

## DEVI : REMNANTS OF A SPIRIT

Tucked away in the green environs of Chittranjan Park is the studio of Shampa Das. For the past year she has been creating meditations on the Devi. Replete with cosmic energies and symbolisms floating all over her canvasses these works are a study in the power of the spirit within the domain of human and earthly ancestry.

### **Aspects of Devi**

There are many approaches to looking at Devi: chronological, religious, or by function. Here we have chosen to observe Devi through her six main functions, beginning with her most forceful and dynamic form and moving toward less potent forms.

Devi is first seen as [cosmic force](#) where she destroys demonic forces that threaten world equilibrium, and creates, annihilates, and recreates the universe. Next, in her gentle, radiant [dayini](#) form, she is the gracious donor of boons, wealth, fortune, and success. As [heroine](#) and beloved, Devi comes down to earth and provides inspiring models for earthly women.

Devi is then seen as a [local protector](#) of villages , towns, and individual tribal peoples, where she is concerned only with local affairs. In her fifth aspect, Devi appears as [semi-divine](#) force, manifesting herself through fertility spirits, and other supernatural forms. Finally, she is also represented in [woman saints](#), who are born on earth but endowed with deep spirituality and other-worldly powers.

### **Cosmic Force**

As cosmic force Devi creates, annihilates, and recreates the universe. Of awesome appearance, she destroys demonic forces that threaten world equilibrium wielding weapons in multiple arms that testify to her ability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. This category includes her form as Durga, slayer of the buffalo demon; black Kali; the emaciated Chamunda; and Devi herself.

### **Durga**

Durga, the great Warrior Goddess, represents the lethal energy of divine anger when turned against evil. It is Durga's story which is told in the

three great legends in ► [Devi Mahatmya](#). 📖 The world was under attack by Mahisha, the most evil demon in the world, who took many different forms, including that of a buffalo. The male gods, fearing total annihilation ► [endowed Durga with their powers](#). 📖 Riding a lion into battle, Durga slew the buffalo by cutting off its head and then she destroyed the spirit of the demon as it emerged from the buffalo's severed neck. It is through this act that order was established in the world.

Durga's victory and power are celebrated every fall throughout India in the ► [Durga Puja](#). 📖 Durga is among the most widely represented visual forms of Devi across the Indian subcontinent. She is seen in stone, bronze, wood, clay, and paint; her image is reintegrated in the contemporary world in oil on canvas and with powdered pigment in fiberglass.

Kali may be said to represent the darker side of Devi's power. Her emergence is chronicled in the third story of the *Devi Mahatmya*. Confronted by the insolent remarks of the demon generals, Chanda and Munda, a fiery burst of energy emerges from Devi's forehead and takes the dark skeletal form of goddess Kali. Kali overpowers and beheads two demon generals, Chanda and Munda, and when she carries their heads to Devi she is named Chamunda. She is often portrayed as emaciated, black, and with a necklace of skulls. (The story continues in which Devi, Kali and a group of matrikas, or mothers, destroy the demon brothers Shumbha and Nishumbha. In the final battle against Shumbha, Devi absorbs Kali and the matrikas and stands alone for the final battle.) During a fierce battle in which the Great Goddess demonstrates her omnipotence by defeating powerful demons who terrify even the gods, she encounters the fierce Raktabija. Every drop of blood he sheds turns into another demon as it touches the earth. A unique strategy has to be devised to contain him. Devi asks Kali to step in and contain the demon. With her huge mouth and enormous tongue she ferociously laps up Raktabija's blood, thus preventing the uprising of further demons.

### **Lakshmi**

Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is worshiped by householders for the health and welfare of their families; business men and women offer her

prayers to ensure the success of their endeavors. She is frequently shown standing in her lotus throne and holding lotus buds, which are symbols of beauty and fertility. Lakshmi, a goddess in her own right, is also the wife of the Vishnu and as Vishnu has nine reincarnations, so does Lakshmi. The two most popular forms of Vishnu and Lakshmi's reincarnations are Rama and Sita (whose story is told in the Ramayana) and Krishna and Radha. Sita and Radha also appear as another aspect of Devi, that of Heroine and Beloved.

### **Sarasvati**

Sarasvati, goddess of learning and music, emerged as early as 1300 B.C. as Vach. Vach was considered both speech itself and the goddess of speech. Later, when transformed into the goddess of learning and music, she acquired her name and a swan as her vehicle. Hindus consider her to be the consort of the god Brahma

uddhist and Jains, whose faith places emphasis on knowledge as the means to liberation, also worship Sarasvati. She is commonly depicted seated on a lotus holding a stringed instrument, the Vina. Devotees, particularly children starting school, and students of all ages, worship Sarasvati as the source of knowledge. As the goddess of music she is particularly sacred to those who sing or play musical instruments.

### **Parvati**

Parvati is the consort of the god Shiva. She is constantly beside Shiva, watching him as he dances the dance of bliss, admiring him in his deeds of annihilation, joining him in games of dice or playing with their two sons, the elephant headed Ganesha and the warrior Skanda. Shiva and Parvati, whose love is deep and abiding, represent the paradigmatic divine family. Shiva and Parvati are often united in a single form known as Ardhanari (literally half woman) to represent the concept that the divine is both male and female.

### **Ganga**

The concept of water as potent energy in liquid form appears in the sacred Vedic texts that date back to 1300 B.C. By the start of the current era, the rivers Ganges and Yamuna were personified and invoked as life-giving waters. The celestial Ganges came to earth (starting in the

Himalayas and flowing into the plains below) so that the cremated ashes of ancestors could be immersed in her waters thus enabling them to attain salvation.

### **Vasudhara**

Like her Hindu counterpart, Lakshmi, Vasudhara is the Buddhist goddess of wealth, good fortune and abundance and is one of the most popular household deities of Nepal. Devotees appeal to her for earthly riches and for fertility of the field and womb. This six-armed goddess holds four precious, life-sustaining symbols: a book of knowledge, a sheaf of grain, an auspicious water-filled vessel, and a cluster of jewels.

### **Devi Through The Ages**

The goddess has been worshiped since prehistoric times in India. This section outlines the evolution of Devi through the ages. Each segment reveals that as Hinduism evolved and changed through the centuries, the roles and functions of Hindu goddesses also went through dramatic changes.

(Notes from the Devi show Smithsonian)

### **Discovering Devi's Dimensions**

It is important to have a rudimentary understanding of the many Devis that transcend and float on the canvasses of Shampa Das as she harnesses a series of works that flit back and forth through time and periods in her journey with her many goddesses.

### **When asked about her journey and techniques used Shampa states:**

“ I use a synthesis of philosophy, aesthetics and technique to create my language on the canvas. Symbols always fascinate me. They have a language of their own and encompass the power of silence within them. What interests me is thought and what I experience is continuity between the space of consciousness and space at large. The forms and elements are an integral part of the space where

sometimes they cross the threshold; the boundaries dissolve and become part of the matrix.”

While she talks of her techniques there is a certain amalgamation and a juxtaposition of esoteric elements that float and preen around us at the same time. Its almost like being with the goddesses and also being in the air at the time, this figure/ground relationship is something that forms the essence of these works.. Its almost as if she takes the idea of figurative form and puts it on top of a pattern and that’s where the mechanics of these paintings begin.

“ The works have solid colour; consciousness by definition arises from the Brahman, which is like an absolute ‘substance’, homogenous, continuous, indivisible and unchanging. And some areas appear to be composed not from a single homogenous whole but of discrete ‘particles’, like the bits and bytes of data in a computer. It is a mere ensemble based on disconnected bits, which only give the appearance of a complete structure. To me these are parts of the puzzle we call ‘life’, pulsating with energy. I start with segmented fragments, like building blocks, which seem abstract individually, but create an identifiable whole when observed together at the end of my creative endeavor.” She adds.

Perhaps more so we see a kind of a subtly patterned background, a blue and greenish blue shimmering against one another or an ember and different russets, sometimes there is a crimson tide that flutters . Then she paints on these white forms and dark forms that were taken from drawings she had done on previous occasions. They are subconscious inventions of quasi-biomorphic forms, painted in lighter and darker tonalities. She reinforces the edges of those forms by painting slim slivers of outlines, sort of off register, going in and out of the edges of the white forms which were simply painted flat. The simple contrasts create an affecting resonance, and the multiple formal elements essentially become the foundation of her vocabulary. Intriguing how her application of paints and layers makes you wonder how these works can be acrylics and not oils.

“ The nature of Acrylic, that of fast drying can be used as a thin layers as well as thick impasto, suits the philosophy of my work.”she affirms.” I first render the canvas with a layer using a brush or apply color with a roller and then images and forms begin to take shape. Just as in life every experience makes you what you are today and decides your path for the future, this layer-by-layer process essentially leads me to a journey to discover and reveal the final image. Sometimes paint used with the help of a brush or roller and is thick and textured so that the forms seem as if they are fully immersed in their surroundings and blend into a complete whole.”

The colours are juxtaposed to construct a range of hues that sedate and inspire a quiet meditative mood. And as the work progresses it is becomes more aesthetics and less of an idea and the vision starts getting clearer and clearer layer-by-layer. “ I never sketch or draw out a layout before of what I have in mind but directly work on to the canvas,” explains Shampa.” The acrylic medium facilitates this process and helps me maintain the spontaneity and mystique of a magical experience. The elements are then infused into the work with the help of acrylic paint applied with a thin brush, silver and gold archival acrylic water based pens. The form later emerges and blocks of colour assume shape, to reveal a fluid, entwined work of intricate dimension. Before I start with a series my study and travel helps me to formulate the theme or the concept of my next project. I have been doing so for all the series of work that I have done. “

Cosmic Microwaves and Devis

One of the phrases used to describe these paintings is “cosmic microwave.” We can find it compelling because there is a reference to the technological hybridization and virtual space in Shampa’s works. We can definitely think of them in terms of states of being, and how we relate to other beings and things in our world, including animals, minerals, and vegetables. It means all the natural forms. I think Devis as a series has to do with an abiding affection for the state of being.

You look at the different unisexual portraits and feel that the thing that won’t be reducible in human consciousness will be the condition of being and the sense of being. This is something that we share with all animals and insect life on earth and perhaps even with plant life to some limited extent. That sense of being is within the animal forms and I think that is something irreducible. Most of us would admit that human beings have actually gotten carried away with themselves, with their own hubris, self-importance, and sense of superiority. I think we all share that irreducible sense of being, and we share it with the so-called “lower forms” of animals. These paintings have to do with an attachment to that sense of being, how we look at things in space, how we look at so-called “beings” in space, and how we start to see the relationship between us and them.

### **Cosmic elements**

**At one plane we could think of the** “physical presence of discrete tones—spatially isolated at lengthy temporal steps. Inevitably, relationships—melodies—form. At another we could think of the puranas the notes in history and symbolism and think of the many elements that accompany and testify to the essence of the Devis. ”

**We could almost** mean that the elements echo each other. Each is repeated in a different manner, it’s reworked; it takes on a different identity. One’s a reflection of the other, there’s an accent.

Which brings us to the subject of repetition, and especially of echo, which implies sound.

***ya devi sarvabhuteshu shakti roopena samsthita  
namastasyai, namastasyai, namastasyai, namo namah***

For that goddess who is established for all the people in the form of Shakti

I bow to thee! I bow to thee! I bow to thee!

Shampa recites a verse and translates it for us: “ Devi attributes supreme divinity, power over creation, all speech, nature, mind and liberation.

The flux of mind and matter in Creation—the Cosmic Power or Primordial Energy, acknowledges women as the vessels of both creative and destructive power” she says. “ The embodiment of feminine power, as envisioned in our scriptures, is often referred to as a talented daughter in the form of Saraswati (goddess of learning and the fine arts) or a new bride as the 'coming of Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) into the house.

This divine energy as a feminine force is the force to reckon with in the physical world. This energy takes a wide variety of forms, including nature, creation, life force, movement, mind, and strength, as well as the power to dominate or destroy.

In her life-perpetuating form, the goddess is beautiful, benevolent, fertile, motherly, attractive, and full of knowledge, compassion, and desire.

She embraces and enlivens all aspects of reality.



In today's world understanding these levels of energies also takes us beyond the association of femininity with gender, and it shows us that the very life-force of the universe is the feminine face of spirit.

These Transformative forces within the mind and heart, can cleanse our mental and emotional bodies, put us in touch with the protective powers within us and deeply change the way we see the world."

Be it the lotus or the swan or the elephant or the little flowers each element is an inchoate echo it also implies a variation on the original form, which appeared pretty early on in Shampa's works. So repetition or echoing of form is a ritualistic method that also amplifies the atmosphere or sacred ambient of the paintings.

**Shampa states: I have always been** very interested in making repetition a virtue as opposed like the many prayers and shlokas we chant during a pooja. But I'm also very interested in things that are repeated in different subtle and unsubtle ways. You see it in one manifestation, then it manifests itself again in a different way. There is something that's universal and something that's particular about repeating a prayer in any religion I think it's a process that defines an act that embraces us."

What is it then, when repeated differently, that's universal about it? What is it that is universal to that form, which can differ in particular forms? These questions interest us deeply. They're beyond the tenets of time and history they are more than mere Platonic philosophy in a sense.

Each goddess is created in the orbit of her own divinity. If it is

**Bhuvaneshwari she** transcends everything as a boundless and formless presence without any limitation. **The whole Macrocosm stands as her**

body and the countless existing beings represent her precious jewels and adornments.

Five Elements that are representations of the transformation that occurs in the world around us, they are metaphors for describing how things interact and relate with each other. The five elements are the cosmological foundation which makes up our bodies, the world, and the entire universe. Everything, living or non-living, are a physical combination and manifestation of these five elements in the relative world.

And Shampa resolves certain very important truths, or clarifies them in intelligible language. To us, the idea was to take what we think is useful to our work—the understanding of the real or the cosmic, two-dimensional space and what it could generate, and so on—and make it into something else entirely.

Shampa's dimensions of Devis tell us to take on the subconscious and meditate upon it. You have the subconscious and then you also have a real manifestation of it. You're both in it and out of it at the same time.

UMA NAIR  
AUGUST 2016