

Shubha Mudgal

Vocalist

'I do not know what God is to me'

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Shubha Mudgal is a Hindustani classical vocalist. She was awarded the Padma Shri in 2000.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It means looking for something that has been there all the time, yet for some reason we forgot it, and have to go back and seek it. It is a strange conflict that it is there for everyone to see and within everyone, yet we lose it and have to rediscover it.

How did you rediscover it?

Through music. I grew up in a very liberal home, where religiosity never was a big thing. We never bothered about rituals as such. But we were exposed to many kinds of music, literature, and experiences. And over time, I wondered what it was about the world of music that made me feel there is something more to be looked at. It could not be only a pleasant sound to my ears.

Did something trigger it?

Classical Indian music is generally considered as spiritual. But I never thought it systematically could be so. Classical musicians cannot always feel spiritual when playing. Not all musical intent can be spiritual. Also, the lives of those playing can be extremely mean and shallow. So how could the music they play be called spiritual? That has always been a strange thing for me.

Yet, a couple of very meaningful experiences connected music and spirituality to me.

In the early 90's, a woman by the name of Veena Modi came to me as a student. Unlike all the others, she did not wish to perform, but only be able to do "seva" (or service) to Thakur, to Krishna. I was intrigued and surprised by her request.

She then came with beautiful poems in a dialect of Hindi spoken in the area of Vrindavan, and asked me to compose music for them.

Even though I am not a composer, I felt drawn to them like a magnet. It was like a compulsion. And I got more and more involved in it.

She then offered to take me to her guru in Vrindavan. He explained that the purpose of art is not to display one's skills but only to please "him", to please God. He insisted that there needs to be an expression of deep surrender and a shedding of the ego. If I have some skills, it is tempting to show off: I can make my voice run, soar and do a whole range of things; everyone is aghast which makes me feel even more powerful so I sing even more complex things, with the desire of impressing everyone and proving myself how wonderful I am.

But all this made no sense for the guru. And I was wondering what he was talking about. If I have some craft, shouldn't I do something with it and show it?

But as I visited him repeatedly and talked to him more, I got increasingly involved in this tradition of making a musical offering to God. It is there in many communities, but it is particularly developed among the Vaishnavites. I found it wonderful that seva can be done through offerings of jewellery, food and more but that nothing is more powerful than prayers through music. Thanks to this, a whole community of musicians assembled over the centuries, creating music for all times of day and night. And even though it is attached to rituals, it evokes all aspects of life. It is like speaking to someone dearly loved. In the morning, when you go to someone's home, you do not just barge in. You knock at the door, say 'may I come in?', and indeed the song says: "will you grace my day by showing me your beautiful face? May I ring the bell at the temple door and come in?" And at night, there is a song to put the deity to sleep.

It is such a treasure trove of poetry. And it took me over. For many years, I worked on it and it became a major part of my training and learning.

So in the end, the student who came taught me so much more, and opened all those worlds to me. I later on took diksha with her guru's son in Vrindavan, Acharya Shrivatsa Goswami. I feel very connected to him, even though I rarely see him and I am a disobedient student, unable to do as I traditionally should!

The other experience that changed many things for me happened with one of my teachers, legendary singer Pandit Kumar Gandharva. He was famous among others for his renderings of Kabir. As a child, I had been taught his poems like every other pupil in India, and like many others, I had ran away from it, making faces at it. But when I heard the same lines musically rendered, I felt there was a far deeper meaning than the words taken literally, a meaning which had completely escaped me and that I had failed looking at. So I had to go back and study those metaphors. This was another major turning point in the way I looked at music – instead of an experience made to impress others, music as something far deeper.

So in the end, music is what drew me to spirituality and became my portal to access it.

Did you always know that music would be your life?

Absolutely not. I was very blessed to grow up in a family where I was exposed to all sorts of worlds and directions. It was not a family of musicians, I am a first generation musician.

When I graduated from school, my mother said I should take a year off to decide what I wanted to do. Very unconventionally, she insisted there was no need to do what everyone else does. If music was to make me happiest, I should look at a life focused on it. And gradually I decided to do so.

Now, does that mean it should be called a life's mission or purpose? I do not think I am so special that it was specifically meant to be like this. I feel it is all like a large jigsaw and things have to a large extent fallen into place. But I don't know enough about that jigsaw to be able to say if there is such a thing as a specific purpose.

What about the feeling of a specific guidance and protection?

At times when things flow well, one feels protected and when things go wrong, one doesn't feel cared for. But I think it is the whole idea — there can't be a bed of roses all along. So I am not sure about any protection, but I know I have been very fortunate.

First of all, I have been very luck to find my anchor in music. Many people float around, trying one thing and another, never finding their anchor. At times of difficulty I find energy and companionship in music. When perturbed or upset, even if I make bad music, just sitting and trying to sing does a lot of good to me.

I also have been very fortunate to receive so much both from my family and teachers.

Most people say that learning classical music is quite an uphill task, that gurus put you through cruel tests. But I have been extremely lucky. I have had my tests, but most importantly, I have been accepted as family by my gurus. So many people were flocking to their doors to learn, and they were giving me so much special attention, letting me stay in their homes and learn so much. It is amazing that I could learn from so many wise people.

Today, I am in the unfortunate situation that none of my gurus is alive. Yet, even though I miss their presence, they have given me so much, that I still feel enriched. And it is a big, big, big blessing to have access to such knowledge. Especially for someone who did not come from a hereditary family of musicians.

Talking about my family, it has been another major blessing to have such an unconditionally supportive family. I forget many things including birthdays, I do not attend family events, yet they are always there. They are doting yet not blindly so. They feel great pride but do not make me feel that all is wonderful. They never hesitate to point out mistakes and missteps of any performance of mine. Besides, my husband is a musician so when I go home, I am very brutally told this was not fine, you should change that and so on.

Are you ever satisfied with your work?

I am very brutal with myself actually. As a student of music, you know where you cheated, and where there is scope for improvement.

I could not point out to one recording I am completely satisfied with. I actually do not like to listen to my work, unless it is to study it and improve.

It is easy to feel wonderful when hearing the appreciation of listeners, or when someone stops me in the street to say how moved they were by my songs. But I am never carried away by it for more than a moment. It is enough to hear some old master's recording, or a neighbour's child's who never learnt music to be humbled by his most pristine voice. It teaches you humility, as you wonder where such an angelic voice is coming from. No amount of success or appreciation is a real indication of one's achievements. If honest with yourself, it is so easy to see where you are stumbling.

So I have been in this constant tension created by the desire to perfect one's voice, with the understanding that I will try all my life and never completely find it. This tension is what keeps me going and what pushes me all along.

What is spirituality in your day-to-day life?

A few prayers, which are about establishing a discipline, and music of course. Though I am not the most obedient student of my teachers. I have evolved my own daily practice and discipline according to what feels right to me. Often teachers say "do this" and you feel "no, it is not working for me". For example, my time of practicing music may be completely different from what is customary. I do what works for me. I cannot stand rigidity. It can be so stifling. And there is a very fine line between discipline and rigidity. I do not want to do anything mechanically. And if it means that a few rules get broken along the way, so be it!

I have actually had a very particular relationship to my gurus. In India, we believe so much in people, that many get more attached to the person than to the system or tradition he or she embodies.

Similarly, some get more attached to a guru than to music. Yet, I am very questioning by nature. I cannot accept things completely, even though traditionally I am supposed to. I believe in teachers, but I feel I must question everything to make sure it works for me. It is difficult to have faith in your teacher yet know they also are human beings – perhaps way more evolved than me, yet still human beings with their issues. And many have a hard time accepting it.

How would you describe your relationship to God?

I do not know what God is to me. It happens all through music. There are of course several ways of approaching God, like in poetry, with the visual and cognitive Saguna, or the intangible and ethereal

Nirguna. I feel attracted to both. Yet I feel Nirguna may be more important, especially because when there is a form, it is more connected to religion. And as much as I love the idea of singing to a deity at any time of the day, for every festival and piece of food you give It, the whole link to religion can lead to much dogma and violence, instead of being liberating.

The pursuit of art and spirituality should be liberating in the way one feels, things, behaves. So when I look at all the violence coming from religion and rituals, often used to tear the world apart, I feel it is better not to talk about it. Even music, which is supposed to be liberating, is nowadays polarizing as well. Musicians in Maharashtra wishing for non-Maharashtrians to be banned, the same between countries, between first-generation musicians and the others who cannot stand the former to become torch-bearers of their art and so on.

We all come with such baggage, and hopefully we can at least lose it before dying!

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

As a student of music, maybe a little more obedient!

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

I have too many questions I think!

What is your idea of happiness?

Everything I have experienced, with such an amazing family, doing what I really love. I am not complacent and always feel like learning and singing more, but I am happy with what I have. Sometimes I am greedy and ask for more, but I am quite content on the overall.