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The economics of being Subodh Gupta

Five years ago, he was just another young artist looking to claim a slice of India's expanding art pie. Today, he is its No. 1 contemporary artist. How did he get here?

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Everyone everywhere is mad for Subodh Gupta.

At the Venice Biennale, at Art Basel, at Frieze Art Fair, at Chanel Mobile Art, in Shanghai, Zurich, Paris and New Delhi, the name most readily dropped and sought out is Subodh Gupta (or "Goopta" to those who don't know or can't pronounce the shortened "u"). Suddenly, like the limited edition bag that the artist designed for Italian fashion house Fendi, Gupta, a small-town boy from Khagaul, Bihar, has a waiting list.

"Everyone knows who he is in the European art scene," says Peter Nagy of Nature Morte, New Delhi, which along with Bodhi Art in Mumbai are the two galleries in India that officially represent him. Nagy is right; everyone does know who he is. Were it possible to quantify the craze, Gupta would be in rarefied company, somewhere next to Anish Kapoor, a few steps behind perhaps but close enough to warrant a cautionary backward glance or two. Sure, M.F. Husain and Tyeb Mehta, Jitish Kallat and Atul Dodiya have stepped across the invisible barrier—breaking records at auctions and popping up at the errant biennale. But none of them has achieved quite so much in so short a time as Gupta.

Gupta's hotness is a fact not lost on his manager, Flora Boillot, who moved from France to New Delhi two years ago to oversee the affairs of Gupta and his artist wife Bharti Kher. It is Boillot who handles all media requests, coordinates out-of-town gallery visits, makes sure Gupta is on time for his various appointments and that his shipments to shows in San Gimignano and Shanghai are on time and intact.

And it is Boillot who fields my request for an interview sent via SMS to Gupta's iPhone in February. "Subodh is busy, Subodh is travelling and Subodh is not available until July," Boillot tells me. In July, a reminder email gets another Boillot reply, this time granting the interview but with an addendum—"the interview cannot exceed 30 minutes". She also stipulates that I hand in a release form that essentially confirms I will not use the images or information in an untoward manner (like, say, in setting up a Where in the World is Subodh blog).

Release forms and French managers are not generally the purview of artists, especially artists in India, so by the time I arrive at Gupta's studio, in the dusty construction pit that is Gurgaon, I had built in my mind the myth of Subodh Gupta—the Damien Hirst of Delhi—who from 2005 to 2008 saw his auction prices increase 52 times.

How a boy from Bihar, with zero interest in doing what most of his village did (i.e. work for the railways), managed to become India's No. 1 Artist is nothing short of wondrous: a fairy tale with a requisite cast of greedy gallerists, ambitious curators, a savvy wife and one bespectacled man from small-town India.

He is in every sense a product of the new Indian market, where marketing and image-building, and self-promotion are not only expected but encouraged and praised. Having worked exceedingly carefully to control output and place his works in the most high-profile collections and shows, Gupta, in that sense and perhaps that sense alone, has warranted the comparison with Hirst, a master showman in his own right.

If Gupta, 44, knows he is a much traded commodity, identifiable by last name alone despite the two or three other Guptas peppering the Indian art scene, he isn't showing it. Mild mannered, and even a little homely, he lacks the polished smugness of a man who has just been signed to the art world juggernaut, Hauser & Wirth, a Zurich-based gallery at par with Gagosian and Saatchi, which incidentally will also feature him in a group exhibit next year.

Told that he is a difficult man to meet, Gupta demurs. "It's not like that," he apologizes, before sitting down on a sagging couch in a plain-walled studio cluttered with unfinished canvases and a cabinet full of Gupta's coffee-table catalogues.

He is happy to chat beyond our allotted time (keeping representatives from a London gallery waiting), talking about his childhood, his friends, his children, his art, especially his art. But he refuses to discuss his relationship with Kher. "Why you want to go into my private life?" he asks irritably.

Those who see the two together acknowledge that Kher, born and raised in England, has been a key influence in Gupta's life, sandpapering the rough edges, cleverly directing where they would show, and like Gupta, realizing with steely ambition that they are destined for bigger things.

"Both him and Bharti have been very savvy." Nagy says. "There was a period when not much was happening, and Subodh and Bharti were very generous of their time. They had lots of people over for dinners to foster a sense of community."

“Nothing comes easy,” Gupta shrugs. “And it will never happen, it never happened with anyone unless you keep doing it and doing it.”

“Doing it” is Gupta’s way of saying he slogged, back-breakingly, until he got what he wanted. That is, in fact, the one quality that everyone remarks on: His unflinching resolve to work; to put paint to canvas and steel to wall; to meet and travel even when nobody wanted his works, when sitting in a solo booth at the Armory show in New York, dealer Pierre Huber had to beg clients to buy a Gupta. “Nothing comes easy. And it will never happen, it never happened with anyone unless you keep doing it and doing it.”

On one of his very first visits outside India, Gupta was manic about experiencing everything he could. He was fascinated by the art, the museums, the magnetic pull of a hundred creative minds working in a thousand different ways. “I’ve been with him in Europe, and he’s running around looking at contemporary art museums, participating in an international language in form and material,” says Nagy, who first encountered Gupta as the winner of an emerging artist award sponsored by New York’s Bose Pacia Gallery in the late 1990s. “Nobody’s working harder in India than Subodh Gupta.” Now a father of two children—a son and daughter—Gupta has slowed down. Still, in recent months, he has made several jaunts across the globe: to Hong Kong for the Chanel Mobile Art show, Switzerland for Art Basel, Italy for a solo in San Gimignano and England to support Kher’s exhibition. “Art is a long journey. So I’ve been working for 8-10 years almost for European galleries and at that time nobody in India knew about it,” he says.

While still in college, Gupta took it upon himself to orchestrate a meeting with Russi Mody, then the Tata Steel chairman, who was known to foster young talent. “What I’m trying to tell you, it’s not easy for one boy from art school to go meet Russi Mody like this, no? So it took me one year almost to meet him like this. Three months I was just preparing myself, who is this guy, how will I meet him?” On the strength of his works and Mody’s patronage, Gupta approached various galleries, eventually scraping together enough money to move to Delhi. He arrived with 15 friends from Bihar and stayed at a guest house at the Lalit Kala Akademi. Like most migrants from small town India to the Capital, Gupta was enamoured of everything and everyone he came across. As a student in Bihar, he had belonged to an acting troupe and was thrilled to discover that in Delhi, unfettered by cultural boundaries, he could mingle with artists, actors and dancers.

“In 1986, the Kala Mela used to happen. Kala Mela for us was like oh god Basel Art fair. Like Venice Biennale,” Gupta recalls excitedly. “Oh my God, we see the Husain today, we see the Ram Kumar, we see Souza and we see Swaminathan. We go mad, these are the fathers and masters of contemporary art in front of you. So we used to go crazy and we used to go ‘Sir, please autograph’.”

How Gupta made the leap from Delhi to Paris, London, New York and Shanghai in the span of a few

short years is a little incredible, even by the standards of the frenetic hypermarket of the new art world. “We’re not used to in Europe an artist going from nothing to what happened with Subodh,” says Huber, the influential Geneva art dealer, who was the first international gallerist to sign him on. “To make a work from \$12,000 (around Rs5 lakh) to \$1 million, it’s very strange. This never happened, in my mind.”

It was Huber, in fact, who first propelled Gupta to prominence, if such a feat can be attributed to any single person. Huber is a powerful dealer in Switzerland, whose gallery, Art & Public, has amassed over the years a weighty roster, including Sol LeWitt and Robert Barry. In the late 1990s, Huber spotted Gupta’s works at a group show in Italy and spied in them something different—something he had seen in American and Chinese artists much before either contingent became appealing to European collectors. He invited Gupta to display one of his installations at the Armory show in New York in 2002, and paid for his air ticket and expenses. “Nobody was impressed, nobody was looking at the work,” Huber says, so he called a friend of his and asked him to buy his work for the now paltry sum of \$12,000 (which was around Rs5.76 lakh back then).

Huber strategically placed Gupta in a series of art fairs and biennales, careful to show his installations and only a few oils. At Frieze in 2005, Gupta displayed his steel cabinet installation, which evoked minor excitement and managed to push its creator from the periphery on to the radar.

At Art Basel in 2006, Gupta showed yet again, after initially being rejected by the selection committee. This time, the work was an installation of airport trolleys, his first exploration of immigrant traffic and labour. The response was instant. “Everyone was talking about it,” Huber says.

Soon Gupta, through Huber, was on contract with Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, and began experimenting with the kind of large-scale installations that would eventually culminate in *Very Hungry God*—a clattering, shiny, menacing skull, compiled in precarious manner with buckets, tiffin boxes and other steel objects—displayed outside Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 2006, and bought by French billionaire Francois Pinault.

That proved to be the key. In the last couple of years, Gupta has been in the news repeatedly: first for breaking the \$500,000 mark at Christie’s and Sotheby’s, then crossing the \$1 million mark. Then, he was placed in the elite post-war contemporary auctions along with Hirst and Kapoor, and collected by Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessey (LVMH) honcho Bernard Arnault, British billionaire Frank Cohen, Indian collector Anupam Poddar and other powerful connoisseurs. The final cherry came by way of a ranking as one of three Indians on *ArtReview*’s list of the 100 most powerful people in the art world. He was invited to tony charity events such as Bono’s (RED) auction, and feted on the international circuit by American socialites and European collectors, all of whom couldn’t get enough of “Goopta”.

Still, Gupta was restless, forever on the Sisyphean task of trying to outdo what he had done before. “Whatever I was making at that time, I feel like I was serving someone. And what I’m making right now, I feel like I’m doing something my own. That changed and that doesn’t come that easy,” Gupta notes of his transition from painting to installation. “Like I said, visual art takes time. It took me four years to reach somewhere to change, and in between I made so much not good art. When you lose something and become empty, something new comes out.”

The new was what most people today associate with Gupta. Large, photo-realist oils of rope-bundled luggage on taxis, of faceless bodies pushing airport trolleys, hard, sharp installations that use mundane objects in arresting display, videos featuring a naked Gupta showering himself with cowdung.

“Subodh belongs to this very small community of artists who are very free and pushed, led by a kind of vision of what’s art,” says curator Fabrice Bousteau, who invited Gupta to show at the Chanel Mobile Art earlier this year, and will again work with him in 2010 for a group show.

For Gupta, this vision came from his childhood, from his days spent in a vast joint family, playing with cousins, watching his housewife mother craft small objects and clothes, and attending theatre shows put up by the local Bengali community. Plundering the vast array of objects at his disposal, he began appropriating childhood knick-knacks in ingenious fashion. One of his very first installations, *29 Mornings*, was a composite of 29 wooden stools, or *patlas*, which Gupta remembers sitting on to eat his breakfast, lunch and dinner.

“Seventy per cent of the population is poor people, or lower middle class or upper middle class. We still use, even in my home, utensils day-to-day for our food. So it’s such a common material. And that is India, 80% of country, no?” he says. “So, in that kind of atmosphere, when you are growing up you are going past many kinds of activities, ritual ceremonies and somehow even if you don’t practise right now, subconsciously you can’t forget what’s happened. And today, I’m lucky that those things helped me to create my artwork. So this is very important for me, and that’s how things happen.”

Unlike so many of his peers, Gupta was astute in packaging his “Indianness”—he managed to draw in local collectors with opaque references to a changing India, but beguiled Western tastes with his flawless execution, and bundled-up exoticism.

“Firstly, they are beautiful, and secondly, because they glorify and beautify quotidian Indian culture, I find that the work responds to a particular fusion of ideas that appeals to me,” says Cohen, who featured Gupta’s work in his *Passage to India* show at his gallery in Wolverhampton, England earlier this year.

That mishmash of seemingly disparate worlds was essentially Gupta, still inherently a boy from Bihar

but with some of the savvy of a jet-setting artist who could take hot pink *chimtas* (tongs) and hang them in pompom-like configuration. Those who have known him for years say that Gupta is still the same, ambitious undoubtedly as he's always been, and with more polish, but with the same quiet courtesies of a small-town boy.

Indeed, at the start of their respective careers, Gupta and Kher were generous with their time and money (of which they had little), hosting dinners, inviting artists, and curators, helping to foster a sense of community when Indian contemporary art was derided as a quaint by-product of post-colonial angst. Even as they grew in stature, Gupta hung on to his roots, helping organize an exhibition for young Bihari artists in 2007, and keeping in touch with galleries he later outgrew. "He has moved on in life," says Renu Modi, owner of Gallery Espace that was among the first to give him a solo show in 1992. "But he has never stepped on to other people's shoulders to step up."

Through the course of our interview, Gupta is meticulous about giving due, crediting a list of people, including art collector O.P. Jain, Modi, his cohort of Bihari colleagues, whom he declines to name, his parents, who let him shift to Delhi though they were disappointed in his career choice, and a scattering of other people who helped him along the way.

He still speaks in accented English, unapologetic when he trips up on French names, and only sheepish when asked about his participation in Chanel Mobile Art—a travelling show sponsored by the fashion house that invited an eclectic group of artists to interpret the Chanel bag—and designing a bag for Fendi, which he says he did because the money would go to charity. "What kind of serious art I will produce for that?" he says of the Chanel project. The curator Bousteau was a friend, so Gupta agreed, but on his own terms, cheerfully subverting the idea of a posh bag into a video of people carrying *thailas* and *gatharis*. "This is Chanel bag for me, no?"

This is Gupta's flair, to take the homely and make it beautiful—an obvious aim for any artist but, in an age of cow dung-strewn paintings and dead animals, not necessarily a qualifier for a work of art. Under Gupta's direction, even the most humble objects, the *bartan* (utensils), the pot, the tiffin box become shinier, prettier, better. Immortalized in oil, they shine with a brilliance that lifts them from their lowly position on the still life scale.

With a clutch of high-profile collectors and a trail of gallerists eager to sign him up, Gupta has had to grapple with the surreal mathematics of pricing. From 2005 to 2008, his prices at auction for an oil painting increased from \$23,126 to \$1.4million—a 5,000% increase.

Gupta's primary market prices hover between \$350,000 and \$1 million for the larger installations. And though even Huber concedes that Gupta's prices have jumped by exorbitant proportions in the last few years, he asserts that the pricing is in keeping with the artist's stature. "He's the No. 1 contemporary

artist in India. Why does he have to be cheaper than the No. 1 contemporary artist in China or the US?” Still, there have been allegations of price manipulation, a practice in which a gallery will put up a work for auction and then buy it back at a high price, thereby justifying a precedent for exorbitant prices not always in keeping with quality. In a *Mint* article on the Indian art market ([Picture is looking less perfect for Indian art](#)), art critics and experts named Gupta and Kher’s works in connection with inflated pricing. However, auction houses and galleries denied having any hand in the practice.

Gupta is unruffled because in spite of or despite him, prices will continue to increase, as they have for Indian contemporary artists across the board. His solo at Hauser & Wirth next year will further brighten his spectre, and it is not farfetched to think that in a few years Gupta, if prudent, will find himself in prominent museum collections.

“This is my job,” he says. “What is an artist’s job? My job is to think about art. And I do that all the time, thinking. Even while sleeping, I’m thinking about my artwork.”

2007: Is placed in a contemporary sale, as part of a selection from the Pierre Huber Collection
2008: Becomes youngest Indian artist to enter million-dollar club when ‘Saat Samundar Paar 10’ sells at a Christie’s auction for \$1.2 million
2009: Solo show with Hauser and Wirth; part of a group show of Indian art at Saatchi