

Ritu Kumar

Fashion Designer

'We can only negotiate with fate'

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Ritu Kumar, Fashion Designer.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is the quest to find out where I am coming from and where I am going.

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

When I see the world around me, I feel there is a God, there is something that makes this universe work. And we are like on a river of which we cannot stop the flow, but we can direct the speed and path of the boat, if we are lucky. In fact, nothing happens without work, nothing comes on our lap without a price. So we can negotiate with fate, but we cannot determine it entirely. And so many astonishing things that happened in my life I could have never planned or fathomed.

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

My purpose never was and is not to be a fashion designer. Fashion can be a quite light-weight occupation and the whole industry works on making people unhappy about the way they look. Rather, acting as a catalyst in the revival of interest in textile crafts has been my passion. It all happened quite by accident. I moved to Calcutta when I got married and discovered the most sophisticated and skilled

crafts people in the hinterland villages, with absolutely no work. So I started collaborating with them, then opened a shop in Calcutta – the first boutique in India, so I could sell their work. Gradually people began to copy it and along with others in the country, it created a wave of renewed interest. Years later those villages were full of work. I could have never fathomed such a transformation and such a success. I could have never engineered it myself. Someone was pushing me into it, someone was directing my boat on that river...

What has been the role of spirituality in your life in the crafts and fashion?

It is about seeing a continuity of life and nature as expressed in the crafts designs, for instance through the recurring pattern of the tree of life, which I have seen everywhere, whether on ancient Egyptian paintings, or in Peru, or in so many parts of India.

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

My moving to Calcutta – my entire perspective was very Delhi and Amritsar centered, our priorities used to be about good meals and fun. And then suddenly I was exposed to all that poverty, to the worlds of Satyajit Ray, Tagore, the Durga pujas, the rich hinterland – it all became part of me and gave me a conscience. I discovered those areas entirely dedicated to printing, or to handlooms, or to embroidery, each of them completely poverty ridden and with no work. And my life changed entirely, there was a clear purpose after that.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

There was a weaving village on the border with Bangladesh. I would sit there on the banks of the Ganges, drawing my block, and I was seeing around me the same cycles of nature that had been there for thousands of years. It opened me up. There is so much security in remaining in a tight and closed community. But we cut ourselves from the natural cycles, unaware of the larger picture. That village and others inspired me in reconnecting with it all.

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

It does not matter, as long as it would be a completely enriching experience. When I look at nature, I can see what reincarnation is about, in a very physical way. But actually, I do not know about souls...

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

What am I doing here – what does this cycle of birth, life and death mean?

What is your idea of happiness?

To be at peace with my work and with myself. There was this village in Bengal which I used to visit in the sixties, so completely poor. Years later, thanks to the revival of interest in crafts, they were so much better off, and on my way back after a rich meal there, I think I was the happiest ever in my life.