

# Manish Arora

Fashion Designer

'It is time for the underdogs to stop being the underdog'

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**Manish Arora is a fashion designer.**

**What does spirituality mean to you?**

Being honest to yourself. And doing the right things in life.

**How do you go about it?**

At least in my work I can say it is about doing what I believe in. Even if nobody agrees with what I want to do, I will always go ahead and do it. And if I make a mistake, at least I know I am the only one responsible for it.

**Did you always have that clarity?**

Sort of. I think I am actually getting clearer over the years. The older you get, the surer you are of your likes, dislikes etc.

That is the true test, no? And in any case, life constantly throws situations at you that push you to do it, and don't leave you any choice.

### **What are your inspirations on that journey?**

All the time things inspire me. For instance watching Slovakia beat Italy in the World Cup. Because it is time for the underdogs to stop being the underdog ! And in this I very much think of myself also. For instance I don't want to be known any longer as the "first Indian designer doing well internationally". I want to be known just as a designer. It is about time for people in the West to change their perception about those coming from developing countries and stop seeing them as some exotic species, saying "wow you are the first Indian designer here". Instead, they should understand and assess us the same way they would for their own country's designers.

In fact, I think we often are better here these days: you can put us Indians down ten times, but we will always fight back and come up even more, which is a quality I think people in the West have lost. Right now is our moment. We are developing now. In Europe I often see that the best people are not the locals but people from outside who have moved there.

### **Why does it matter so much what people think about you over there?**

For a person like me who works globally it does matter. Of course I am what I am because of my country. But this tag doesn't need to be there forever. I am a designer, period.

### **When you say "I am a designer", that's not all that defines you as a human being, does it?**

Actually, as a human being I have become a designer ! Because 24/7 it is there and it is how I am ! It is strange, even when I sit at home watching a commercial on TV I think of how I would make it better if I were to do it. I look at the products people sell at traffic lights, and think of why it would be better if I had created them. Even if I see a car plate, I look at the font and think how another font would be easier to read and more beautiful. It constantly comes in anything I see!

The kinds of things I do today go way beyond fashion and I think it comes from the fact that I function that way all the time. I can adapt and work in very different fields easily, not just in fashion.

### **Why fashion by the way?**

I am from Bombay; I was studying in a good Commerce college. But I didn't like it. I thought I would want to do something more creative but didn't know what it would be. I read one day about the fashion institute in Delhi, NIFT. Somehow I got attracted to it. I filled some form and went for the exams without knowing what it was about at all. I just went for the heck of it. There was no fashion background in my family, nothing. I am actually amazed that I had the confidence to go for that exam. I didn't even have color pens or sketchpads for it. And of course I never thought I would get a call after that. But I did. I came to Delhi for the interview. And again, I didn't know about anything. So I behaved and answered with nothing in my mind, completely spontaneous and naïve about things. That's when I learnt that not knowing about things can actually be good, because you can be completely spontaneous and the real you can come out.

Only while I was at NIFT I realized that fashion was really what I wanted to do. It was the thing for me. At the end of the course I got this award of the most creative student. And that's how it all began. So I learnt that when you want to have your own style and want to make a mark, it's good not to be too aware of what's happening in your field. I have stuck to that. That is how the real me comes out. And it works.

### **Why are you doing all this though, what is your purpose?**

I just want to put my point across to people. Of course everyone wants to make money. But if that was my main objective, I would not be doing what I am doing now and would be the most commercial designer. Instead, I have chosen a different way. I want to make a point and convey a certain idea of design I have in my mind – which is new, and different from others'. And I want to keep doing that. Of course being well known gives you a boost, and inspires you to go out and do it. But that's not it. It is about people remembering me as someone who has a particular style that nobody has seen before. It is not easy to go on and on every year, and every season. It is not easy to go abroad, and have shows in Paris for instance, which is so expensive. It is almost impossible for an Indian to go across the globe and do this. But I keep doing it.

So first, it is about me enjoying the process, which I really love. I love coming to the office every morning to create things. I would not be like this if I were an accountant or didn't have a creative job. So it is a very selfish urge to enjoy what I do in life and not feel it is just work. Second, it is about being appreciated by people and for my design philosophy to be understood. And third, it is to start a new way of design which did not exist in the world before.

### **Do we all have a purpose in life?**

We all can have one, if we find it over time. Nobody came to me and said this is your job, start tomorrow. It is about being aware, listening to people and their reactions, seeing what they think of your work, taking criticism in a very positive way, changing yourself by listening to those whom you think would know something and still listen to your heart at the end of the day. All those things can help you decide what you are here for, what your role is. If you only sit locked in your room, alone, there is no way you will realize what your purpose is.

### **And in all this, are things destined, preordained?**

I don't believe in destiny at all. I don't believe in astrology, in any of those things. I believe that if you want to do something, you'd better do it yourself.

### **Aren't there moments in your life when you feel like there is a larger orchestration, that certain things are meant to be, some odd coincidences or synchronicities?**

Sometimes strange coincidences do happen, yes, of course. But I just treat them as coincidences and leave it at that. I don't believe it's the stars, or destiny, or karma, or any of those things. I just don't want to go there.

### **Did you have a religious upbringing?**

I come from a very conservative family. But at the same time even though a part of my family is very religious, some like my mother never go to temples. So I was never forced into any of it. Religious views were not pushed on me at all.

### **What about God, does this concept mean something to you at all?**

I believe there is somebody somewhere, some kind of a power, who could be there for me in case I need it. But maybe I only say this selfishly because I could need that person one day...

### **Is it actually a force or a person?**

I don't know where it is or what its shape is. Maybe it actually is inside me. Maybe it's just my inner voice, my soul. My name by the way means "god of your own soul" so ... But I don't have any image of it.

### **How do you know there is such a thing then?**

Out of selfishness. Because I might need it one day. It gives me some confidence. Isn't it why people create the image of God? If life was perfect and everything was fine, I don't think anybody would believe in God. There is such a belief because we need someone to take us out of our problems. So basically, I just want to keep my options open ! It is like a security blanket that I would like to have. But I have never gone there yet.

### **Talking about the inner voice, sometimes on the intense pace of life, it can be difficult to actually hear it, isn't it?**

Absolutely not. There is all the time in the world to hear it when you eat, when you sit etc. If you want to! Some people don't want to and it's their choice. That's when they don't know why they are here in this life. They don't take the time to listen.

Many creative people feel they are at times a conduit for something beyond them, they create something and don't really know where it's coming from.

I do get surprised sometimes at what I do. It is an after effect. While I am doing it, I do not know what I am doing. As if I were possessed. I just go on and on and on for months doing it, producing, creating, not realizing what the end result will be. Once it is all done, I say "wow I did this !" and I wonder where it came from. Then my Virgo analytical side takes over and dissects where it all came from, and basically messes it up completely.

### **If there were one question you could ask God, what would it be?**

What's after all this ? I am very curious to know what there is beyond the planets, and our universe. I get scared of that question. Is it IT? Is that all there is? There must be something more, something else. But what ? What happens after this life? Sometimes I feel that this time on earth could be the toughest and the bad part of our overall journey. What happens before coming back on earth? It is very small if there isn't anything after, and beyond the universe as we know it. The universe is already discovered, those three or four dimensions. What is beyond it? This can't be it. This can't be all. So I would have to ask about that.

**If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose?**

Same as in this life. But born with the resources to do more than in this life. I would want to remember what I learnt in this life instead of having to start all over again. So that I can take it to another level. I don't want to restart mentally. I want to start from this mindset. And not waste time.

**Are you a free spirit?**

Of course. I am quite adventurous in life. I am not scared to explore and try ever more, which can be bad, as you can burn yourself and not everything is good for you.

But I have been quite lucky. I don't know of any other designer in India who has gotten an opportunity to explore so many things at my age. I am only 37 and have been worked outside of India on the design of cars, shoes, sunglasses, watches, Walt Disney characters, Barbie Dolls, and more. And I just started as a fashion designer! Though I have to say, I may be lucky, but I have also been working very hard for it. And when people came to me for those things I was not scared and went for it.

So when I am born next time I want to take it from here and not have to restart all over again.

**Could you have ever fathomed when you started that you would do all those things?**

Absolutely not. I just went with the flow. And I always do. I always say it is only the beginning. I always have to think of myself as not knowing anything, as being a newcomer. Only then I can move forward and learn more. If I think I am God's gift to mankind, then I would just stand still and become sterile.

**What is your idea of happiness?**

Anything. Especially the smallest and stupidest things. When my bed sheets are fresh and neat that makes me so happy. When my windows and cupboard's mirror get cleaned, you have no idea how happy it makes me! Maybe more than a successful show !

**Do you have contentment?**

Certainly not. But I have the patience to go slowly and smartly about things. I am clever about it, you can even say selfish. And I think a lot.

**Some people get very troubled by human behavior around them, or suffering?**

I am a little heartless about it. I don't actually feel bad about it. I can't help it. This is the way it is. It's life. And I just forget about it. Honestly, living in India, you have to develop this immunity otherwise you would only be a depressed maniac walking around and may kill yourself very soon.