

Chennai's complicated relationship with its dying rivers, as chronicled by artists

Author - Vinita Govindarajan, Published on - 18.3.2019

The DAMned Art Project attempts to study and eventually change Chennai's relationship with its rivers.

Madras Photo Bloggers

To be greeted by a traditional kolam, or rangoli, at the entrance of a building or household is hardly unusual in Tamil Nadu. The intricate pattern of rice flour is an ancient art that is believed to bring general prosperity into one's home.

However, since February 3, visitors to the Lalit Kala Academy in Chennai have been greeted by a large, unusual kolam. Instead of the usual strokes of white powder, this is a kolam made of waste collected from the banks of Chennai's Adyar river. Tucked into the grooves of the design are toothbrushes and rubber slippers, medicine containers, liquor bottles and plastic toys, including the popular cartoon character Chhota Bheem with his slingshot. This is Chennai-based artist Parvathi Nayar's way of rethinking the city's relationship with its polluted rivers.

Nayar's project is one of the 13 installations presented at DAMned Art Project, an exhibition organised by the Goethe Institute of Chennai, which runs until March 4. The exhibition displays ideas and simulations of public art based on Chennai's polluted rivers, curated by artists Ravi Agarwal and Florian Matzner. Over 20 artists from India and Europe visited the city and walked along its chemical-ridden waters, meeting local communities who lived on its banks, to come up with an idea for a piece of public art, depicting their individual interpretations of what the rivers mean to the city.

Parvathi Nayar's kolam. Credit: Madras Photo Bloggers

Chennai has three main rivers – the Kosasthalaiyar to the north, the Adyar river to the south, and the Cooum flowing between them across central Chennai. The three rivers are connected by the Buckingham canal built in the 19th century for navigational purposes. Over the past five decades, with commercial establishments and residential areas increasingly draining toxic waste into their waters, the seasonal rivers have turned into sewage canals, breeding grounds for mosquitoes, and home to fewer varieties of fish. The Cooum, in particular, has been degraded so much that its name is now synonymous in local parlance with a foul-smelling drain. For Chennai's residents, it is a river to keep away from.

"The project is about the what the river means in urban spaces and the multiple meanings they create," said artist Ravi Agarwal, a curator of the project. "We are trying to think about the multiple ways in which a river features in sculptures, politics and the social fabric of the city."

HG Arunkumar. Credit: Madras Photo Bloggers

Kolam for the river

For Parvathi Nayar, the idea of kolam for the river struck her after she met historian Padmapriya Bhaskaran, who had discovered several temples along the Cooum.

"I was trying to see a different past or a different future for the river," she said. "I see it flowing past ever day outside my window and it is smelly and dirty. I decided to go on a little journey to the temples at the source of the Cooum. While talking to people on the way, I understood there was a time when the Cooum was considered a sacred or a holy river."

This was when she began seeing the temples and the kolams outside them in a different light. "Kolam cuts across every caste and creed, from a poor fisherman's home to outside a corporate bank," she said. "It seemed like a great symbol to play with, that would also speak very strongly of Chennai. I wanted something of this place, this region and time to be there in the exhibition."

Nayar's initial idea was to make the kolam on the red oxide floor next to the Cooum with blocks of ceramic, which she had got cast in the shape of algae that was found in the river – "From a distance it would look like a typical white kolam but when you came closer you would realise that it has a very strange form that spoke about the present nature of the river." However, this project did not work out since the organisers could not get permission from city authorities for public art installation along the river.

Community participation

Nayar had to rework her kolam to fit into the exhibition space. She visited the Adyar river, which flows south of the Cooum, and was struck by the amount of garbage in its shallow waters. "And so organically the idea came that why not do a kolam made out of the garbage that comes with the river, and in a sense, bring the river into the gallery," she said. "This is not industrial garbage, this is garbage that you and I threw into the river. So I felt that all of Chennai in a way is complicit, and is part of my project."

With the assistance of 40 volunteers, gunny bags of trash were collected and segregated over two months. "I looked at it and allowed the form of the kolam to be dictated by what we collected," she said. "This is a kolam to invite, it is an invitation to the next world, to the world we are leaving behind for our children."

Another community-driven project at the exhibition is that of Vienna-based artist Anna Witt, who was fascinated by the production activity that took place across the city. Witt had travelled along the river and asked female sweepers to chalk out the shapes of the waste they find along its banks. These shapes were then shown to school children in workshops and they were asked to draw animals and birds that they associated with the shapes. Around 250 of these drawings were being embroidered onto a long fabric by traditional craftsmen at the exhibition venue. "These will be given back to the community who participated in the project," said Witt, who named it *The Circle of Life and Things*, to reflect on humans' relation with nature, production and recycling.

Anna Witt's 'The Circle of Life and Things'. Credit: Madras Photo Bloggers

No space for public art

The rest of the projects are shown in the form of simulations, such as artist HG Arunkumar's dam-like structure made of 1,00,000 plastic bottle caps to show the consumption patterns of society that live around the river.

Artist Gigi Scaria's installation *Source of a River in Descending Order* is a particularly fascinating work, in which the water flowing from one basin to the next turns murkier as it moves down each level. This explores the idea that while people and communities receive much from the energy of the river, "what we return to her can be the cause of her death".

Gigi Scaria with his project 'Source of a River in Descending Order'. Credit: Madras Photo Bloggers

These were meant to be physical installations by the Cooum river, but the institute could not get permission from the authorities even after trying for two years. "Instead of the open urban space, where public art projects happen worldwide, we saw ourselves confined to a traditional exhibition space with an entrance, walls and all the rest," said Seema Massot, the project coordinator. "We decided that the original artists' ideas and plans had to be made known to the citizens of Chennai and to engage in a discussion of 'what could have been, if...'.

Unlike in Europe, India has not had many such public art projects, said curator Ravi Agarwal, who had in the past curated a similar project on the Yamuna river in Delhi. "But art can change the way people think or perceive about something," he said. "This kind of art can make people come to the river, not ignore it, not take it to be just a dirty river but something that you would want to come and see. Each of these projects uncovered the river in a different way, to show that the river is not just flowing water, but has a complex interaction with all of us."

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