

Down To Arth — How Manav Gupta uses meaningful artwork in terracotta to bring clay back to nature

By Sumati Mahrishi

The mundane clay objects become more than mere 'useful' kiln-burnt pieces of utility; they acquire meaning, they become moments in a story and chapters in Manav Gupta's series of work, 'Arth'.

A few years ago, at a display of Delhi-based artist Manav Gupta's works in Minneapolis, visitors asked him if earthen lamps would survive the snow. Gupta uses clay objects in his body of work, where he embraces nature and architecture. Earthen lamps — his ingredient for the persistent in-depth probe into nature through gigantic installations — were making viewers curious. Gupta's love for clay, especially the earthen lamp, is deep. So, to quell all doubts regarding life and longevity of clay, he left 'Shrinking River', one of the installation works, in Minneapolis snow. People were surprised. They understood his belief in clay. They understood clay and its permanence, the fragility of life, our belief in nature and elements as sacred. He adopted clay as his medium, extensively, in 2013.

No other artist uses clay and pottery in public art like Manav Gupta. His works on nature and climate change are extensive, in harmony with themes and sites he chooses, and soul stirring. In the backdrop of the recent Kerala floods, his series, 'Arth' (meaning), stands as the most gentle and revolutionary expression of art exposed to rain, trees and sunlight. Depletion of natural resources, recreating and sustaining, are at the core of the series.

Why clay?

"We are clay. Maati. Dust to dust. Hence, clay. I am clay." Art is about hope. Offering earthen lamps to people in public art, Gupta hopes that people will not discard diyas, which serve as 'a conduit of prayer to the sacred'. Clay is a representative of an element. "It represents earth and human," he says, "we deplete our resources and we are depleting humankind."

At the ongoing exhibition of his works at the grounds of Delhi's Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), stands 'Ganga the Riverfront and Matighar', his tribute to Ganga. The work flows, suspended from the rooftop of Matighar, the iconic art gallery. It presents a striking depiction of the sacred river in its various flows and stages.

"In my view, it is a perfect synergy and tribute to Matighar, which has been closed. The Ganga will lose out if we do not care for it. Concern and activism towards the environment doesn't have to be noisy. I chose to raise my concern by recreating the river and by engaging with people in mega cities."

Mimicking nature is an art. Gupta uses clay and deploys seemingly mundane objects of pottery — diya (the earthen lamp), chilum (smoking pipe), khullhad (cup) and ghara (pot) — to create rain, waterfronts and rainforests, and other aspects of nature and life. He weaves and assembles the clay objects into installation works in painstaking efforts to mimic nature and to arrive at nature as closely as he can.

There is more to his choice of material — metaphors.

"I am scrubbing the soul," he says. To him, the first realisation of using clay as a drop came from an inverted diya. "There are artists who can create from cerebral thought. For me, it has to be in the heart, the inside. It (clay) kept growing inside."

Watching Gupta's 'Waterfront' in Delhi unravels more depth and details in his work. The presence of clay in several strings of diya, chilum and khullhad woven together to form a river and installed at Matighar, involves a layer of meanings.

"It is my tribute to Matighar, which translates into an abode of mud, through my work."

The use of the different shapes and sizes of the numerous diya, chilum and khullhad and gharas used in the 'waterfront' gives it a sense of flow. The chilum lends it the cascade, diyas the flow, kullhads the break in the flow — pace and momentum — and pots the gurgle, hollows and rocks.

Rain, his work comprising chilum — the traditional smoking pipe of clay associated with intoxication — strung meticulously into thin wires, succeeds in creating a poetic depiction of rain. The viewer can feel the flow of drops. It is while standing between the falling wires studded with the chilum that Gupta's fine handling of the most simple activity in nature and season, that of rain, arises distinctly. The effect is similar to what a viewer would experience when he sees an object kept between parallel mirrors. This is more intoxicating than any intoxication associated with the chilum itself.

"I tell my viewers — get drenched in the rain of chilum."

It is fascinating how his work grows and develops for months after he has put up the installations — out in the open.

"Trees are my laboratory," he says. Rain needs trees, and trees need rain. Rain invites life. Worms, insects, birds, creepers, climbers, and seedlings live and play on and around this installation.

At the IGNCA lawns, Gupta's installations have spent a monsoon — out in the open, under sun, rain, night and day. Clay — maati — his medium for art in Arth develops a warm relationship with the site.

The reassembling of the units swirls up a new cycle of recreation every time, every display, every site. Earth to art to metaphor and back. 'Dust to dust'. No one uses baked clay for public art like Manav Gupta and nothing scrubs the soul better than clay.

Foreign audiences are much more impressed, eager and far ahead in terms of wanting the works.

"As always, it so happens, we (Indians) realise our worth much later."