Written by Ranchor Prime
Tuesday, 06 August 2013 14:42 - Last Updated Tuesday, 13 August 2013 15:39

Balbir Mathur was born and raised in Prayaga, India, in a Hindu home. His father was in the army and he attended a British school where he was taught by Catholic missionaries. Like so many of his generation, he grew up with an inferiority complex about his mother culture. "I was led to believe that Indian religion was darkness and oblivion," he remembers, "I wanted to be like the British, who seemed to have so much power. What was it that made them so powerful

and us so weak?" Wanting to throw off what he saw as the apathy he had inherited through his Hindu background, he vowed to discover the secrets of Western dynamism. The search eventually took him to America in the late fifties where he married an American girl and settled down as a successful management consultant. His ambition was to bring his management expertise back to India. "I desperately wanted to help restore India's self respect now that she was an independent country," he recalls, "but first I had to become more American than the Americans and beat them at their own game."

Materially he found success, but in 1976, on a trip home to visit his mother, his life took an unexpected turn. While he was in Prayaga preparations were underway for the world's largest religious festival, Kumba Mehla, which takes place every four years at the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers. In freezing winter temperatures several million Hindus bathe in the sacred waters at the time of the full moon. It is said that anyone who bathes there at this time is released from their karma and freed from the cycle of birth and death.

For Mathur, the festival was a mass demonstration of Hindu superstition which, besides being a waste of time and an irrelevance in modern India, was also, with its huge, densely packed crowds and lack of proper amenities, a health hazard and quite often dangerous. When in his youth his mother had taken him to visit the 1955 Kumba Mehla, he had watched helplessly as hundreds of people had been crushed to death during a freak panic in the crowd. This experience had intensified his disillusionment with Hinduism. Now, however, he was fascinated by the spectacle of the world's largest gathering of human beings and decided to try and get the National Geographic magazine from America to cover it. Back in Washington he managed to convince them to commission him to do the job himself.

"Within two weeks I was back in India in the middle of the Kumba Mehla with two photographers. On 19th January 1977 was the main event. I had been up since before dawn going round interviewing everyone I could. At around seven or eight in the morning I came back

to my tent. A man appeared and told me there was a yogi there who claimed to be 350 years old! One of the traditions at Kumba Mehla is that yogis who are normally never seen come out of the forests or down from the mountains and show themselves to the crowds. Many of them claim to have special powers, and I now know that some undoubtedly do, but a lot of them are fakes who just come to enjoy the adulation of the crowd and collect money.

"So when I heard that this Baba was claiming to be 350 years old I didn't believe it. I said don't give me all that bunk! But the man wanted me to see for myself. He challenged me, 'If you're a journalist then you should examine this man - he is one of the main attractions here. You are debunking him without seeing him - how can that be?'

"I had to respond to the challenge. 'Where is this guy?', I said, and off we went over eight miles of sand to see him. Eventually we crossed the Ganges and reached his place. He gave me an audience, but I was unimpressed. Then it started to rain. I thought of all these innocent people who might die of exposure. Northern India in January is very cold and it really rained. People were slipping, getting lost and hurt. I forgot all about my writing and just began helping. I was very angry at all these superstitious people coming here with no proper arrangements. Around two in the afternoon it occurred to me that one of these Hindu 'bishops' would probably declare that the rain was a blessing from God. So I thought, 'Before that happens let me ask the people and find out what they really feel.'

"The first person I approached was a baba sitting in the wet slushy sand. I asked him how much money he would have made if the rain hadn't come." "He said about 100 rupees. So I asked him how much he had made. He said around 20 rupees. So I thought I had the case sealed and tight. 'Well,' I said, 'Was the rain good or bad?' "He gave me a completely blank look. 'Rain is an act of God. It's neutral. How can I decide whether it's good or bad? Who am I to judge an act of God?' "An illiterate, poor baba I froze. Somehow the meaning sank into me. I was speechless. I consider that baba to be my teacher. It was a turning point in my life. In the next two hours I

talked to sixty-three people and all of them gave me the same answer.

"Soon after that I returned to New Delhi. I was on a busy schedule but somehow my conscience told me to go back to the Mehla. This time I went to discover what gave that baba his strength. I spent fifteen days roaming and talking to people. I realised it was not the East that should learn from the West, but the West that should learn from the East."

From then on Mathur took an increasing interest in spiritual matters. The same energy and enthusiasm which he had previously directed at becoming a Westernised businessman he now began to dedicate to the exploration and promotion of the Hindu values he had rejected in his childhood. He began to practice yoga and regularly fasting. At the same time, back in America, he lost his previous sense of drive and his business began to fail. In 1980, after a six-day fast, Mathur vowed to dedicate the rest of his life to fighting world hunger by planting fruit trees.

Mathur had always loved trees - not in the usual way, as a horticulturalist or a naturalist - but in a mysterious and personal way. He felt drawn into deep empathy with them. Influenced by his mother and his Hindu upbringing, he had imbibed a natural sense of the dignity of trees. For the Hindu, trees are to be respected as fellow living beings, not simply a source of firewood. Particularly on account of the extreme heat of India, the shade of the tree is welcome, and the tree is looked upon as a friend.

As a child Mathur often heard his mother recite a prayer popular among devotees of Krishna which compares a tree to a humble devotee. The tree lives to a great age standing upright in scorching heat, freezing cold, wind and rain and is always prepared to give shelter to passers-by. It freely gives its fruits and flowers. Among its roots grow healing herbs. In its branches a whole host of creatures can live. If someone cuts its limbs, it remains silent and does not complain. The tree is the very symbol of tolerance and generosity. It is the model for all devotees of God to follow.

A popular Krishna story tells how two demigods were once cursed to stand as trees. They were born as twin arjuna trees in the courtyard of Krishna's childhood home, in the forest of Vrindavana. Krishna, with His beautiful, blackish complexion and peacock feather in His hair, was God Himself playing as a mischievous child. One day, after the trees had grown to their full

height, Krishna playfully pulled them down, releasing the two demigods from their imprisonment. After spending long years of penance as trees, they were much wiser than before and had become purified of their sins. They offered prayers to Lord Krishna and returned to their home in the heavenly realms.

This story illustrates the Hindu teaching that a soul is made to enter the body of a tree as a result of being too sensual. By living as a tree the soul learns patience and tolerance. While in this predicament, the living being in the body of a tree should be treated with gentleness and sympathy. To do otherwise would be to add further hardship to the great trial which that soul is already undergoing.

Influenced by this religious sensitivity to trees, and by his own inner affinity, in his childhood Madhur had actually experienced a close relationship with a tree. It was the lemon tree that grew in his garden. Each day he would get a fresh lemon from this tree for his tea. He used to say to this tree, "You have provided me so much nourishment and love, one day when I am rich I will plant thousands of lemon trees for poor people so that they too can share your nourishment."

One day he felt as though the tree spoke to him. He never forgot that tree. "All during those years in America this lemon tree friend kept on coming back to remind me of my promise, `When are you going to do it?'"

So finally Madhur had decided to do something. He decided to begin by planting 144 lemon trees. Back in India he hired a gardener to follow him and plant a tree with fertiliser and water wherever he pointed. First he approached his mother: "I asked her, `Can I plant a tree by your house?' She said no - she was seventy-three years old and who would take care of it? He approached other relatives and friends but they had other excuses. It seemed that no one wanted a tree on their land. Eventually with difficulty I managed to find homes for some of the trees. My real wish, though, was to plant unlimited trees, but how was I to get people interested?"

Mathur hit upon the idea of asking a local holy man to bless lemon tree saplings. The man was visited by thousands of people daily and if he were to bless the plants then perhaps some of those pious people could be persuaded to take them and grow the trees as a sacred task. When he spoke to the holy man he received significant advice.

"I asked him to bless my lemon trees. At first he was reluctant. He said that such a project had to be 'an act without any consequences'. If I were to act in that way then my work would be successful. He said that if I were to think even of other people's benefit then I would also think of my own, and it would fail. If I were simply to express my soul, the world would follow."

Mathur arranged for the man to bless 2,500 trees. Suddenly everyone wanted one because the trees were blessed. Some people stood in line all day to get one. Not only did they take the trees to plant at home, but some promised to plant many more as well. From this Mathur understood that it was not enough just to ask people to plant trees, however good the reasons may be. There had to be another dimension, a spiritual one. It was this that the holy man had hinted at in telling him that it must be an act 'without consequences'. In other words, it had to be a spiritual act, an act of service to the Supreme. In Hindu understanding, all actions in this world have consequences, or reactions. The reaction, either good or bad, comes as a result of the desire that caused the original action. If one does some work for one's own benefit, then one must accept the reaction, good or bad, depending on whether the original motivation was good or bad. Obviously, planting trees is a good act, and brings a good reaction, or good karma. However there is a stage beyond this: an act without any reaction, without consequence. In performing such an act there cannot be any attachment to the good result, as in the case of an ordinary good deed, done to earn a reward in this world. This is an act for the sake of God. Only such an act can be free of karma, and consequently completely selfless.

The realisation that Mathur had stumbled upon was that planting trees had to be more than a mere good deed, it had to be a transcendental action, one that appealed to the deep-seated spiritual conscience of the Indian people. By appealing to their underlying religious sense, Mathur felt he would be able to touch their deeper motivation - the same motivation that brought them in their millions to bathe in the sacred waters at the Kumba Mehla - their desire for liberation from the world of birth and death.

[redacted]