



## THE COLOR OF WATER : TARSHITO

**KATIE LAZAROWICZ**

*As a part of a world tour Tarshito was seeking a Gond artist to represent India in “The Path of the Wayfarer in Love,” an enormous scroll which will travel to a total of eight countries. Venkat was honored to contribute. He painted a playful a wedding procession in the Gond style, dancing across one 1.5 meter section.*

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VenkatRaman Singh Shyam, Tarshito  
and Katie Lazarowicz discussing elephant  
painting at Tribal Musuem, Bhopal  
Photo Courtesy: Luca Desiderato

What is the color of water? Amidst laughter and song, filling the vibrant halls of the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum, a tribute to the living traditions of India, internationally celebrated Gond artist Venkat Raman Singh Shyam elegantly applies ripples of gray to a cream-colored canvas. Here, shadow is the color of water. Familiar scaly patterns characteristic of Gond painting populate the space of this imagined “river.” The shape of an elephant emerges from shores. This elephant-river will evolve in months to come, taking on a new look, after traveling Italy for completion at the studio of the Italian artist, Tarshito. Once complete, it will return to India, with seven others like it.

Before this painted river flows to Italy, Venkat Raman Singh Shyam will flood his river with more color.

This elephant, he explains, doesn’t live in the water, but soars above it. The form on canvas is only the creature’s shadow in water. This water, which has no color, reflects like a mirror. In the same way, the painting is a mirror of the artist’s imagination. Urtha Haathi, this flying elephant is larger than life. He consumes the entire space of this river. For Venkat this expression is attuned to the larger collective mythologies and origin stories of the Gond. This painting is but one expression of Gond art created with Tarshito, by different artists as a part of this project, Seven Holy Rivers. It began in Bhopal in October, 2017 and will be displayed in Delhi next year 2018. Venkat’s river is only part of the story.

Tarshito arrived in Bhopal with a quieter ambition. As a part of a



world tour Tarshito was seeking a Gond artist to represent India in “The Path of the Wayfarer in Love,” an enormous scroll which will travel to a total of eight countries. Venkat was honored to contribute. He painted a playful a wedding procession in the Gond style, dancing across one 1.5 meter section.

The spirit of “The Path of the Wayfarer in Love,” is a global unification through art. The impossibility of traveling to each country led Tarshito to land on the number eight, as a representation of infinity. In July 2017 this scroll began with the Huichol tribe of Guadalupe Ocotàn in Mexico. After India, it travels to artists in, Perú, Australia, Nepal, China, and some yet to be determined places. Figures will populate the peaks and valleys on a “procession” across Tarshito’s new world with a mixed geography.

Visits like this one to India, mark Tarshito’s migratory returns to the subcontinent, His last “solo” show in

India was in 2011, on the occasion of the 54th Venice Biennale at the Italian Institute of Culture. For decades, this fiercely passionate designer has returned to India to co-create and celebrate many living traditions in India. His first major exhibition was in 2001, at Delhi’s Crafts Museum. His contemporary process, builds on decades of experimentation with communities of terra cotta sculptors, potters, weavers, and painters representing a full spectrum of Indian tribal and folk artists. Today Tarshito’s work renders forms that shape a new way of thinking about the geography of our world.

This formation of new spaces, which he calls the “new continent,” is mapped out in textures of white and grey. Familiar names of cities and countries are folded and re-arranged. This morphology disrupts the idea of nation states. It bends the way we understand the shape of continents, and the time that has formed them. Visually traveling in these new paces, one imagines the

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*Three artists working on their rivers at Tribal Musuem, Bhopal  
Photo Courtesy: Luca Desiderato*

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*Kalabai Shyam & Anand Shyam working on their rivers at Tribal Musuem, Bhopal  
Photo Courtesy: Luca Desiderato*





*This project of the making Seven Holy Rivers was nurtured by good fortune, and the swift embrace of the Gond community. On his first day in Bhopal, Tarshito met with the Gond artists who would eventually be involved with this project. Tarshito's vision quickly became a reality. At the initial gathering in Bhopal's Indian Coffee House, a great deal of negotiating was in order.*

possibility of this type of global unity. This "new continent" in the completed work calls the viewer to experience a transcendence of political identities that limit our sense of connectedness with one another.

The process of creating Seven Holy Rivers brought together a diverse group of artists within the Gond community itself. All worked as one family, drawing huge audiences at the Tribal museum where the work ceremoniously began. The result, when works are co-created in Italy with an extension of the new continent on canvas will interrupt what it means to be an Indian or an Italian artist. One cannot simply say that these works are "made in India," or "made in Italy." They are at once, both.

In the same vein, it's hard to call any one of Tarshito's shows, a "solo," when there are such diverse hands involved in the making.

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Holy Rivers was nurtured by good fortune, and the swift embrace of the Gond community. On his first day in Bhopal, Tarshito met with the Gond artists who would eventually be involved with this project. Tarshito's vision quickly became a reality. At the initial gathering in Bhopal's Indian Coffee House, a great deal of negotiating was in order. Mature artists like Vankat and Anand Shyam, naturally hesitated with distinct level of expectation for the price of their work, whereas emerging artists, liken Nilesh Urveti, were more eager to come on board. Compromise was reached. The project quickly multiplied as the wives of each artist, skilled and accomplished painters in their own right co-signed the project and all were ready to get to work on this project that had to be completed in merely five days.

Seven Holy Rivers asked each individual artist to develop ideas independently for this project, but to work together. For Tarshito, this way of creating is an expression of



his own inspiration. The enthusiasm with which each chose their “holy river” canvas, embodied a uniquely Gond appreciation of nature. Tarshito’s works in India have long asked local craftsman and artisans to venture more deeply into their established traditions. More than adorning a canvas on which Tarshito had outlined each river’s shores, more than endeavors to make beautiful paintings, these rivers are sensitive renderings of the personal insights of each individual artist. They are personal, yet part of an organically unified endeavor. The joy with which the project came together was palpable. Each artist took to the canvas with the spark of light that comes with the striking of an idea. With such light, comes play. Light played upon these seven rivers took many different forms, each to the delight of the individual artist.

Venkat and his looming elephant remind us that water in fact, has no color. It colored by the world around it. For his river, the Saraswati - an

imagined river itself - the flying elephant myth is appropriate, as is the way this figure from an intangible realm rests on the material of his canvas. In contrast, there is a visceral type of realism in six other rivers, each with their own colors for water, offered in this project’s deeply contemplative spaces.

For example, the most ecologically minded sets of images are found in the work of Premi Bai. She brings the viewer face to face with the reality of a river’s seasonal life. Premi Bai’s crafted the Godavari is a sublime clay green color. It represents a muddy bed of a drying, shrinking river just before the monsoons of June and July. It is filled with crocodiles, fish, and a fisherman - the mundane things such quieter months. Premi Bai enjoyed painting this river in an unconventional color. With the freedom to fill it how she pleased, her own palette, she presents a lovely study of a cycle where the water does

not flow. Rather, it recedes, and life amidst the disappearing waters, remains despite being at a precious edge.

All of the artists saw a different color for the waters. Gariba Tekam’s Ganga River recalls a family visit to Varansai. He vividly spoke of seeing red and blue dance together in the sun, along with the evolution of life in Ganga’s water. Of seven, only one river, the Kaveri, by young artist Nilesh Urveti employs the conventional “sky blue” color for water. In contrast the bright red river of Anand Shyam, a senior artist, boldly stands out among the others. His Indo River is filled with memories from the village - both dark and light. The Yamuna, taken up by Kaushel Prasad weaves together mythological tales and animal forms. Emerging with the shoreline are shapes of a forest full of animals. It is peppered with the scales and design characteristic of Gond art, and the deep blue of the river is woven together with other imaginary waterways.





And last, but far from least, is the work of Kalabai Shyam, who, at the very beginning of the project perked up and requested the Narmanda River for her hand, when the choices were offered. Naramada, for the Gond, carries the greatest meaning. It is the only river which they have all seen, as opposed to the other rivers which flow in different directions across India, and not through the region they live. Kalabai approached the river with this in mind, populating its waters with pilgrims and all of the wares of a pilgrimage. Creatures of the enchanted shores burst forth in a scale that telescopes us in and out dramatically from the journey of the pilgrims along the river. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that this river is the first to make its own way to in Tarshito's studio in Italy. In Bari, Italy, the emergence of a mixed geography has already begun, and the journey of the spirit brought forth in every brush stroke of these artists takes its next avatar. In three months, all seven rivers will make

their way back to India, to Delhi, to be reunited with the makers at the opening in Delhi's oldest gallery exclusively dedicated to folk and tribal arts, Arts of the Earth.

This project is co-created with Tarshito by

*Kaushel Prasad - Yamuna River*  
*Kalabai Shyam - Narmanda River*  
*Premi Bai - Godavari River*  
*Gariba Tekam - Ganga River*  
*Anand Kumar Shyam - Indo River*  
*Venkat Raman Singh Shyam - Saraswati River*  
*Nilesh Urveti - Kaveri River*  
*Saroj Venkat Shyam - Procession*

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 Venkat Raman Singh Shyam working on the Saraswati River in his home in Bhopal, Photo Courtesy: Luca Desiderato

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 Painting on Nrmada River is in progress in Tarshito's studio at Bari, Italy. In this artwork the Gond painting parts were done by Kalabai Shyam, Photo Courtesy: Luca Desiderato