck.

"I have been to asylums, orphanages and spastic societies and helped them by way of funds. I set aside a percentage of my earnings from acting and doing shows all over the world to donate to the poor and needy. I am planning to adopt a child, not in the conventional set-up where you rear the child, but where you pay monthly for his/her welfare and education and become his/her Godmother. I want to be at peace myself."

Surprisingly, Manisha doesn't want rape scenes banned. "We should not avoid showing rape in films," she insists. "Show what a woman goes through, her trauma, to make people aware of such ignoble deeds. Rape is not degrading to women. It is degrading to the man who rapes a defenseless

women who cannot defend herself. If I am raped, I am strong-willed enough to then make the life of my rapist miserable. But on the other hand, I feel sensuality in cinema is necessary. Even some violence. But too much erodes the moral fibers of society.

"Regarding women being priestesses or sanyassinis, as is happening, all that I'd like to say is that many rules and regulations that linger around today were formulated centuries ago when women were accorded little religious status and given no meaningful facilities or positions of service or expression. If I, as a woman, go through my monthly menstrual period, it does not mean that God is away from me. No one can take God away from me and my heart. My own grandmother's eldest sister is a priestess. In my family we daughters were educated properly. My great grandpa even used to go from house to house to plead with the people to let their womenfolk take up education.

Manisha admits feeling ashamed that at a time when an Indian woman, Miss Shamita Sen, is chosen as Miss Universe that Indian women still kill their girl infants. "How can women create such a heinous crime? Without a woman you cannot be born. Women have sterling qualities. She can look after, care and nurture a giant family and in other instances becomes the family's major breadwinner.

"To Hindu youth my humble message would be, 'Stand up for your own rights and do not forget your roots and culture. But do not discriminate between Hindus and Muslims. That is wrong. God is in every one of us.'" On drugs, she adds: "I have been through hurts, humiliation and have had several flops in my career. I could have easily got into bad habits. I did not. Failure does not matter at all. What matters is what you learn from failure. One should never throw away one's self-respect, nor allow respect for elders to be abused. When my aunt got married and was about to enter her husband's house, she was asked to touch an elderly lady's feet. She respectfully did. But then money was tossed down in front of her and she was expected to pick up the notes. She refused to be part of this abusive act and walked into the house. She is happily married and well respected by all."

It took me three months to connect up with all five stars. Though I do film star interviews all the time, this was one of the most rewarding assignments I can remember. Each actress was so soulful. To say I was surprised embarrasses me. It was an inspiration to see the depth and dignity these young actresses maintain amidst the visceral extremes this profession can invite. But Meenakshi's comment about working in only one film of substance troubled me. Our nation is junk-film-fed on mindless plots of vapid girls and violent guys. Where are the brilliant creative scripts that dramatize women's extraordinary strengths, men's sensitive side and humanity's goodness? With all all her spiritual gifts, India can surely provide us a few more such stories.