

Arpana Caur

Artist

'Fanaticism creeps into all religions'

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Arpana Caur is one of India's finest artists. A self-taught painter, she is influenced by her mother's writings and Punjabi folk literature.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is a whole way of life, a wholesome outlook on life. It is about trying to live life as a better human being, explore one's inner depths, live with compassion, sharing and joy. It is very different from religion, which is at the core of so much fanaticism, tragedies, massacres, suffering. The "me better than you" syndrome is so often fueled by religion, whereas spirituality is about loving the other, about seeing one's reflection in every living form. Spirituality at its core is therefore deeply humanistic and whether someone spiritual labels himself a social reformer or not, he ends up being one. Kabir wrote about spirituality, but he also questioned the caste system or the authority of the priests and the mullahs. Guru Nanak while being a spiritual being was also socially very conscious, denouncing the caste system, advocating equality for women and so on.

Fanaticism creeps in every single religion, including mine. And I face this dilemma for instance, when painting Guru Nanak: am I to paint him with a turban or with a sufi cap that he is said to have worn? Am I going to offend the religious sensibilities of some people? That is religion, whereas in fact, Nanak exemplified the spirit of true secularism. He always travelled with one Muslim and one Hindu companion.

So today, we see great works of art banned or destroyed, only because they are seen as an expression of otherness, of what is alien. Religious fanaticism has increased even in India. I see it among others as a result of economic difficulties; religion can be an anchor for those who need to vent their frustrations. Spirituality on the other hand is only about love.

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

I have constantly felt so at a personal level, but the moment I think of a larger scale, I doubt it. How could I comprehend and explain all the pathetic inequalities of our society, the tragedies of the tsunami or other natural disasters of the kind?

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

I always felt I had to paint. I started at the age of three. And it has always been such a strong conviction, that it made me think it does not come from this lifetime only; it is a heritage from some past birth. Still, I never felt confident about my work. Even now, at the age of fifty three, I always find so many flaws in it and feel I may not be skilled enough. Sometimes I worry I am saying too much through my figures, or I am telling too many stories at once. Doubts always arise. But it is also a way to permanently grow. And I feel that if one seeks to better oneself, it is a way of walking in the Creator's footsteps. Otherwise, just living for oneself without growth would mean there is no purpose to life.

So no matter what, painting is a form of quest, a thirst to express what is inside and what is beyond, and it is pure joy.

Painting can also be cathartic, helping me to confront situations, get them out of my system.

Of course I could say that it is also about touching others. But the reality is that so few people visit the hundreds of galleries and museums of India. They are empty most of the time. So it is first and foremost about a very personal exploration and journey.

Today, I can make a living out of it, I can help others thanks to it, and living from my passion is such a privilege, it is ultimate freedom.

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

Every day begins with thanks giving, I bow before the holy book and thank God for another day. I then sit in meditation for a while. And afterwards I start painting, which is also a form of meditation for me. When I come up to the studio around 6.30 or 7am, I can see all the birds, parrots, and other peacocks on the terrace. It is the most divine part of the day, till noon. Only in the afternoon do I interact with other people. I have made a conscious decision not to answer phone calls, and not to have a mobile phone. I felt I had to protect myself. Otherwise it can be so overwhelming. In 1974

when I began exhibiting, there were two galleries in Delhi. Now there are more than 200. They constantly want to come and visit, see works for shows and so on. I could spend my life doing that. Once the afternoon meetings are done, I go for my evening walk, and while walking I say my prayers. If I am driving somewhere during the day, I listen to some spiritual music, hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib book set in ragas, or poems from Kabir and so on.

So basically I remain plugged in and connected to God as much as possible, all day long.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

Whether I am working on a spiritual series or any other subject, painting is fundamentally a deeply spiritual thing for me. And often I feel like a channel for something way beyond me. I paint something and then I wonder — how did it happen? Was it really me? So every day I feel this energy flowing through me. I was asked for instance to paint Sai Baba. I had not the slightest clue of how I would go about it. But somehow, it happened. And I realized it must have had some quality because when it was unveiled in front of a thousand people, they could relate to it. In that case as so many other times, it definitely did not feel like I was the one who painted it.

Can you share a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

My spiritual growth has been a very gradual one, there have been no dramatic awakening moments. But still, the encounter with my guru twenty years ago did mark a turning point. It has enabled a deeper and broader understanding of so many things, including my own Sikh holy book and further exploration on so many dimensions.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

This whole approach to life and spirituality did not mushroom by chance one day. It is the result of everything I saw and experienced as a child. When partition took place, my family was vacationing on this side of the border, so my grand-father went back to Lahore to rescue his parents and in-laws, but also the holy book. Few people actually know that out of 36 poets comprised in the book, only seven are Sikh, all the others being Hindu and Muslim. So since childhood, prayers and reading from the holy book would take place every day. Not a day would go by without me spending time on my own in the prayer room. My great-grand-father would visit every day both the gurudwara and the Hindu temple. My grand-father would never charge poor individuals as a doctor. My mother, despite barely having enough to provide for our family, would always find a way to make blankets, quilts, food for poorer ones. So there was this great secularism, this wide, embracing and loving ethos which I imbibed on a daily basis, and which I try to live to this day.

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

As a painter, because as long as I can create, it is the ultimate ecstasy.

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

Why can't everyone have at least two meals a day in free India? People explain it by the law of karma, but that answer does not satisfy me.

What is your idea of happiness?

Loving & be loved.