My Life, My Quest & the Nature of Reality
A Photographer's Perspective

My name is Madhur Dhingra and I am a Surreal / Abstract / Fine Art Photographer based in both Toronto (Canada) and New Delhi (India). I was born in Delhi, the only child of my parents, into a family torn apart by the aftermath of the Partition of India and Pakistan. The Partition bloodbath forced my then-affluent family, who were living in Pakistan, to migrate to New Delhi, India.

The exodus from our ancestral land was so sudden and hurried that my family had no choice but to flee overnight, leaving behind everything. The only possessions they carried were the clothes on their bodies. And they weren't the only ones. Millions were rendered homeless, and many were massacred on their way to India. That was 1947, a year of terrible bloodshed.

This resulted in massive insecurity within the family. Though born much later in Delhi, I inherited all that trauma, never being allowed to forget the naked scars of Partition. What resulted was a void inside me.

Spirituality and photography came to me to fill this void that has plagued me since my childhood. Emptiness and restlessness have become an integral part of me, and you will find this reflected in my images and style. Most of my work reflects a search in which I seek answers to fundamental questions about life, its meaning, and its purpose, while trying to understand the ultimate nature of Reality.

Interestingly, photography became a tool along the way in this personal search.

This quest has taken me to every corner of spiritual India and the surrounding Himalayan regions, including Nepal, Bhutan, Zanskar, Ladakh, and Lahaul & Spiti. Along the way, I have engaged with Buddhist philosophers, Vedantic yogis, spiritualists, scientists, and charlatans alike.

Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas is often called "Little Tibet" because of its Tibetan Buddhist culture, language, and architecture. After 1959, many Tibetans who fled Chinese rule also settled here. Buddhism is the dominant faith in much of the region, especially around Leh, and centuries-old monasteries are scattered across it. I would sit inside these monasteries for hours at a stretch, listening to the prayer gong echo through the main hall and break the pin-drop silence. Light filtering in from windows, doors, and high ceilings, playing hide-and-seek with the dark monastic interiors, was bewitching. I have always equated Light with God and firmly believe that the darkness of the human soul will ultimately awaken with the play of Light (God) on it.

Constant interaction with Vedic and Buddhist scholars has led me to move beyond the traditional concept of a "Creator God" found in organized religion. Such frameworks often fail to comprehend the unconditioned, non-dual, and omnipresent force of existence. To me, the divine is not a glorified "personality" sitting apart from the universe, directing the minute details of daily life. Instead, I explore the idea that the Universal Mind does not exist separately from the universe, but within it and as it.

The universe was not arbitrarily created by outside intervention; it is self-born and governed by the eternal Law of Cause and Effect. In this view, the impressions of all objects lie dormant within the depths of the Universal Mind until activated by the working of Karma. They are then projected into the space-time dimensions we recognize as the material world. The universe is not only self-actuating but also self-determining.

And what exactly am I? I am that Eternal, Pure, Blissful, and Primary Consciousness.

As for my photography, my solo exhibitions have been highly acclaimed, and my imagery has been exhibited in India, Europe, Canada, and the United States. My artworks are held in private collections and galleries across the world. Isolation resulting from COVID-19 gave me time to search rigorously for a style I could call entirely my own. After many months of hard work and perseverance, I finally succeeded. Many international magazines and galleries have published my work, calling my style unique and refreshing.

Photographing strangers on the street has always fascinated me. Those unknown faces with their uncharted expressions and emotions captivate me to my very core. I love spontaneous moments, turning them into artistic images in my own style. What began as stark realism in street photography has now given way to abstract, impressionist, surreal, and painterly imagery. Waiting endlessly for "the decisive moment," the phrase made famous by Henri Cartier-Bresson, no longer appeals to me. I now prefer to blur my images, creating movement in my own way.

No fixed rules of photography dictate my journey now.

Some of my images were also shot in Varanasi, one of the oldest living cities in the world and rightly referred to as the spiritual capital of India. It is also known by its ancient name, Kashi, and is literally a photographer's delight.

Mark Twain said, "Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together."

Varanasi offers a different experience to each visitor who comes to its banks. They encounter the gently flowing waters of the Ganga, boat rides at dawn, ancient ghats lined up one after another in a sweeping arc, innumerable shrines and temples, narrow, winding by lanes that lead to the ghats, countless temple spires, dilapidated old palaces at the water's edge, akharas and ashrams, the melodious echo of chanting mantras, colourful parasols, and much more. The sunlight, too, has an ethereal quality here. Golden rays dance off the ripples of the river in ecstatic abandon, like a celestial ballet. Together, these create a mesmerizing experience that is unique to this city of Shiva, the Lord of Destruction and Renewal.

I plan to conclude my search in Banaras / Varanasi at Manikarnika Ghat, also called the Burning Ghat or the Ghat of the Dead.

Death has always drawn me, along with its myriad unsolved questions and the mystery that surrounds it. I have raised questions about it time and again in the company of mystics, while researching spiritual books and the findings of science. I have finally come to understand that life (Consciousness), like any other energy, is indestructible, though there does come an end to the experiences it undergoes in its finite, mortal garb. Just as sound goes back into silence but is never lost, so the individual self or consciousness merges back into the fundamental, ever-flowing sea of Universal Consciousness (God), from which it may re-emerge another time. Edvard Munch poetically wrote, "From my rotting body, flowers shall grow, and I am in them and this is Eternity." (verify wording and source)

Life for me as a photographer continues, and my search to understand the nature of Reality also continues.