

Subodh Gupta

Artist

'It is very tough to make me happy. I have no idea why'

Sat Jun 12 2010



Subodh Gupta is an artist

What does spirituality mean to you?

Superstition. I grew up in a typical middle class family, with everybody really deeply believing in gods and goddesses and constantly performing rituals. Not two or three times a year but every week. Just name a ritual and they had it. Including the craziest things. Every week there was a fast, and for any event, a puja would take place. Life was revolving around those things. Of course, as a kid, I was much more interested in eating the prasad than in the puja itself.

There was another aspect to it. Every morning my grandmother would chant and read the Ramayana. And when I moved to the village, the school's headmaster used to stay with us. Every evening after dinner, we would all sit with him and he would read the Mahabharata. He would read it in Sanskrit then translate it. Every single night. That is my knowledge. Those are my foundations.

Today, I guess that installation art is my way to approach those things. I transpose what I saw there into my art.

What about gods and goddesses?

Calendars with gods and goddesses were the only form of art around me in my childhood. There was nothing else to see. And in that way they were important to me.

Was one god more important than others?

We had an absolutely huge family. About 1,500 of us in a town outside Patna. We had a family temple. But each home had its own god. There wasn't a particular form. Rather it was some mud kept in a dark room.

The only time I would remember to pray was when I would lose my socks - I was praying god to help me find them!

Today, do you believe in God?

I completely lost any such belief.

Why?

Because I could see that despite all those beliefs, my family had such a tough life. I saw much hardship from childhood, and young people dying. My father passed away when he was 42, I was in 6th standard. My sister-in-law also died young. And it made me wonder - what is the point of all those rituals if they can't prevent such suffering? What is the point of adding hardship through fast and endless rituals to an already difficult life?

So after my father's death, everything changed in my mind. I went to study in the village. And felt I couldn't believe anymore in any of those rituals. And I haven't since then.

Then what about your own way of looking at life?

Basically, only one thing mattered: I always wanted to do something very different. It is as simple as that.

The government school was not good, as you can imagine; my father was gone, so there was no real guidance. My older brother had to take care of us all, siblings. Thank god I was the youngest! I didn't have any of those responsibilities, so I could become an artist; I was free to do whatever I wanted.

When did you know that art would be your thing?

When I was in school I knew one thing: I would never do a regular job. I was always bad with timing. I could never wake up early. Going to school was very tough. Just making it there was an achievement! So I couldn't fathom waking up early every day to go to an office.

Why art?

Because you can be free. That's why I went to art school. For five years, you go to school, and even if you sleep, nobody bothers or asks you questions, especially at the Patna school of arts! And my family thought I was studying. That's what I wanted. Everything started there. And I was lucky.

Being lucky - does that mean there is such a thing as destiny?

How would I know? I do think that if you do what you believe in, things happen. And that's the underlying origin of luck. Also, there is a period in your life when you can change your direction. I switched from theater to visual arts and now that I went so deeply into it, I want to stay there, and I want to go deeper. It is like a sea, magical things come to the surface and you don't know what will come next.

But for the magic to come out, you have to go in the right direction.

Could you have ever dreamt that you would achieve what you did?

I never think of where I am. I feel that I am where I was. Because I have not changed. I am the same. Yes things have happened. I used to work in the kitchen and now I have a big studio. But whatever happens within that space I enjoy equally. I was never sad when working in one room. I was so happy and I always thought I am the best.

Always really?

Absolutely. At the beginning, some big gallery owner came and said he liked some particular work but suggested I change some things. I knew I would not listen to him. I knew what I was doing and he didn't know what he was talking about. Twenty years ago, nobody knew me. But I always felt that if I did things in a certain way, things would happen.

What does success mean to you?

It feels good. Today success has given me the means to realize my dream-works. But maybe I was feeling better back then. Because mentally I was stronger.

What do you mean?

Sometimes when you have five plates to eat from, it is not good. You should have only one. In that way I feel that time was much better. My resolution and willpower were so strong. When you have five plates, you have to be so careful to choose the right one. So now it is a little tougher than before. No doubt I enjoy luxury, I enjoy my place, my equipment, my lifestyle, but at the same time I should not lose my path. That is why I feel it is somehow a tougher time. I have to keep my focus.

How do you keep your focus?

With the right thinking about work, about art. And with the right approach – if I think something is a good idea, and if the next morning I still think it is a good idea, and similarly for a few days in a row, then it is likely to indeed be a good idea...

How does your thought process take place?

Since I grew up in a big family, I do not need to be alone or in an isolated place to think. My ideas come when I am surrounded by people. Because ultimately my art is about them. So I need them. I am not painting nature. I would love to do it. But that poetry would only come when I have fulfilled my job with people. And it doesn't look like it will happen anytime soon. There is too much going on within our society, within humans. The fight with human nature and human behavior is something I take to make my own art and it won't go anytime soon.

I actually understand them well. That is my strength. I can catch that part very well and show it to us.

What about this feeling many artists have of being a conduit for something beyond them?

I am not like that. For me, it is about the chaos. My art comes from the chaos of things happening. And from my capability to then distance myself to observe it. I don't know how I do it, but I do. That is how I make my art.

When an idea comes I disappear somewhere else. That is also why I can't read books. You know why? I read one page and then I begin dreaming, my thoughts go completely somewhere else. And then I realize I am writing a different story! I read but I don't register anything. I write my own paragraphs... I tried many times but I can't help it!

Looking at your success, is there some larger orchestration, what some people would call a "divine protection"?

I think it's mainly about hard work and the strength of my convictions. When I first came up with the idea of using utensils, everybody dismissed it as complete rubbish. Today it is my signature... If you find something and are convinced about it, and persevere despite everyone thinking it is garbage, after a few years, the world will think it is great.

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

There are a lot of mysteries in life. But it is up to me to solve them. I shouldn't ask Him. I thank Him for giving me so many opportunities. But then I have to play my role. And thank god I know what my role is...

What is God for you?

Nature, my mother, my family. I am very close to my family. I think of them all the time, I dream about them. They are all part of my spiritual life.

And I have my superstitions too. When I sleep sometimes I look around wondering if there is any ghost.

Did you see ghosts when you were a kid?

I was always so afraid of them. Even when I was 14 or 15, I would scream full of fear and beg my mother to come, telling her I could not sleep alone.

If there were such a thing as reincarnation, what would you choose for the next round?

To be born again as an artist.

I guess I don't believe in reincarnation though. I am very ruthless. I think of what I have here and now. But I think sometimes of someone like Van Gogh, who didn't see success in his lifetime and now his paintings sell for such fortunes. I wish there were such a thing as reincarnation so he could see that recognition!

Is it important for you to be recognized?

Yes, why not? Why would I exhibit my artwork? For people to see it.

What is your idea of happiness?

I am never happy! It is very tough to make me happy. I have no idea why. Every time I achieve something, every time I do very well, I say "big deal, so what?"

I have every reason to be happy all the time. I know what I want but even when I get it, I am not necessarily happy.

But is what you want the key to your happiness?

Obviously not.

I am happy when I am with my friends, with my family, when I do my art. But at the same time there is some dissatisfaction. I guess I am confused about what being happy would actually require...