

## The Excavated Museum — Manav Gupta is truly a unique genius

By Uma Nair, Art Critic and Historian

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Manav Gupta is truly a unique genius — the thinker and the visionary is hailed by critics as one of the most erudite and versatile contemporary artists today. After a hundred thousand footfalls at the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi at his Ganga waterfront; and taking it across the Mississippi and the Hudson in USA as part of his Global Public Art Project on sustainability connecting rivers of the world, he has created an entire 'excavated museum' at the DLF Mall of India at Sector 18, Noida till February 18 with a suite of five mega environmental art installations.

Why 'excavations in hymns of clay'? His philosophy and artist statement bring out the uniqueness behind the whole first-of-its-kind concept of a solo project of environmental art by any artist as a travelling museum and public art for sustainable development.

*He says: "Water and all 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. Hence excavations in hymns of clay."*

As a part of his outreach programme, he deploys the quintessentially Indian potter's produce of clay objects — earthen lamps (diyas), local cigar (chilam), earthen cups (kullar) — to transform their individual identity into metaphors and idioms of sustainability, context, perception and treatment as he conceptualizes and creates large-scale avant-garde works. Using the rural Indian pottery meant for everyday use, in mass numbers, he deconstructs their age-old existence as units to make them lend themselves to another form, be it in a Duchamp-like inverted concept or simply rendering them formless.

### The River Waterfront:

A site-specific installation with the invention of deploying earthen lamps and chilams as an iteration of their metaphors to form the lyrical formlessness of Time along the flow of the river. The multidimensional sensuousness of strands of rain pouring down against a waterfront is thought-provoking as a poetic device executed with dramatic presence. Using the earthen lamp as a metaphor, Manav explores issues of environment consciousness, and how perception and context interplay each other.

The earthen lamp is woven in the cultural-religious fabric of India from time immemorial. And the chilam a means of cheap intoxication to gratify. This humble small clay bowl and the local 'cigar' have a nondescript existence and only during that momentary use turn into the medium of gratifying the desires of the soul or the senses. Taken for granted. Anointed when needed. Only revered when in use. Their life is strange — like the Ganges.

Given today's world of current complex issues of treatment and perception of women as well as earth (referred to as mother earth in many quarters of Indian spirituality) the artist draws a cross-spectrum reference of eroding human values using Ganga as the idiom.

### **The Time Machine:**

With the first-of-its-kind use of the potter's produce of earthen cups to form the hourglass, the artist engages the audience with Time and its ethereal and transient passage. Clay, a naked, earth symbol of existence, resource and sustainability, and the cup as the metaphor of Time's limitedness draw us to explore how we use our resources. The fragility of clay juxtaposed with the limitedness of the 'cup of Time' draw an engagement to our waste, perception, passage and interface with Time and Life itself in a rapidly mechanized, capitalistic, consumerist human interaction with earth along our limited timelines of life.

### **Noah's Ark:**

The artist uses the symbolism of Noah's ark to underline the relevance of saving the world. A cycle of creation, un-creation, and re-creation, in which the ark plays a pivotal role. The artist excavates his impression of how a buried museum might be discovered that houses the Noah's Ark and the Time Machine and other such creations that hold secrets of sustainable living.

### **The Beehive Garden Project:**

Bees are an obvious or not-so-obvious link in the evolution chain and our sustainability. This global beehive garden project is an environmental statement about biodiversity and its crucial linkages to sustainable development.

### **Meet me by the riverside — The Bed:**

Love is what makes the world go around. The artist makes an intimate statement of love through the use of the male and female idioms of existence and how fragile love can be and yet so ethereal — another dimension of sustainable development.