

Pravah: The ever-flowing symphony of life

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“Verily, all things here arise out of space, and then disappear back in space. For space alone is greater than everything. And space alone is the final goal.”

- The Chandogya Upanishad

There is a certain stillness about Shampa Sircar Das’s work, that one may feel, but not quite be able to put in words. The imageries, amorphous and fluid, carry in them so many stories and metaphors of the past, present, and future; yet they sustain just as much silence. The spontaneity with which the human and animal forms appear in her paintings and interact with the sundry elements of nature, it is as if her motifs never begin nor end. Her canvas only offers to be the aether, on which these varied creations wilfully occur, resonate, and dispel. On this note is born “Pravah,” her newest series of artworks.

Every so often Shampa di intrigues me with her sense of meditative reflection towards the many things in nature that a lot of us seem to miss. Perhaps born out of her mindful travels, or from her pull towards the Indic folklores, she conveys every observation in a way that is thoughtful, calming, and aesthetic all the same. For Pravah, she perceptively chooses water as her leitmotif. “The cosmic energy inside and around us is ever-flowing like the flow of water,” she says. “The non-manifested substratum from which all manifestations are derived.” Truly, what else could honour this concept better? The movement of water from the clouds to earth and back, is the essence of life itself, for any stagnation in this stream would bring anarchy, and subsequent death. Therefore, the course, or ‘pravah,’ of time and tide must never cease, as must not new reflections, inventions, and renaissances. The springs and tributaries seek the rivers, while the rivers passionately seek the oceans, finding peace when they merge, only to be separated once again. And this journey continues ceaselessly, bringing about new life and new worlds. For the flow of water stands synonymous to the rhythm of existence. From water is it all born, and thence continues the cycle of birth and death, establishment and annihilation.

Vedic literature, one of Shampa di’s significant sources of inspiration, raises water, along with nature’s other elements and creations, to a divine pedestal; something abundantly visible in the Indian temple iconographies. Be it the images of Ganga on a crocodile and Yamuna on a tortoise that flank the doorways of early temples, or the recreation of Prayag where the two goddesses meet in a wall of water in the 4th century Varaha cave at Udayagiri, the examples of such creative depictions are aplenty. However, where our ancient art and scriptures have accredited the symbiosis of human and nature with such profound reverence, most of us today are becoming increasingly distanced from nature as well as each other, becoming stark individuals rather than a whole. Shampa di, with her work and conversations, reminds us once again of this humble philosophy of the Vedas and Upanishads, that unanimously emphasize the inherent oneness of existence. Through ‘Vriksha’ and ‘Prakriti,’ she subtly but decisively points out this very temperament of harmony.

In fact, nature, especially birds and animals, are deeply celebrated in much of the Pravah series, them having seized the foreground leaving the humans reduced in stature, and mostly in the backdrop if at all. This tweak, says Shampa di, comes from her own bittersweet experiences during the corona pandemic. While it hit us with the precariousness of mortality, where she like a lot of

us lost loved ones unexpectedly; it conversely blessed the birds and animals with some room to bloom. “I think this phase really taught us the need for harmony with nature and environment, and recognise the divinity of prana or shakti in every manifestation of nature. While the government and establishments struggled to cope with the crisis, nature finally seemed to breathe easy by this reduced human activity.” Indeed, the koels and peacocks were heard again, even amid the intense Delhi summers. The heat seemed less harsh, the breeze seemed a little cooler, and the skies seemed to have cleared up a little. Many animals, like the deer and lemurs, seemed to have claimed the once busy streets, caught on camera confidently ‘chilling.’ That is how incredible nature is in adapting to changing human habits.

As an ode, Shampa di creates ‘Mriga,’ a magnificent stag, its glance benign, stance austere, floating through the blue ethers, spontaneously dissolving into the placid backdrop. The Hansa and Mayura, subsist in full glory, dotingly embraced by lotus flowers and the singing skies. Prakriti holds a full bloom in her arms, her flowing hair restoring earth to its original resplendence, while tigers play around her, feeling protected and free. Purush clasps the greens of banana vegetation, feeling the kindling pride of a father for all his creation, while elephants march confidently basking in his affection. The banana foliage and elephants find a prominent showcasing in this series, an inspiration from her recent trips to the rural landscapes of West Bengal, Deccan, and the South.

Shampa di is an avid traveller, and since the last eight years has travelled extensively through the lengths and breadths of India, especially Leh, Ladakh and Spiti. She draws generously from the Buddhist iconography, particularly the Tibetan thangka paintings, murals, and frescos. The manner in which she crafts her human forms are somewhat reminiscent of the visual interpretations of The Buddha, composed and benevolent.

Yet in spite, her paintings do not carry any rigid religious messaging. They are fluid, just like the ever-flowing waters, that takes the shape of any vessel it is poured in, yet remains formless at the same time, free again once the vessel breaks. One can see a similar quality in her artworks, where the subjects have no hard forms, genders, and seem timeless. “The balance between masculinity and femininity is getting lost today, with more emphasis being laid on the masculine,” states Shampa di. The Purush and Prakriti, for example, have no set gender definitions. The line exists, but is inventively blurred. Much like the Vedic concept of Ardhanareshwara, the conglomeration of the masculine and the feminine, that beautifully renders the coexistence of both energies in every individual. Shampa di’s paintings are thus an effortless coming together of the ancient and the modern.

Pravah also includes paintings with the theme of Dashavatara, a remarkably innovative gist of the evolution of consciousness. A Vedic allegory for the flow of creation, it takes one through the ten incarnations of the formless, exalted, and immortal Narayana, who takes various mortal forms for the benefit of the gods and ardent seekers, so that He can be envisioned, approached, prayed to, and loved. The theme of water reflects here as well, for life sprouts from the primordial waters, and so does our modern theory of evolution. The Matsya emerges from the ocean, followed by the Kurma who begins to explore life outside the water. The Varaha leaves the water for good, and finds greater strength and swiftness on the lands. The Narasimha is half man-half animal, but soon evolves into the Vamana who is fully human, but not full in his strength and stature yet. Parashurama enjoys full strength and rationality; however, his emotions dominate him. Rama, though, has his emotions under control, and his sense of righteousness defined, way above any

compulsive beastly needs. The pinnacle of human fullness is reached in Krishna, who is the epitome of strength, tact, and intelligence, along with love, laughter, and balance. The Buddha is a meditative man, who having experienced all fullness that the world has to offer, retires from the glamour of opulence into a more humble, centred existence. In the end comes Kalki, the destroyer, who brings about the necessary universal dissolution, resuming the life cycle back to its advent.

Shampa di's renderings of the Dashavatara follow closely the mythological elements attached to each incarnation, and chooses to express them in a more nonconcrete, benign light. The forms are strong and lithe, but not too sharply masculine. Her Matsya gracefully raises His palm in Abhaya Mudra, perhaps blessing King Satyavrata. Her Kurma rests in serene composure, perhaps awaiting the momentous Sagar Manthan. Varaha sits with His hands raised in wonder, perhaps marvelling at the rejuvenation of all of cosmos after having saved Bhoomi Devi. Vamana stands amongst Banana plantain as he lifts His feet, perhaps aiming to reclaim the heavens next. The rich details of the ancient stories add layers to each painting. However, even without any prior context, one can still appreciate the nuances that play out in each canvas.

This is because Shampa di's artworks develop instinctively as she paints. The free-flowing nature of her art reflects in her choice of mediums as well. She enjoys using acrylic in thick, textured layers as well as thin, watercolour-like layers. Acrylic gives her the freedom to play around and explore new ways of application. The colours come together to build a range of hues that are immediately assuasive. In Pravah, one can see a notable shift in her colour palette. Once brighter and more contrasting, her choice of tones has metamorphosed into becoming more subtle, subdued, and pastel. The gradations of the colours, textures and motifs bring about an uncanny sense of surrealism. Nonetheless, the process is never quite planned. It is as spontaneous as life. "My vision starts getting clearer with every layer," she shares. Much like life, where each incident leads us to the next, and each overtone teaches us something more. And sometimes, the most inadvertent decisions can turn the entire canvas around.

What is more, the canvas is in fact turned around, with a brief exploration into the three-dimension. "Prakriti" exits the paintings, as if reincarnating into a more tangible form, leaving behind the tranquil blossoms of the canvas, something I choose to metaphorically associate with Shiva's abode. "Nandi," follows along of course, in devotion towards his Master; his head lowered in veneration, his posture exuding vigour. The bull form is a common motif in the temples dedicated to Shiva. However, Shampa di brings to this a twist of abstraction, digressing from its classical posture. The grunge, gritty texture on both the sculptures is deliberate. It implies the evident eventual decay of all things. Metal that was once shiny will one day rust, the earth that was once born will one day combust. It is perchance nature's, and the artist's, most tender ways of reminding us the eonian truth of 'jeevan pravah' – what is born from dust, must go back to dust.