

Ila Sankrityayan

I have always been fascinated by water. And in Ganga, the water allows one to enter a phase of mystery, to explore a deeper experience than that of it being mere scenery, and put into paint the extraordinary diversity of this river along its enormous journey," says Australian artist Kevin Pearsh about his deep love and affinity for the sacred river that made him bring it on canvas displayed in the exhibition titled *Ganga 21* at ICCR, Azad Bhavan.

The artist set out in 2006-07 to create 21 large canvasses that define the tranquility and eternity of the mystique Ganga. He travelled 2,500 km alongside Ganga from the icy cave of Gomukh to Ganga Sagar in West Bengal. Exploring his journey in India, he says, "The idea to paint this river evolved in my mind between January and March 2006. My journey started in April-May 2006 from Gomukh to Haridwar. From Haridwar began the second phase of my expedition in October the same year and it continued on to the border of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The final voyage was between Buxar

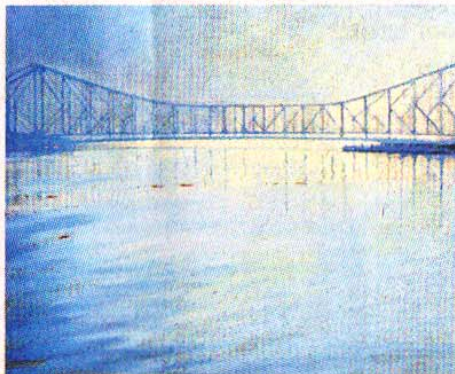
in Bihar to the delta in Bengal and Ganga Sagar in the month of February-March 2007."

Describing the first canvas, *The Himalayas*, showing snow-covered mountains under blue sky and green plains, he explains, "This painting depicts Gomukh, the spiritual source of the river and the place where the water from the mountain peaks start and form. It is the first phase of my journey which terminated in the temple town of Haridwar."

Another of his works titled *Steps at Gangotri* portrays the image of a man in saffron attire stepping down on the stairs as if he is guiding the viewer down the steps, towards the river with large size floating stones. "This is Gangotri where Ganga first touched the earth," says Pearsh, elaborating further, "Here, I painted only a small amount of water as my attention was focussed on the white stones leading down to the river. The central figure depicts the assistant priests who guide me on the rest of my journey."

Explaining his painting, *Devprayag — Bhagirathi & Alaknanda Rivers*, he says,

Eternity on canvas



Howrah Bridge

"Devprayag is the meeting point for the feeder rivers of Bhagirathi and Alakanda to become Ganga. It is a turbulent location where you can see currents converging with pilgrims bathing in the background." He next takes you to his favorite work, *Shiva — Mysteries of*



Ritual Bath

Ganga Ma and reveals, "This giant statue of Shiva in the early morning appeared to me as if the Lord is watching over the world and people with a sense of responsibility. Here, we see the last foothills of the Himalayas at Haridwar that beckon into the Indo-Gangetic plain."

Move a step ahead and you find the image of Har-ki-Pauri in Haridwar under the heading *Ritual Bath* with pilgrims taking bath in the holy river. "One of the seven most sacred sites of the river, a bustling mosaic of individuals of all ages and background made me paint them on

canvas," says Pearsh. The ensuing canvas, *Lone Fisherman*, captures Ganga on the plains as according to the artist, the river opens out as much as 2 km wide at certain places. "A lone fisherman dramatises the solitude here," he reveals.

The painting titled *Manikarnika Ghat* is the result of Pearsh's fascination about the culture and people of Varanasi. "I was enthralled by the life of this city. Here we can see the early morning rituals performed by activity priests and pilgrims at the ghat," says the artist.

From Varanasi, the artist moves to Bihar in *Eternal As Ever* that was painted in Buxar and shows a boy looking quietly at the river and sitting alone on a wall. "The boy sitting at the edge of wall seems to me as if he is looking beyond the horizons of this world for here, you cannot see the end of the river," puts in Pearsh.

Most of the artists' works captures the sand business in Kahalgaon in Bihar, especially in the painting titled *Delivery of Sand* to the islands showing the accretion of temples built over the island from centuries. In the

painting titled *Early Morning*, we see the mist-covered island one early morning and in the second, it shows the beauty of a late afternoon and is titled *Late Afternoon*.

The painting, *Howrah Bridge*, portrays the image of the famous Kolkata bridge that spans the Hooghly River in West Bengal. "The bridge presents the impressive engineering of 19th century and here the river prepares to reach the sea," explains Pearsh. *The Flower Offerings* portrays the offerings at Ganga ghat in Bihar. Explains Pearsh, "This is symbolic representation of the offerings thrown daily into the river and gives the feeling of a long journey about to reach the end. These offerings led us to the Ganga Sagar, the sacred point where the river finally meets the sea. It is a point where nothing can be seen," concludes Pearsh, revealing about his painting that depicts the end of his journey at Ganga Sagar.

Pearsh painted 21 large formats of oil on canvas depicting the inner character of Ganga and the cultural traditions of India in a magnificent and realistic way. The exhibition ends on July 28.