

WRITERS MOSAIC

Sanjoy K. Roy

In Conversation with Vayu Naidu

'A thousand years later, it appears we're all chosen to be reborn together in this lifetime to work through our entangled karma and find ways to forget and heal. We still don't quite know what happened that night and what possessed Puneeta, but the image of her undulating body has stayed vividly in my mind.'

— Sanjoy K. Roy

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Vayu Naidu talks to Sanjoy K. Roy about his haunting memoir, *There's a Ghost in My Room*.

[Music]

Vayu Naidu (VN): *There's a Ghost in My Room* by Sanjoy K. Roy is a spell-untying memoir of the world we live in. It is about his exceptional experiences of living across dimensions that is cited as supernatural or paranormal. What is distinctive about Sanjoy's writing is that it brings the effortless visual recollection of the occurrences, so, while reading or listening to him gives us the immersive experience of tuning ourselves to perhaps what we are in denial of, multiple realities and voices. Welcome, Sanjoy, and guess what? It's Friday the 13th before the Ides of March and also the 800th birth anniversary of Saint Francis of Assisi. So, it seems that all the dots are aligned to welcome you, Sanjoy Roy. Sanjoy, the book was really a total surprise to me and I'm sure to many others, because look at you, you are the urbane master of arts, arts festivaliser, if I can coin that word. So, through the book, when was your first encounter with this supernatural phenomenon?

Sanjoy K. Roy (SKR): So, thank you, Vayu. Absolutely delighted to be here in London, not entirely unaffected by the wars that surround us and that got me to take a 12-hour flight diversion from India to here, so keeping those prayers for those people who've been impacted. My first encounter, and I have to qualify, this it's not that I looked at these as encounters that's something that really came about much later in life, but

when I was five, as I've said in the book, I had gone back to Calcutta, to my grandparents' home – my grandfather had just passed – and I was climbing back into bed with my grandmum and my mother, as we did. And as I climbed into bed, all the lights and the chandeliers and everything was on, I see this disembodied hand with a [missing word] flash across the mosquito net. And I screamed the place down. And everybody came rushing, my uncle, my aunts, all of the household staff. I insisted that they checked every room, under every bed, inside every cupboard. And the interesting thing is it wasn't just that I saw it, my grandmother saw something, my mother saw something, didn't exactly see the flash of the sword, but they all saw something that I saw, so they seem to have been some kind of validation that I had seen something. But there was nothing to explain it because there was nobody. They opened up every room, as I said, but there was nobody to be found. And this image, so many years later, or 60 years later, still is etched into my mind. And like I said, at that point of time, I never looked at it, and nobody said to me that this is a supernatural phenomena, this was a ghost, or this was a supernatural something. And it was all of these many incidents that happened over time. And they used to happen, and life used to go on. I never sat around wondering why me or what it was or—

VN: And also having the validation from others, it becomes something that's natural in a way.

SKR: It was, yeah, it was accepted. I'm not sure whether it was natural, but it was certainly something that it was accepted in our lives that these things happen. And when these things happen, you experience it, and then you carry on. It's only much later in life, after Puneeta and I met, and did we start piecing it together and realising that this pattern wasn't necessarily only a figment of my imagination, but stuff that happened with a reason and a cause and so on and so forth. So, that was very interesting. I mean, Vayu, I've always been a skeptic, as you said, [missing word]. I mean, we've been brought up in this very rational way. My parents never looked at superstition. I mean, my mother was the great family druid. But my dad, having lived much of his young life in the UK, in Dartmouth, and then in the Royal Navy before he transferred to the Indian Navy, was pretty much out of this sense of the sensibility that all of this brings to the fore.

VN: And it wouldn't have been accepted professionally, I'm sure.

SKR: I don't know whether it was about being accepted. It's just that it never played in our scheme of things. So, I continue to be a great skeptic, except that because I encounter stuff every now and then, I can't shoo it away and scoff at it. I'll have to say

that, yes, stuff happens, but you know do I believe in ghosts and the supernatural? Not entirely, not all the time, except that when I encounter them I do.

VN: And that's what I really enjoyed. And you mentioned it very clearly in your introduction, and you see the thread through the book, that you're not focusing on occult and superstition; you're talking about it as a daily reality. But the fascinating thing is also how you want to bring—not you want to, but I think you're propelled to bring about social change. You're very affected by suffering, just as you opened so candidly with your rerouting of the flight and almost offering a moment of visibility about what the impact of war is. Here we're sitting so-called comfortably, you've sensed the churning that I'm having because I have family in Dubai. But it's wider than family; it's about the whole world. And you click into that empathy. And then you've also become this trustee and founder of the Street Children Project. Do you want to tell us something about how you link in that empathy?

SKR: I mean, one is, of course, through example, my mother, my paternal grandmother, and a lot of our family has always been involved in some amount of charity, or in those days called charitable work, today we call it social innovation. And that was a natural way to be. And I remember every time we went anywhere, much of my college life was spent protesting about some evil or trying to correct something that had gone wrong.

VN: I'm only smiling because I remember this wonderful anecdote which you must recapture for us about really telling the principle of St. Stephen's off in a very quiet but practical joke way.

SKR: Well, I'm not sure whether I was very quiet, but I certainly was—had no intentions of following, I hated rules. I mean, we were always being corralled into spaces that you don't necessarily want to be corralled into. And remember, at the end of the day, I am a Bengali. So, being a Bengali, at some level, you're also—

VN: An argumentative Indian.

SKR: A revolutionary, an argumentative Indian in many ways. And so, absolutely, I mean, from the very beginning, we were always taught in some sense. So, we were made to believe that there is a lot of inequity in the world, and it's our responsibility or duty to find a way to be able to resolve at least some of that in whatever little way that we could. And my parents were very married to this idea, so they were always very supportive of their staff, of their staff's children, making sure that they went to school, etc. And similarly, my grandparents on both sides were always giving whatever they could to different causes.

But when, in university especially, we were in university when there was all of the things of bridal deaths and dowry deaths and so on and so forth. And we used to do a lot of street theater protesting these kinds of movements. And that was much more attractive to me, using theatre for social change. And a lot of the work that we did initially in our theater company was this. Can we look at how do we use theatre with kids who are mentally challenged? And we did a lot of workshops at the [missing word] Home for mentally challenged kids, et cetera. But also, the theatre that we did on the street reflected this. And then later in life, when Puneeta and I got married, we had kids. It was so problematic that when you stop at a red light and you have a kid coming and saying, 'I want to sell a pen or a flower because I don't have anything to eat', and you go back to the fact that your kids have everything. I think there was this sense of responsibility that if our kids, by the accident of birth, have access to everything, then can we try and help these other kids who do not have that access?

And Nukkad, our project in a theatre action group, which I used to run, envisaged that how do you help children on the street but using the arts and theatre. And that led to a wonderful play called [missing name] in a place called Triveni. And Mira got inspired, and she made the movie *Salaam Bombay!* And then *Salaam Bombay!* led us to set up the trust, Salaam Baalak Trust. And in those days, the trust was primarily set up to be

able to rehabilitate the kids who were in the movie *Salaam Bombay!*, because these were street kids that Mira had cast and who Barry John, our artistic director, had workshopped with. And once that got done, Nukkad, which was the theatre action group organisation that worked with street kids in New Delhi, we subsumed that into the project. And we started with 25 kids and three staff at the New Delhi railway station, a platform looking after kids who had run away from home, giving them an egg and a glass of milk and giving them an opportunity to work their lives through the arts. Today, we are about 13,500 kids we look after every year, annually. We have about 17 centres, we have 300 staffs, we looked after over 170,000 kids and rehabilitated many of them, and many of them have been very successful and gone on to do really well. And so, yeah. So, at every point, one's effort continues to be, and I think, Vayu, as storytellers and people in the arts, I think all of us realise and recognise the need for empathy, love, and a way to be able to see the world in its full perspective, not through pink rimmed glasses.

VN: And huge respect to you, people like you, and I'm going to bring Puneeta into this as well. Yes, we recognise a life of privilege that we had by the accident of birth, but it was fantastic having those post-independence values. Always, the Guru Dutt films come to mind. But it is those values that held us in good stead, and I can see the legacy you've also created through the arts with the festivals. But coming back to the

supernatural thread with Puneeta. Now, it's fantastic you have had encounters, but marrying somebody who also has that kind of reverberation must have really made it like you've been through this in past lives.

SKR: Yes, well, again, accidentally, I mean, when Puneeta and I got married—or when Puneeta decided that we were to get married, and she said, 'You have to choose, and otherwise we must part ways.' And I was quite happy to get married because I was like, *oh, that's going to be great party time.* And we had a 10-day wedding.

VN: Quite a partier you are, wonderful stamina.

SKR: So, Puneeta is not necessarily a party animal like me. But the initial years, it wasn't that this is something that came to us automatically. It was really when our youngest son was born, and he was born when we were going through a tough time. And in his—when he was around two, every night, he used to wake up screaming in his bed, and his pillowcase and sheets used to be smeared with blood. And he used to keep saying, 'She's coming to get me.' And we had no idea how to react to this as parents. You tend to be frantic more than anything else. We went again and again to our pediatrician, Dr. [missing name], and went through all the tests. Is it a nosebleed? Is it a mouthbleed? Is it a earbleed? But nothing was evident. And then a friend of mine from

university, [missing name], who is a great [missing words], one day came and told Puneeta, 'You need to say this prayer every day and whisper it also into his ear.'

VN: So, it was an actual mantra.

SKR: It was a mantra. And he did the [missing word] part, which is an appeasement of the mother goddess. And lo and behold, in the next few weeks or months, the bleeding stopped. And he said that [missing name], when he was born, was very dear to Ma Kali, the goddess of destruction, perhaps. And therefore, she wanted him back, and that was the attachment. And to break this, we had to do this particular kind of penance, which Puneeta, unlike me, was brought up pretty much in the regular Hindu Dharma world. Puneeta came from the Arya Samaj aspect, where everything was much more simplified, and they did not look to the mother goddesses etc. It was about the fire and cleansing. So, for her to believe in this in itself was a process. And because it succeeded, it was a step towards us discovering why we were together in many ways and what was our life's mission for ourselves in our inner journey. So, that was really—that came together.

VN: Fantastic to hear that from your life and from you. Because what was also wonderful about your book is it's not just something that happens in India, because

you travel so much. And also, there's a wonderful Viking myth of exactly the experience that you both have gone through as parents with [missing name], your child. And that's about Baldur the beautiful. It's Odin's son and Freya's son. And this child used to have nightmares. And according to the myth, it's Hades wanting him back. So, what I'm trying to say is this whole—it's such a universal experience that you open out with your life and you're sharing for a lot of people. And I think, thank goodness, in a way, in India, we have so many combinations that the mantra is a seed word that gravitated, in a way, the offering, appeasement, and moving on. So, now you go to Khajuraho, and there's this amazing revelation. It's the first time when you're actually having people you're working with. You've set up Teamwork Arts by then?

SKR: Yeah.

VN: You have. And you're having an office meeting in the room, and what happens to Puneeta?

SKR: So, it's not really the first time, because Puneeta's office was above our residence in Safdarjung Enclave, where her colleagues in the office used to see a lot of these you know headless people. And remember, places like Safdarjung Enclave in New Delhi were built on the graves or the graveyards of some of the past dynasties of Delhi.

VN: After all, it's a city of nine lives in a way.

SKR: Of many cities and many capitals. And so, they used to—this was pretty much part of our life circle. But in Khajuraho, as you said – and Khajuraho is this wonderful temple town in the middle of India, in the central of India, it's called Madhya Pradesh – the temple town of Khajuraho was completed in 999 common era. And these are wonderful friezes and beautifully sculptured friezes on these temples spread across what is now the Khajuraho village. And we were going to celebrate the millennium with a tribute to the completion of the Khajuraho temples in 999 CE, which coincided with the turning of the millennium. So, in 1999 therefore, we were doing this big show based on a water body right next to the temple complex. We had invited the president of India. So, it was a big to-do for somebody like that to come to this little space in the middle of nowhere. And it was a very complex, creative show that we had put together or we had envisaged, with a whole pontoon floating across the lake, with huge puppets and fireworks going on and live music and bands and processions and all of this, apart from the protocol issues that were involved. And so, we used to come back every day, and we used to be staying in a hotel called Hotel LaLiT. And in my suite, Puneeta used to go to sleep. Even then, you couldn't keep her awake when she got to bed. So, she was in the bed opposite us. We were in the living area with the doors open, sitting

around in a circle, talking about the next day's production needs. And suddenly, in front of us, we see Puneeta's body levitate and go in a sort of wave and the whole sheet etc. And for us, it was just we looked on stunned.

[Music]

[SKR reads from *There's a Ghost in My Room*]

'Exhausted by the never-ending meetings, Puneeta had crawled into bed, covered herself with a white linen bedsheet and fallen fast asleep, oblivious to our ongoing discussions. I've always marveled at her ability to fall into deep sleep regardless of the place or the noise or lights around her, something that's almost impossible for me to do. From where I was sitting, I could see Puneeta asleep on the bed. Suddenly, the sheet that she had covered herself with appeared to levitate, with her body convulsing from head to toe. I scrambled up and dashed to her, calling out her name and trying to wake her up, but to no avail. Her body on the sheet undulated like windswept waves in a lake till the convulsions subsided. She woke up oblivious to what had happened and was perturbed to see us peering down at her with a collective look of horror on our faces. We recounted the incident to her and asked her what she

had experienced. She said she hadn't felt anything at all and was totally unaware of what had transpired. I'd held on to Puneeta, seeking comfort and reassurance that all was well, while the others, completely spooked, fled from the suite, and headed to their room.

On our return to Delhi, still puzzled by what exactly had occurred that night, we went to the Karmic Research Centre and consulted Gurudev, our ascended master. Gurudev was ever calm and had a deep understanding of the most complex situations. He suggested that Puneeta undertake a past life regression session. Through a guided meditation, he took her back many lifetimes to a thousand years ago to Khajuraho, where she had apparently been a Tantric priestess. I was a powerful Tantric head priest who had misused my position and powers for self-aggrandisement, and filled with greed and ego, had sought sexual fulfillment. Puneeta was a priestess with siddhis, or powers, bestowed upon her through Tapasya, practicing extreme self-discipline, meditation and penance to purify mind, body and soul in order to achieve spiritual growth and realisation. She had come to Khajuraho to challenge me, but it seems she was unsuccessful, and my powers and spells had pushed her over the brink into insanity. The regression got more complicated as

friends from this lifetime were also present then, playing key roles as aides, procurers, and deputies to the head Tantrik, and they were all impacted by the tragedy that unfolded against the backdrop of Khajuraho. [Music] A thousand years later, it appears we're all chosen to be reborn together in this lifetime, to work through our entangled karma and find ways to forget and heal. We still don't quite know what happened that night and what possessed Puneeta, but the image of her undulating body has stayed vividly—'

[Music]

SKR: All of us are brought up to think things through logically. I think the new generations are far more attuned to their gut instinct. And as we are seeing, science is now today proving that the gut instinct is pretty much the second brain in our body, if not the primary brain in our body. So, the gut instinct is actually what triggers our brain to function in a particular way, etc. Much of the decisions that I've taken have always been, Vayu, through a particular sense of instinct.

I used to get invited by British Council and Arts Council to do arts-related workshops and training programs across the world. And whenever I travel, especially to the UK, I

never saw anything from India that was mainstream that was not, say, Ravi Shankar or Zakir Hussain, et cetera. And I used to always wonder, *but why not? Why aren't we in South Bank? Why aren't we at the Royal Opera? Why aren't we at the Barbican, et cetera?* And that's how, step by step, it wasn't necessarily a plan with which I said, 'Hey, we're going to do stuff', but when we came to Edinburgh in 1999 to the Edinburgh Festivals, which was really absolutely gobsmacked with this melting pot of creativity, every possible creative person on the planet seemed to aggregate there. And I was like, *oh my gosh, this is where we need to be.* So, we created our first platform in 2000, 2001, in Edinburgh. And we just did it across festivals. So, we were in the International Festival, we were the Festival Fringe, we were at the Literature Festival, we were in the Film Festival, we were in the Tattoo. And we just labeled it under one 'Celebrating India' marketing banner. And it was very successful.

Jaipur really happened as a result of this. This is what we need to do in Jaipur to stop people from breaking down their havelis and palaces and building modern office blocks, etc. And they said, 'Let's do the festival.' And I wasn't so enthused. I said, 'No, we'll advise you how to do the festival. We won't necessarily run it for you.' And within that festival, Namita Gokhale and William Dalrymple used to program a literature silo. But when that festival went south, for all the obvious reasons, lack of resources, processes, et cetera, Faith was like, 'How can you allow your baby to die? And you have

to come over and pick this up.' And I was like, 'No, we don't want to take over the whole festival. We'll just take the literature segment.' And that's how the Jaipur Literature Festival was created.

Again, the decision not to take the whole festival was instinctive at some level, because we didn't want to manage what we would need to manage. We really wanted to start it in a completely different way. But the rest of it was really the sum total of all the experiences that we had across the world by then. We were in South Africa, we were in Singapore, we were in Australia, we were in New Zealand. And the festival, unlike what everybody thinks, we began, as I said, as a way to show how arts creates value for built heritage. And the rest is, as they say, is history. We started on this cold winter morning in January, 19 years ago. People would have laughed if we were to have said, yes, 20 years later, we would be amongst the largest festivals in the world. But people came. It was word of mouth. We were able to get the word out across the different continents we were already in. We had processes that we had figured from all of our experiences in these other places. And the sense of hospitality that we bring to the table, Vayu, you've been to all our festivals, and you've had a sense of that. The colour, the conversations, the programming, the world's best writers, and most importantly, the audiences, which are really young, because we were very focused. Right from the word go, we were clear that we wanted to do a festival for young people because our belief

was that we seem to have failed the planet, as we can see around us, but if we could provide considered information for this next generation, perhaps they would be able to bring about a difference. And 67% of our audiences, about 400,000 right now on the ground, are below the age of 27. And then if you look at any literature festival anywhere else in the world, it's more your and my hair colour who are there. So, this is very exciting.

VN: And it's become a movement. And it's a movement. And today, we're in so many countries. [Music] And so much of it is volunteered work.

[Music]

SKR: But more importantly, I think the success of the Jaipur Literature Festival is not necessarily the Jaipur Literature Festival, but it made literature sexy and accessible.

[Music]

Presenter: Sanjoy K. Roy was In Conversation with Vayu Naidu. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

[Music]

Sanjoy K. Roy was in conversation with Vayu Naidu

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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