

Manav Gupta and his cadence of colours

His images glow in ecstasy of colours and he delights in exploring a visionary world inviting us to his other-worldly realm. This may be a denotative perception of the exciting canvases of Manav Gupta articulated in symbols. His may be quite as much an elusive pursuit of what is unknowable and indecipherable. What appears to the senses is only a feel of cosmic eminence that Manav Gupta seeks to arrest in his glorious colours and informs us in one of his poems: 'With paints I draw / which was / and what is / can one sketch what will be.'

The imaginative painter, Manav Gupta, is also a poet, deep and spiritual, with his ecstatic way of seeing. He writes verses in Hindi and English and has published a collection of his poems in English. Both in his poetry and painting he draws on a philosophic resolution of reality.

He differs sharply from many iconic stalwarts whose colours play upon details of myth or lopsided metaphysics of the myths. Manav is secular and wins instantly an all-embracing response of his viewers. When one reflects over his works, consummate in craftsmanship and composition, it is the poetry and music of his amazing dash of colours which spring to the top of everything else. A harmony integrates the glare of his light. There is a unifying intensity in his brush strokes. These have been interpreted variously. Some found in his colours a cosmic matrix while others marvelled at his liberation of light from the object. Whatever the attributes, the painter while making a logical use of concentrated colour, is ever restless to explore and invent his distinctive idiom. Our acquaintance with Manav Gupta has been less in the galleries than in the capital's poetry evenings, compelling us to wonder how he is at ease in both the fields.

Now in his forties (b. 1967), Manav has had a troubled childhood. His parents separated when he was 13 and the mother, a gentle and art-loving woman, had to sweat out to keep the family going. She then taught in a B.Ed. college in Kolkata. Manav recalls nostalgically the bucolic surroundings of the college residence near National Library where he grew up in the lap of nature. The mood, rhythm and the pageantry of nature reflected in his works owe to this experience that deeply shaped his artistic sensibility. The painter is overwhelmed when he acknowledges nature to be his first guru.

A self-taught artist, he says he learnt the grammar of painting from the veteran painter Rathin Mitra of the Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata while Vasant Pandit taught him the soul of painting. Of cheerful smiles and tranquil disposition, Manav did not have a smooth passage to painting. The rigors of existence quite often suppressed the talent when the artist consciously observed the unremitting silent sacrifice of his mother day-on-day to provide for the children. Even as an undergraduate he had to take up tuitions rather than go for art classes. He met his college expenses himself and even helped his sister who had her own dreams as a Kathak dancer.

Just when Manav graduated in physiology from Presidency College, Kolkata in 1988, his mother detected cancer. The painter had to grapple with heavy expenses of his mother's treatment and also arrange the marriage of his growing sister. Eventually his further education was shelved and locking his easel and canvas in the drawers, the painter turned to the job market. His pleasing personality and

academic performance stood him in good stead. He bagged a cushy job first in Nestle and then secured a big rise in an oil company. But he had to look after his ailing mother. The oil company which was pleased with his performance posted him back to Kolkata on a top-notch new assignment.

Rubbing shoulders with the elites of the corporate world in Kolkata he felt materially quite satisfying though his heart ached for a life of an artist. The urge grew stronger when, after the marriage of his sister in 1993, his family burden had relatively eased. Yet, for a while he let it go, till his own marriage in 1995 to Sudeshna who, in the face of a glamorous world around, chose a life of sacrifice and stood firmly by the artist when he took the daring resolve to be a full-time artist.

The proposition was galvanized in 1996 when his solo exhibition of works made a splash at the Birla Academy which picked up one of his paintings for its permanent collection. He was then one of the youngest painters to win this recognition. He now mattered in Kolkata's art world and just next year, The Taj Bengal invited him to put up a show which made a discerning impact upon the elite visitors. He was then confidently emerging from his seminal fold, attaining in the process technical and imaginative maturity.

Yet the corporate career that Manav was clinging on was coming in his way of his artistic goal. The dream of a full-time painter kept haunting him constantly till finally he took the watershed decision to say good-bye to his corporate job, well reminded by well-wishers of the impending hazards. They had a valid reason since art history teems with woeful cases of painters who lived in dire poverty and frustration. Leaving the job he said good-bye to Kolkata too. It was the year 1999. Responding to an opportunity to display his works at the Taj Palace, New Delhi, he landed in the town bag and baggage. It was a turning point for the painter. His exhibition was so successful that the Ministry of Culture was prompted to hold an exclusive display of his works in its premises.

This official exhibition of the painter drew attention of all those who mattered in the art world of Delhi. Whatever little money the painter made in the sale of his works, he spent it all producing elegant calendars rather than going for a flat or a car. His single-minded devotion however did not go in vain. His works began to reach out steadily to deserving destinations — the Roosevelt House in 2001, Leela Palace in 2002 and the Park Hotel in 2003. The painter suffered a setback in the home front during this time when after a prolonged illness his mother passed away in 2003. Manav was then experimenting with his new style of painting, the Jugalbandhi, with the renowned singer Shubha Mudgal. There was a pause and the experiment had to wait for some more years.

A dramatic turn-round dawned in 2005 when Manav's works made their advent in Rashtrapati Bhawan. The preceding year he had already made a stir at the Victoria Jones, London. At the Rashtrapati Bhawan, his paintings attracted the notice of the then President of India Dr APJ Abdul Kalam who chose the works for his book of poems brought out by Penguin. Dr Abdul Kalam acknowledged the talent of Manav eloquently at the National Gallery of Modern Art when he said: 'Manav came and stayed with me in Rashtrapati Bhawan and created beautiful canvases full of life. I can see in them the beauty of flowers. It is as if they are speaking to me with poems. First time I realized painting and poem intertwined with the imagination of a painter, leads to the birth of a new creation. That new creation touches your heart...'

With the exposure at the highest level, the beauty and grandeur of Manav's works were widely acclaimed and in 2006, he notched his rightful place in the Lalit Kala Akademi. As his market expanded

further, he gravitated the Arab World which began with works being acquired by the Omani Fine Arts Society followed by several art organizations in the Middle East. The Royal household of Oman cherishingly patronized his works. His canvases were lifted at Christie's auction in 2006 and the Bonhams, London in 2007.

Manav sets a new trend in Indian painting with the creation of what he calls 'Jugalbandhi'. It is a kind of transference of sound in colour — the theme of the song or the musical performance brought live on canvas. After his initial hit in 2003 he made it again in 2006 with Dr L Subramanyam during the French Award ceremony. In his series of Jugalbandi paintings he tapped the emotion of ragas on canvas, his brush working on the waves of cadence of flutes and santoor as also the lucid voice of singers at their classical best. The experiment which carves out Manav's unique place in painting hierarchy owes its genesis to his own vocal accompaniment to the Kathak performance of his sister in his earlier Kolkata days. The experiment sets a model for collaborative art.

Today, the busy bee of painting, Manav Gupta works in his studio in NOIDA which is a part of his residence. He says he has a long way to go on his avowed mission and has no regret that he gave up his high-profile management job for the love of brush and colour.