

## Flora and Fauna: The Eternal Muse

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### **Abstract:**

*This research paper focuses on the vibrant and vivacious creative expression employed by the four Indian Contemporary artists and demystifies their world of creativity and truthfully analyses the intricacies and fine nuances of their mesmerising creations wherein they have pursued a common muse based on stylised versions of flora and fauna in an awe-inspiring aesthetic expression.*

**Keywords:** *Guru Nanak, Bani, Japji Sahib, flora and fauna, vahanas, Egyptian civilization, John James Audubon, The Birds of America, Persian, Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahari Miniatures, A. Ramachandran, Sakti Burman, Arun Ghose, Noah's Ark, Dhiraj Choudhury, K.G. Subramanyan.*

## **Introduction**

We are blessed to live on the Earth known as 'The Blue Planet' which is perhaps the most vibrant, opulent and vivacious planet, inhabited by incredible and amazing living species and creatures. The noble ancients aptly nicknamed it as 'The Garden of Eden' and we revere it till today as the 'Mother Earth' which provides all bounties of life and it is capable of sustaining all forms of life. In first Sikh Guru Nanak's *bani* (hymn written in *Japji Sahib*)- '*Pawan Guru Pani Pitaa, Mata Dharat Mahat*' literally meaning that Air is our *Guru* (teacher), Water is like father and the Earth deserves to be worshiped as 'Mother'. Our saints, sages and *Gurus* rightly proclaimed that '*Jat Mein Jot, Jot Mein Jata*' meaning the Almighty Creator is found in its each creation or specie- both Flora and Fauna. Man shares this world with mesmerising, myriad and enchanting forms of life and he was always amazed to find himself surrounded by spectacularly beautiful exotic plants and flowers, blossoming trees laden with fruits, creepers, shrubs and bushes, birds, animals, reptiles and aquatic life. Since his first creation in the recorded history, man was always inspired to emulate the images found in his immediate environs and these living forms were his first inspiration, to imitate the Ultimate Creator and create something equally awe-inspiring to quench his thirst for self-expression, using simple tools available from time to time. Since ages, poets and artists were amongst the front-runners who sought refuge in the magnificent realm of Nature and started depicting flora and fauna in their own individual styles, perceptions and requirements, initially using these as ornamental elements and narratives, to express the pulsating vibrations in their minds and hearts in an expression of joy and ecstasy. The creative minds continued sculpting symbols through which they could felicitate their thoughtful aspirations, concepts and experiences. It is amazing that each artist in one way or the other invents his/her own specific style and employs these wonderful forms of life as his/her vehicle of self-expression thereby creating a specialised and stylised visual imagery and vocabulary.

If one closely studies the arts and crafts created by a large number of artists and artisans belonging to various major civilizations such as Mayan, Incas, Aztecs, Egyptian, Chinese and Indian, one would find similarities in depiction of flora and fauna in various denominations with fascinatingly stylised versions, expressing the inner manifestations pertaining to their beliefs, faiths, socio-cultural and religious leanings. Here one finds remarkable ingenuity of man in giving different meanings to these common creatures. Each bird, animal or plant has been associated with a new significance owing to its form and shape of inherent biological quality based on its natural habitat. In Indian mythology, animals, birds and reptiles are depicted as vehicles (*vahanas*) of prominent Gods and Goddesses such as Goddess Durga rides a Tiger, Owl is the vehicle of Goddess Lakshmi, Crocodile is depicted as the vehicle of River Goddess Ganga, the auspicious God Ganesha

is shown riding a mouse whereas God Kamadeva rides on a parrot and Great Lord Shiva rides a Bull called 'Nandi' so on and so forth.

Similarly in Egyptian civilization, artists freely used animals and birds of their choice to depict deeper aspects of life with philosophical and eternal bearings. Their sacred animals depicted on the walls of the pyramids and monumental monolithic columns include cats, bulls, lions, heavenly bird- Phoenix, ibises, rams, baboons, falcons, snakes, fishes, ostrich, crocodiles, hippopotamus, beetles and dogs.<sup>1</sup> Chinese and Mayan civilizations also revere certain living wild life creatures. In Persian, Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahari Miniatures, there is an elaborate and sumptuous presentation of flora and fauna delicately painted on paper or cloth. These great masterpieces were further instrumental in influencing the imagery of Contemporary Indian artists in a big way and these artists have enriched the world of Contemporary art scene, inventing and employing a visual vocabulary, based on bewitching forms of flora and fauna, suitably altering their shapes and forms, to cater to their thematic needs, concepts and expressions.

European painters were not far behind in truthfully painting the glory of Nature and very effectively depicted these life forms in their masterpieces in photo-realistic manner. The pioneer which deserves mention is 'John James Audubon'- a French-American, ornithologist, naturalist and painter, who dedicated his entire life to the cause of capturing the beautiful and exotic species of birds, animals and plants in the jungles of America. He was born on April 26, 1785 at Les Cayes in the French Colony of Haiti. During his long adventurous travels, he found himself surrounded by countless magnificent and mesmerising rare bird, animal and plant species and was awe-struck and decided to capture each of them in his wonderful water-colour paintings. The result was rewarding and he produced 435 hand-coloured life size prints of 497 bird species made from engraved copper plates and discovered nearly 700 new species alongwith his fellow ornithologist-'John Kirk Townsend'.<sup>2</sup>**(Plate No.1)** These prints were compiled in a very famous book titled- 'The Birds of America'. Today he is known all over the world for his contribution in popularising the flora and fauna paintings. Each work is a masterpiece and testifies his uncanny sense for detail and realism.

The Indian Contemporary artists whose works are inhabited by stylised versions of plants, birds and animals, have done a path-breaking creative exercise in exploring the unfathomed mysteries and impulses of human mind, where one can find resonance of deeper convictions and perceptions in demystifying the complexity of thought processes in socio-environmental milieu, encompassing mythological symbols, bordering on fantasy and harsh realities of life. Renowned Indian Contemporary artist- 'A. Ramachandran' who initially painted headless human entities showcasing oppression, war, human brutality and

political violence, soon diverted his attention in a new phase of creative exploration. He entered a realm of beauty, joy, ecstasy, mystery and fantasy to portray subtle emotions and mellowed passions through his large riveting vibrant canvases laden with engrossing symbols from the world of flora and fauna. These works present glimpses of a peaceful world immersed in tranquillity and charm. The artist has tapped into the deeply rooted and potent symbolism of the 'Lotus' in Indian art and thought taking a cue from the Rajasthani Miniatures where Lotus flowers and leaves are represented in a philosophical perspective.<sup>3</sup> In his large four panel paintings, he has often referred to the purifying power of life giving water or the ocean of cosmic creation and the seed-cups and stem turned towards the setting Sun, as night fall approaches. The 'Lotus' is a symbol of purity shooting out of muddy water which has reference to the grime and slime of worldly affairs. One finds mysterious creatures hiding behind ornamental setting of Lotus leaves and flowers playing hide-and-seek with each other. We find cranes straining their necks and keenly looking at the insects and fish and here and there in some paintings A. Ramachandran appears as a bird or a butterfly hovering over the mysterious Lotus seed-cups. **(Plate No.2)**

Yet another internationally renowned artist- 'Sakti Burman' has infused his each enigmatic painting with mundane creatures in his own inimitable style featuring divine elements of heavenly bliss and fantastic concoctions based on people around him, surrounded by anthropomorphic elements showing or treating animals, gods and objects as if they are human in appearance, character or behaviour. In the words of eminent art historian and author- 'Arun Ghose', "*An image easily outlasts the object it represents. How the artist conceived the image is what baffles us. The curious mix that Sakti Burman has been able to achieve, of the cultural heritage of India and European Art in his long artistic career, is what sets him apart.*" He further adds, "*The effect of 'marbling' his painted surfaces helped Sakti Burman to create a vision of Realism and Surrealism, fragmentation of abstraction and a feeling of dreamscape, simultaneously.*" Sakti Burman later works are redemptions of a mixture of religion and mythology, wherein the forces of Nature and the source of all creations and the cosmic ocean is filled with a resonance of Gods and Goddesses riding or resting against animals and birds.<sup>4</sup> The backgrounds are splintered with a variety of flowers and leaves basically to generate an effect of a dream-like atmosphere and the sublime and ethereal charm. Amongst his notable works is the persona of 'Durga' destroying demons and in a similar vein a Biblical story of 'Noah's Ark' is shown floating on and on carrying the precious cargo of all life forms specially birds and animals in spellbinding portrayal. **(Plate No.3)** One is overwhelmed by the sheer magic of his creativity which has the power to besiege the minds and hearts of the onlookers. His intricate craft aptly showcases the tender and delicate feelings he wishes to portray on his vivid canvases.

Legendary Indian Contemporary painter- Dhiraj Choudhury was born on April 1, 1936 at Brahmanbaria district of Bengal (now in Bangladesh). He was not only an iconic artist but also a great art teacher. He was witness to the partition of Bengal and had a first-hand view of the inhuman atrocities and mindless violence which torn apart people who shared a single cultural background and heritage.<sup>5</sup>This left him disturbed and in his earlier works in black and white, he portrayed the isolation, exploitation and tortured human minds and bodies struggling to gain a hold on life. The era of gloom slowly withered away and he soon started joyful and lively vibrant paintings filled with happily dancing figures slowly turning into flowers and leaves, where animals and birds join the party in a joyous abundance. Flowers such as lily turning into beautiful women in magical expression against a brightly coloured background. Abandoning realism and intentional distortion, he created a unique pictorial language, creating works that remain vivid today, as they were painted a long time before. His keen eye playfully captures the flowing forms of flora and fauna, intermingling with each other in a divine yet rustic charm.<sup>6</sup> Another hallmark of his work is spontaneity and rapidity at its best, done with a brush which acts like a magic wand and lo and behold everything dances at the tip of his brush. **(Plate No.4)**

In a conversation with renowned art critic R. Siva Kumar, the stalwart of Indian painting K.G. Subramanyan once opened his interview with the words, “*Lord, Let each day of mine be a festival, a celebration.*” Of course his each masterwork is a celebration of life juggling between the real and the imaginary.<sup>7</sup> For him abstraction is a relative interpretation of an object or a person or an element or a situation for that matter, which suits his creative urges and impulses, to say something vividly and frankly, borrowing the vocabulary of folk and tribal art with mythical concoctions in a wisp of enigmatic version. The air of mysticism intermingles with all the freely floating forms in his masterly works composed in rich structural dimensions bathed in the rainbow colours, which linger on in the minds of the spectators, who are amazed at the velocity of his brushwork, which has seen no restraint and moves from one corner of the painting to the other in a wink of an eye, leaving behind fantastic creatures like birds, animals, snakes and mythical icons of Gods and Goddesses elaborately surrounded by blossoming flowers and trees. **(Plate No.5)**

The flora and fauna has remained an eternal muse for generations of artists which keeps on filling the reservoir of their creativity and as it relates to the people at the grassroot level it will remain popular for all times to come. Artists will keep on getting inspiration from the world of natural forms which the Almighty has created in spellbinding shapes, colours and sizes. Man finds deeply attached to his surroundings and these living beings have the power to influence the intellect of a sensitive and creative soul. No doubt artists use these life forms to voice their delicate and innermost emotions and manifestations through this

universal chariot of thoughts. The master painters mentioned in this research paper deserve appreciation due to the fact that they share a common thread of inherent aesthetic ability to express their deeper concerns through the voices of these wonderful creatures, dwelling on their specific themes yet employing the common artistic vocabulary carved out of these life forms. Flora and fauna is not merely a depiction or an illustration of birds, animals, reptiles, trees, flowers and leaves, it has a wider perspective for a maverick thinker, a poet or an artist.

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**Plate No. 1**



**Plate No. 2**



**Plate No. 3**



**Plate No. 4**



**Plate No. 5**