

Satish Gujral

Artist

'I do not believe in reincarnation'

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Satish Gujral is a painter, sculptor, muralist, writer and architect.

What does spirituality mean to you?

When the word spirituality is used, it often is equated to religion. And I am definitely not a religious person. I actually harbour a profound dislike for organized religions. They have done more damage to the idea of spirituality than anything else. They pretend not to teach hatred for other religions, but in fact they are based on the very denial of other faiths. Otherwise how could they claim to own and be the ultimate truth? Religions are based on dogma. And when there is dogma, the substance is gone. Instead of liberating us and encouraging us to question, they try to convert and convince us of an absolute truth.

Also, I do not believe in the idea of God. There is definitely a catalyst enabling for things to happen. But as we can see on the material plane, the substance that catalyzes disappears once the process has taken place. You cannot see it afterwards.

So for me spirituality has nothing to do with religion. And I very seldom consciously ponder over it. Still, I cannot help but feel that there is something sublime beyond the logical plane. At some point, logic and rationality simply do not work anymore. I see it mostly in my work and in the process of creating, in that awe-inspiring transformation of an idea into a form. What was the process that helped this conversion? It was not consciously done, in a way that could be intellectually described. In those moments, I have no choice but surrender to my belief in spirituality.

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

It is very difficult for me to say. I find myself in a conflict whether to believe so or not. At times, certain things happen, for instance when I create something that I cannot explain to myself, how it came, what guided it – then for a moment, I do surrender to the idea of a force beyond. But after that moment has passed, logic takes over, because as a thinking person, I am enslaved by logic, and insist on seeing a proof of everything.

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

Most definitely. Life would be wasted if there was no specific mission, even if one is not necessarily defining it consciously and thinking about it intellectually. People without a mission melt away. I can see their demise. In my case, the mission is very clear: the day I cease to paint, I cease to be. That is the mission. It is what makes me live, what provides me a reason to be alive.

My coming to art though was not obvious from the beginning. It was a misfortune in disguise. I used to doodle as a child, which of course was not taken seriously as it was not something respectable in the kind of family and society I grew up in. But when I became ill and bed-ridden at the age of eight, and deafness had become permanent, my father became anxious about my education. He suddenly saw doodling and graphic arts as the way out. So he found an art school in Lahore for me to attend. And thus it began.

In my subsequent dedication to art, or what I see as the process of transformation of ideas into form, I faced countless challenges and issues.

One of them has had to do with the law of the markets and the age of hype we live in. They basically work against true creativity. An image gets attached to a particular artist who then has to live by it. It becomes his identity. Once a style has been invented it becomes a brand name. The reality though is that very quickly that style is outdated, it feels staled. But the artist is afraid to drop it and lose his comfortable popularity. Society around does not like to rethink who people are.

I have actually gone through this struggle over and over again. I would find a new shape, which would become a "brand" and soon enough, I would feel the need to move on to something else. But doing so meant losing a "constituency" that admired me for that invention.

So I had to pay a heavy price for it. The first time I felt the compulsion to do so was very hard; but that first time also helped me lose the fear of jumping into the unknown and following my conscience, moving ahead to the next invention.

Any time I would feel the material I was using had been exhausted I would change – from painting to sculpture, from wood to glass then to bronze and so on. Of course I would at times come back to one of those modes of expression. But it would be a different experience. It is similar to those cultivating a land who abandon it for a while as it is dead from being used for too long. They venture out and when coming back a few years later, they find the land rejuvenated. But their relation to it and their way of sowing seeds is different, because it is informed by all the experiences and sights they have encountered along the way.

All my life has been about those cycles between inventions, transitions and transformations.

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

It is not something I live in a conscious way. I never pray or meditate for instance. But it manifests through my work at every single moment. An idea emerges and I try to give it a form so the form becomes the proof of its being. This is why I paint. Introducing poetry into reality, trying to touch the truth through it is what makes a creative person different from the others. And where that poetic element is, logic cannot go, and spirituality begins.

What is the role of spirituality in your life as an artist?

The whole process of creativity is what I equate with spirituality. Basically, I have been in a constant struggle to convert ideas into a feeling form. It is a process I live even in my sleep. It is a way of finding my own truth. But it should also help others do so. If one passes by a picture and is not transformed by it, what is the point? One should not try and understand what the artist meant – only what one sees and feels in it. There is no dogma about it. I do not understand people asking me to explain my paintings – it is like making a juice out of fruits and then asking to convert the juice into fruits again. An idea has been transformed into form; it cannot be converted into idea and theory again.

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

When I became ill and deaf, my older brother who was a Communist felt that his ideology could help me – instead of focusing on my own grievance, I should concentrate on the grievance of the world. So he infused in me those beliefs and I adhered to them dogmatically. I would reject anything that would contradict them. I believed then in the supremacy of the idea, instead of understanding that it is only a raw material, that is must be refined to make something out of it. It took me almost two decades to finally abandon Marxism. It happened during my stay in Mexico. It was a very significant turning point, because it was in a way the end of dogma in my life and I could open to so many other understandings of things. It was triggered by my encounters with a number of Russian émigrés, who would tell me stories about what was really happening in the Soviet Union at the time. There was no freedom for creativity and I could not accept it. I understood that Marxism was just another religion in disguise. And I felt I had wasted so many years believing in it. I thought of what it had contributed to me – and the answer was sadly simple: nothing.

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

I do not believe in reincarnation. To me it is just another way to try and build a fantasy. When you cease, you cease.

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

I wouldn't ask a question. I do not feel a sense of mystery about life, which would prompt a questioning of any kind. Besides, I do not believe there is such an entity as God. If there was one, how could it be so cruel as to allow us to make so many mistakes? How could it allow for so much suffering on earth? The idea that suffering may come as a consequence of previous lives' deeds is an invention of religion to justify misery and distress. Believing in a force like God is to me a sign of weakness.

What is your idea of happiness?

It is the satisfaction to convert my feelings and ideas into forms, it is that process of creating, whether through painting or poetry or anything else.

It does not necessarily equate to inner peace and contentment though. Quite the contrary. On the one hand, I would say I have much more contentment today than I ever did before. It took me a long time and much effort to reach that stage. The more I follow my conscience, the less I am guided by greed or other feelings of the kind, the more I am at peace. And I can look at the past without any regret.

On the other hand, complete contentment would mean the end of growth. It is the constant inner feeling of dissatisfaction that prompted me to always do more, improve and change. I still feel I have so much to achieve and so little time for it. Every time I sit in front of my work, I feel it is incomplete. So till the last moment of my life it shall remain the same, with this lack of inner contentment. It is the right way to be. It is the sign that something keeps growing, that something is alive inside.

So how can one find a balance between inner peace and growth? I am not sure one can ever find an answer to this riddle.