

Message in Clay

If you have visited India Habitat Centre in the last three months, you might have come across a flowing Ganga, made up of earthen lamps, cups and chillums.

The installation's showing has now come to an end, having registered a record viewership of over one lakh people — a record for any individual artist's public art installation in India. Artist Manav Gupta, who created the installation to highlight the importance of sustainable living, calls the experience "magical" and "divine".

"In the last few days, climate has not been favourable. There were incessant rains and storms but miraculously, not even one lamp or chillam got damaged despite not being glued or fixed to ground. In fact, when rains poured down, water carved its own path through the stones. So it blent well with nature. In fact it absorbed the power of nature," he says.

Titled Rain, the Ganga Waterfront along the Time Machine, it is a part of Gupta's ongoing series Excavations in Hymns of Clay. The show comprised five major clay installations — the River Waterfront (an ode to Ganga), the Time Machine, Rain, the Beehive Garden and the Bed of Love — all exploring themes of sustainable development and man's relationship with the natural world.

"Through my works, I want to raise consciousness of people towards earth's depleting resources. Environment is one big concern. And I am just taking forward what has already been showcased at global platforms. Personally, I have grown up very close to nature so it was obvious to translate those thoughts in my work," he says.

Gupta has been doing murals for a few years now. In 2011 he presented Bhutan–India relations on a public mural commissioned by the Government of India and mounted it in Bhutan. The monumental work consisted of a suite of 18ft × 12ft high canvases mapping the political, social and cultural ties between the two countries. He also famously painted Airtel building's five-storeyed facade.

"Public art has rarely been attempted in India. In the West, every town has public art but India is far behind. There is a need to bridge this gap. Practically speaking, an art installation draws attention from people at large. It is a medium to communicate with the public, and also works to beautify spaces and make them more vibrant," he says.

Gupta's works have been sold by Christie's, Bonhams, Philip de Pury and are in leading permanent public collections around the world including the Parliament of India, Rashtrapati Bhawan, the Royal family of Oman and Indian embassies abroad. In his present series of 12 artworks, he has only showcased five installations.

Following the conclusion of the show, Gupta carried his research to Minneapolis, Des Moines, New York, Washington DC and Miami, observing how different cultures related to their rivers through ritual objects. He gave a President's Lecture at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and the exhibition travelled to connect rivers of the world as part of his Global Public Art Project.

"Water and all the five elements of nature are our source of sustenance. Ancient civilizations from India to the world over respected and understood this sanctity. While they drew nourishment from the great rivers — be it our sacred Ganga or the Mississippi — as we grow, it's time we excavate the ancient philosophy of sustainable living. And we are all clay. Dust to dust. My art seeks to submit to this paradigm," says Gupta.

Among the publications that covered the historic installation: The Statesman ('River of Clay'), Blouin Artinfo ('Is it Mere Water or Holy Ganga?'), Outlook ('Sustainable Serendipity'), Ministry of External Affairs Magazine ('Taking Art Beyond Boundaries — Maverick Genius') and The Hindu ('Breaking the Mould').