



# 'State of Cooum is a reflection of society'

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*Four artists and water activists open up on why art must lend its voice to the dialogue on climate change and inspire people to act towards cleaning up our rivers and cities*



Hyewon, Pa. Madhavan, Melina and Guiyoung (Photo: Justin George)

**Chennai:** Melina Nicolaidis, Hyewon Lee, Guiyoung Hwang and Pa. Madhavan are a part of InKo Centre's Water Matters, an artistic intervention towards social responsibility. Melina feels that an artist has a larger role to play in our society right now. "We are all more connected that we have ever been but the access to vital information is not enough.

People may have access to information but they may not

interpret it the right way. I think the ethics of activism have really moved into the artistic world. At this moment, environmental awareness is of top priority. The artist, as a communicator or messenger of climate change, can take data and facts from a scientist and interpret in a way that the general public can understand. Once the general public understands something, they can have an opinion, which will inspire them to put pressure on policy," said this Cypriot artist.

Guiyoung Hwang added, "I personally think that there is something different in art and the way an artist supports what is going on in the world." Hyewon Lee, curator and professor of art history at Daejin University, South Korea, pointed out that the answer to our future lies in the past. "I am fascinated by the old tanks that were built many, many years ago in Tamil Nadu.

These tanks are perfect for irrigation and they use up the water overflowing from the rivers during rainy season. We need to replicate such structures from the past and incorporate them into our cities. We need to look into our past to find solutions for the future," said this artist.

## Dialogue on Cooum

Pa. Madhavan, the artistic director of the Cooum Art Festival, said the state of our rivers reflect our society. "The Cooum is polluted because of each one of us, who don't take ownership to keep the river clean. We are responsible for the state the river is in now," said this artist, whose project 'I Am Here' focusses on creating a dialogue around the river Cooum. From January 14-17, Madhavan will be found beside the Cooum for 72 hours. In this solo performance, Madhavan will interact with people and also take them on a walk along the river, to create awareness about the ecosystem.

## City Explorer

Fasting  
for the Cooum

GEETA PADMANABHAN

Photo artist Pa Madhavan can live anywhere. Last weekend, he emerged unscathed (a few kilos lighter maybe, but otherwise unharmed) from 72 hours of fasting on the Ethiraj Salai-side of the Cooum riverbank. With a plywood board for a bed, a few plastic sheets to keep the mid-day sun out and cans of water to keep him hydrated, he was at home and free to commune with the river he loves.

"Every few years, I look for a new landscape," he says, when I meet him on the second day of his fast. He was initially in Ooty, before he moved to Goa, and he has now come to Chennai to explore the Cooum. In 2011, attracted to Gandhian philosophy, he and a group of fellow-artists covered the Dandi March route on foot, to experience the river/water ethos of the country. It

**Pa Madhavan on the banks of the Cooum**

brought him this July to the Kosasthalai river, the starting point of the Cooum, to trace its flow through Chennai. "Twenty people walked those 72 kilometres with me. The river's journey is a revelation."

It is well-recorded. The Cooum (Triplicane/Poonamallee) river is said to spring from a well or "coopam" in a village called Cooum in Tiruvallur district, about 70 kilometres from Chennai.

"There's a temple in the village, whose Shiva deity is called Cooum." The big tank in the village gets water from the old Bangaru Channel. To mark the main course of the



river, you need to be in Sattarai village, around 65 kilometres north of Chennai.

I'm fighting to keep my lunch down in the overwhelming stench from the water-body, but Madhavan has no such problem. He hasn't eaten for a day and is smiling. "There is a before-after story here," he says.

"In the first few kilometres, the mostly dry bed {in July} sees plenty of activities on the banks." The water is used for irrigation, drinking and bathing. The moment it reaches Avadi, you'll notice tankers unloading sewage in full public view. "People react to

the river differently. At the starting point, people live facing the river, walk to it, but once in Chennai, people move away holding their nose. This is a perfect example of how a natural resource is degraded."

The river is beautiful, he says. "Do you see the butterflies?" he asks. He is right; I see scores flitting above the lush leaves and flowers of *Alternanthera sessilis* that forms a bed all over the bank. At 5 a.m., there's no stench, as evaporation hasn't begun. That's when the water and the rising sun make the riverscape ethereal. "See that bend in the river flanked by green vegetation? The boat-docking structure across? The shacks that sell meat? That's how the river speaks, and I stand in solidarity: 'I am here, I am the Cooum'."

Old-timers in the area have memories of a clean Cooum, he says. Some 40-50 years ago, people swam in the waters, caught fish and used boat services. It is human sewage that pollutes the river; no factory discharges waste into it. Cap all discharge pipes, run the water through recycling

plants before letting it out. "Why should the Cooum be an open toilet? People should take ownership of the river. We need to work with the Government."

He rues the fact that the Young Indians-CII-proposed Cooum Art Festival to be held on the riverbank couldn't take place. It was to be an affair with participation of artists from 22 countries to bring focus to the Cooum. But Chennai got flooded, priorities changed. "I am confident it will happen; water will be a huge issue in the future," he says. He cites Rajendra Kumar's success in water conservation in Alwar, as an example of "what ordinary people can achieve".

He snaps me with his pinhole camera, made with a matchbox and a piece of tin-sheet torn off a beverage can. The fast, he says, is a self-purification exercise. "It has a purpose; it's for awareness and conservation. I am documenting the surroundings and the people who visit me; will take it further. An artist has more responsibility in bringing out issues. He can create images — positive and negative — for public consumption."

Coom river and Napier bridge



## ARTIVISM ALONG THE COOUM

Artist Pa. Madhavan will embark on 72 hours of 'activism fasting' and art, along the banks of the Coom river, to shine light on its forgotten beauty

ARPITHA RAO

DECCAN CHRONICLE

**T**he term artivism, a portmanteau of 'art' and 'activism', is slowly picking up in Chennai. Pa. Madhavan is one such artist, to whom the world is a canvas, and a pinhole camera made with a matchbox is his brush. Through these tools, he paints, speaks about, and displays his concerns towards society.

In one such initiative, titled 'I am here', beginning on January 14, he wishes to fast for 72 hours along the banks of the Coom river to bring attention to the river's pitiable state, and how it should be improved. He will reside by the banks of the river near the Pantheon bridge, opposite Radisson Blu Hotel in Egmore. This exercise is a continuation of the Walk Along the River and the Coom Art Festival, which was curated by the artist himself.

Pointing out that Chennaiites — government employees, business magnates and the general public — are responsible for the contaminating the river, Madhavan says, "I find it impossible to say that only one person

or group is responsible for polluting the Coom; we all are. As an artist I felt that it was my duty to understand why this is happening." This required him to go on a journey of self-realisation, so he chose to go on a fast while practicing pinhole photography. "Most religions use fasting as a method of self-realisation and purification. In this state, the body and mind are most alert and hence produce the best of ideas and thoughts. Me being a Gandhian was also another reason for me to carry out this exercise — when Gandhi wanted to bring attention to a certain issue, he inflicted pain on himself. That's when people started becoming curious as to why he was harming himself, thereby joining the silent protest for justice," he says.

On why he named the programme 'I am here' — "It's like I am assuring the river that I haven't forgotten it and that I will restore it. Also, the Coom Art Festival failed miserably last year due to various reasons but I'm not somebody who runs away when I face a problem. This initiative is a way of telling everybody that I'm still here and I haven't run away," explains Madhavan.

"This artistic social project's aim is to bring artists together to experience the river ecosystem; its interaction with the landscape and the relationship between river and people. So, any artist is welcome to join me, for as long as they wish to. I would love to indulge in conversation or open dialogue with people. This is also an opportunity for artists to explore their own relation with the river Coom," he says in conclusion.



This social project aims at bringing artists together to experience the relationship between Coom river and people