

Sudarshan Shetty

Artist

'I have no choice but to be a sculptor'

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Artist Sudarshan Shetty said there is a gap in India between what is inside a gallery or a museum and what is outside.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Many ideas come to me when you mention that word. I wouldn't know how to summarize them all in a few words. And in fact, a lot of my work is actually about finding its meaning.

I do it by engaging with the world. Through that engagement and through the constant negotiation with the contradictions that arise from it, I may find some answers.

So it is a moment-by-moment process?

Absolutely. Things only reveal themselves when you engage with the world outside. Through that active engagement there is a possibility of finding something outside of it, which could mean spirituality, or you may understand something beyond that engagement.

Did it ever have a connection with religion for you?

Yes and no. I belong to the 'Bunt' community from south Karnataka, a matriarchal society, where we traditionally worship ancestral spirits, where talking to the dead is part of daily life. I do not define myself entirely through that belonging, and I do not practice those rituals, but obviously those beliefs

are within me, they were a part of my growing up and have an implication on my daily life. In that sense I feel religious.

Apart from worshipping ancestors, are there other aspects to the community's beliefs?

Some of the ancestor-spirits are deified, and some houses have a residing deity. It was the case with ours, my mother's house. Village people would come to it in order to worship the deity, and communicate with its spirit.

How would the communication take place?

Through a person designated as a medium, who enters a trance, then answers questions and passes on messages from the deity. During those ceremonies, I did experience some shocking things - for instance secrets that nobody could have known were revealed. The deity usually held a sword, which could be scary for those not used to it; the trances always happened after sunset, lit with fire torches, and displaying much drumming noise and drama.

A part of me, as an urban person, doubts it all. But I have seen such intriguing things. So I both believe and doubt.

Did you personally experience it with answers that were very relevant for you?

Yes. But I still question it. Especially, the ritualistic part of it.

All those things would make you believe in the idea of soul, rebirth and so on?

Of course, all those ideas are natural to us, even though intellectually I may question them.

But for sure, accepting them helps being less anxious in life. If you think this is your only life, you could be stressed in trying to accomplish all that you'd wish in one birth. Whereas if you believe in rebirth, it relieves you from the anxiety of trying to do everything at once; mortality becomes less fearful. You simply see your body as a tool you will lose and hopefully regain, to then continue the journey differently.

What about the idea of a divine force, which some people call God?

I am sure there is something. I can see at times something at play which has a larger design. I believe in the Vedantic idea of the inevitability of events. If you have a human life, you are bound to act in certain ways and have no control over it. A lot of my work comes from this feeling - for instance the certitude that I have no choice but be a maker of objects.

However, while making the object, I try to include the idea of its demise and its meaninglessness. While I know that what I am doing is meaningless, I feel I have no choice but do it.

From very early on, you felt you had no choice but be an artist?

Well, I was good at drawing and painting. So everyone around including me believed that I could be an artist. Maybe I couldn't do much of anything else and maybe that is why I ended up an artist.

Still, you went to study Commerce?

Yes, I needed to study something that would give me some kind of a secure job. I come from a very modest lower middle class background, there wasn't much money and there was no question of studying arts. How could I make a living as an artist? I picked Commerce

because it entailed only three hours of classes a day, which would leave me enough time to do other things.

But I was so miserable there. So I left and joined an art school without telling my parents.

Though in reality they were very liberal and understanding people. My father was a Yakshagana performer, a larger than life figure, a virtuoso with words, a master of epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. I grew up in an atmosphere where philosophical ideas were discussed all the time.

Before joining the art school, I thought that drawing and painting well was enough. Then I got exposed to entirely new worlds and rejected the one I had come from. I became very influenced by the works of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, worlds apart from my upbringing.

My parents could not understand the strange pictures I was making. Once I got out of art school, it became important for me that they understood my work. So I began doing those mechanical and toy-like works to enable some connection, to bring the passerby into a museum or a gallery space. There still is a very palpable gap in India between what is inside a gallery or a museum, and what is outside. A lot of the works actually relied on a Brechtian disenchantment of the audience.

In India art is very connected to the idea of entertainment or to a definite social function that it is meant to deliver. So I tried to bring the idea of entertainment into my work, which is why some people may not understand or like it. They may feel it is too conventional, but I see that as a compliment. I try to work with available conventions. I use entertainment or spectacle as a ploy to bring in the viewer. Eventually, in the experience of it, the work collapses under the weight of its own spectacle and thus becomes meaningless.

How important is the impact your work has on people?

It is extremely important for me to connect. I don't think anyone can say "I only work for myself".

What about the idea of being a conduit for something else when creating some work?

As soon as I finish some work, I feel it doesn't belong to me, and that it actually never belonged to me. Where it comes from, who I am is a mixture of so many things. For instance, a lot of ideas come from my father's art, but from where did he get his ideas? It is such an undefined boundless mix. You can't ever say you are the proprietor or the sole creator of a work.

You mentioned somewhere that for a long time, you survived only through miracles?

Yes, because once out of art school, my work didn't sell for about twenty years. But thanks to the strong sense of community amongst friends, I always had enough to eat, and always had a roof over my head. I call this a miracle.

It is changing now. But still, thanks to the profession I am in, I belong in Bombay to a vast community that cuts through all economic classes, which makes life much more interesting.

What were major influences in your life?

I am fascinated by higher levels of consciousness, so I am extremely interested in the lives of people who achieved it, say saints like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, or Swami Nithyananda.

I am fascinated by the occult, how we perceive things and what they really could be. All of it points to the fact that in some way, nothing is real. But at the same time, we must approach it as if it is all real - only through that belief we have a chance to examine its un-reality.

What about the idea of destiny?

Yes, I believe that 'action is inevitable'. I am not sure what 'freewill' means - I wonder a lot about it. If we are all here with assigned roles to play, then I would say that one of our responsibilities is also to question it.

But in any case, besides fulfilling that role, art is also a way for me to cope with life, whether it entails tragic or happy events. It is a way to live and understand life. And it is such a privilege to be able to do it that way.

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

Why am I mortal?

Any regret about this life?

Many worldly regrets, but none so significant. I regret for instance that my father never got to see whatever could be called my 'success'. But actually, how does it matter?

What is your idea of happiness?

Stillness.

How can you achieve it?

I guess one has to work towards it.

But if you work, you are not still?

I guess it is about engaging with the world with such intensity that you do not need any activity anymore, and finally find that stillness.

Do you ever achieve it?

Sometimes, for a few passing moments.

Do you feel that connection to the so-called divine when you play?

When I play, it is a moment of loss. I lose myself. So I don't know if I am connected. It is not that I am playing and I am thinking of God. I am not thinking of anything. That's what happens when you play. It's pure. There is no thought at all. It's just sound. There is no obligation there. That's why they say that sound is god, sound is Brahma, because it's pure. But there is no analysis there. The moment you stop and wonder 'was I ok, did they like it?'

and so on, you're killing it. So just keep playing.

What about the feeling of being a conduit for something else?

I don't like to think of myself or my music as something very lofty. The moment you start positioning yourself up there as a person, as a musician, you are calling all the possible ego trips you could ever be on. You position yourself up there and then begin asking 'did they not see that ? did my audience not get it?' You feel they are inferior because you can't bring yourself down. So what do you do ? It's complicating your life. So I'd rather be like a peon boy. He has his job, I have my job. My gift is that when I do that job, I am having a ball.

Did you always know that it has to be music for you?

I didn't have a choice really. My parents are musicians. My mother insisted on me studying and I ended up doing my masters in English, but I always knew it was meant to be music.

When I turned 30 though, I hit a big crisis point. I had been playing with Raviji for nine years. I had traveled the world, played in every possible great venue, I was making a very comfortable living. Then one night in New York, we had played in Carnegie Hall to a full house and standing ovations. I came back to my hotel room after the show and suddenly had a gigantic sinking sensation. It came like a wave. I felt my life was meaningless and hopeless.

I basically asked myself every single scary question someone could ask himself. I questioned everything. Among others, I asked myself if I really wanted to be a musician. I hadn't really asked myself before. It was an obvious choice. It was something I did well, so why not.

But that night, I really asked myself. And I came to the conclusion that yes, it was the right thing. Of course I should be a musician. But the way I was doing it was not right. The kind of thing I was doing (classical music) was not right. What should my language be? How can I express myself best?

That is when I realized that I was not in the right setup. I couldn't continue doing forever what I was doing. I had been touring abroad for years so I had lost all my friends. My marriage was ending. So if I were to stop touring, without a career, without a wife, without friends I was a complete nobody and it would be my opportunity to start all over again. I could reinvent myself, and see what happens.

So I literally stopped playing classical music. It gave me a buzz to say no to everything. It was a fantastic feeling. It was extremely exciting. I had no money, I started from scratch. That is when I thought of doing new age fusion. Nobody was doing it in India back then.

Very few people thought I could make a career out of it. I just went with the flow. And I have been having the best time of my life ever since. The music I have played in the last ten years, the people I've met, the kind of work I have done, the collaborations I have had.

All the things I wanted to do, I more or less headed in that direction. It's been fantastic.

Tell us about the alchemy of playing in front of an audience, compared to playing alone?

Almost all my life there has been a show-off element when I played. Whether alone or in front of people, I was feeling there is an audience. I was trying to prove myself and playing was much more tangibly physical. A quality of calm and assurance was missing.

Showing off was a part of me, as it often is the case with second generation musicians.

You see your father get all the claps and accolades, your initial connect to music is a lot through the glamour of it. I am not saying it is wrong, but it definitely only is a limited part of the experience.

Of late, I have found myself internalizing my practice sessions much more; I am much more comfortable just sitting with the instruments, seeing how my hands are moving and so on. I am much more introspective.

Also, when I play with someone like legendary drummer Greg Ellis, I am now the other way around – I forget the audience. I unconsciously step out and I just hear the rhythms. It's just wonderful, it's just great. It's a connect.

And you may also take the audience to some of those other spaces?

Yes, I have often been told by audiences that it happens to them, they get transported. It happens when I am incredibly into my music and not self-conscious. If I am blown over, they get blown over.

Being able to take people to that space gives a particular meaning to your life?

Of course. It's a gift. And I just have to be grateful for it. But I also know I really have to keep my ego in check. It's not mine. It's been given to me. It's like someone good-looking.

What is their credit? They were born with it!

One thing is sure though – I love being in that space because in some way I get more relaxed about things, and let myself go, just playing the music. It's very difficult to be there but it happens at times.

It requires a lot of inner work to get there, doesn't it?

Definitely. I am unable to do it most of the time. But there are times when I can, when I am more self-confident.

Regardless, I feel really good about having made those choices, and having stood by them.

Now most people are getting it. Even someone like Ravi Shankar now understands why I broke off and changed course. That is a validation for me. And I am able to play classical music again, and really enjoy it.

I was so full of anger back then. It's scary. I've journeyed quite a lot since then. I basically went through a complete rebirth. And it's amazing to see that.

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

There is no question. Because I like the mystery. I don't want to know. Many questions are best left unanswered.

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

I am really happy being myself. I deeply like myself. I just don't want to go back to being 21 or 22. I would want to start off wherever I finish this one.

What is your idea of happiness?

At this point, I am in work mode and happiness is about achieving the things I have set up to achieve, with as much calm as possible. Getting recognition for it is important of course. But I want to be calm about the whole thing. I want to get rid of inner anxiety as much as possible. If I can keep my calm and patience all along, then of course my relationships will be fine. It is all part of the same equation.

So basically, I don't want anything too lofty, I am not searching for nirvana right now - just do my work well, and reach out to as many people as I can.

Isn't all this nirvana?

Well, one has to be way more detached for that. Not as in denying things, but as in not being affected by things. I am still affected by many things. I have only learnt to deal with my mind better than I used to, say fifteen years ago.

Well, that's the journey, isn't it ...

Indeed it is.