

“Rising into the air, flying like a bird, travelling immense distances in a flash, disappearing – these are some of the magical powers Buddhism and Hinduism attribute to *arhats* [Buddhas], kings and magicians.”

– Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*

The swan, the phoenix, and Garuda the solar eagle rotate in an endless loop on toy plasma TVs in a womb-dark room. Their slow, hypnotic movement across a garland of screens reminds us of a monk telling a rosary. Symbolising purity, wisdom and regeneration, these birds dominate Asia’s mythic narratives: in Chhachhi’s ‘Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia’, they transit across phantasmagoric digital tapestries, backdrops attesting to the cultural exchanges staged across the region. In these composite backdrops, we find traces of Persian and Mughal miniatures, Chinese brush painting and the Buddhist ‘Heart Sutra’, but also the scruffy reality of environmental degradation as conveyed by documentary photography. Thus, Chhachhi proposes an Asia that is not a continent embodying geographical continuities and contiguities, but a conversation crafted from the cross-fertilisations among cultures. ‘Winged Pilgrims’ makes us aware of the storytellers, image-makers, merchants and monks who crossed the Silk Route for centuries, creating a rich internationalism, an Asian cosmopolitanism.

But something is amiss here: the unnaturally slow movement of the winged pilgrims signals their fate. They move in one direction only, like prisoners of a mind that can at best mimic flight. Chhachhi organizes her artistic journeys with the discipline of a yogic practitioner. She chooses a toy that imitates the ‘look’ of the Now – a plasma TV – but it works like a primitive light-box albeit with an electronic roller. In an age of consumerist aspirationalism, which reveres speed and novelty, she prefers the pleasures of an aesthetic of slowness, contemplation and a beauty made from paradox. Even the warbling and lament of the birds is scored in a female voice in a *cappella* mode.

In one of the tapestries, a row of parrots – that ambidextrous symbol of wisdom and the erotic – cross a nondescript urban cityscape, like misplaced totems in a land that has forgotten to read the signs. But this could also be a literary allusion to the *Tuti-nama*, the ‘Tales of the Parrot’, a legendary 14<sup>th</sup>-century Persian story-cycle adapted from the Sanskrit *Shuka-saptati*, which revolves around the parrot who entertains a merchant’s lonely wife with stories, so that she does not embark on amorous diversions while her husband is away on his travels.

Kabir-like, Chhachhi weaves a confluence of cross-cultural visual references that come together without losing their specific texture. She invokes art as an inter-cultural experiment in hybridity. Her parrot is borrowed from the Company School, which emerged when British patrons employed local artists to record India’s flora, fauna and ethnic diversity: in the same frame, quasi-naturalistic

parrots are juxtaposed with stylised trees extracted from Basohli miniatures. Chhachhi melds past and present, mystical and material: her flying magicians must contend with the presence of men in anti-contamination suits culling birds, modern-day saviours who paradoxically protect the earth by killing its species. And the battery hens moving to the rhythm of a conveyor belt remind us that the winged pilgrims have been imprisoned in a television that is not really a television, in landscapes that are artefactual, in a movement that is illusory.

This troubling thought is healed by the presence of the crow, who rescues our belief in the shaman, who can take on the attributes of animals, travel to the realm of the sun, and defeat gravity. Many artists have been attracted to shamanic techniques of ecstasy, prophecy and clairvoyance. Sheba, a wandering mystic at heart, gently warns her viewers not to be blinded by the flash of agonism and greed, not to “destroy their belief in a higher self — the ‘achin pakhi’, the unknown bird, the unrecognized inner, spiritual self.”

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