

SR
SMART ARTKISHORE SINGH

Catalytic art

Ahead of the Commonwealth Games, a number of artworks had been planned for the capital till local politics intervened. Did the city have permission to alter land use for the installation of sculptures? Who would maintain them? Had a committee decided on the locations? The artists? As policy paralysis set in, the chief minister was able to get only one — still incomplete — installation by Vibhor Sogani assembled overnight at a crossing, one of New Delhi's very few public works of art.

Even now, some art foundations are wondering why they are unable to donate works of art to the city government — with the proviso that they actually be installed instead of being consigned to some *malkhana*. As New Delhi grapples with a problem of plenty with no result to show for it, Mumbai has stolen the lead from under its nose. Its new airport is blitzed with works of art that has won the admiration of travellers. While it is an experiential space, there are a few nay-sayers unsure whether this layering of centuries of art,



Tourists who visit India know of Anish Kapoor whose large installations are part of their city's skylines in the US and various European capitals. They might be disappointed not to find anything by this "Indian" artist in any public space in India

craft and design served up like *shaadi ka khana*, all together in one plate, works. But it is designed to awe, which result it serves up more than adequately, making New Delhi's T3 look anaemic by comparison.

For some months now, civil work has been going on in front of a hotel I frequent at Nariman Point. While that work is still progressing, this week a contemporary work of art was installed at the Trident Hotel junction that will elicit several reactions among visitors as well as Mumbaikars. I place amusement high on that list, perhaps even admiration and, in equal measure, derision. But one thing is sure, you can hardly miss the 10-feet-high ballooning baby head by Chintan Upadhyay finished in a bright red, with scenes of city life painted over the somewhat ominous-looking, pouting baby's fascia.

The sculpture is part of art collector Harsh Goenka-led RPG Foundation's attempt to "start conversations around art in public space", a programme that includes the installation of sculptures by prominent artists at traffic intersections to create an "art corridor". Anupa Mehta's curatorial choice of Upadhyay, Valay Shende and Jaideep Mehrotra might be unorthodox but it is nonetheless pertinent, a starting point that might trigger similar philanthropic undertakings by other well-heeled citizens of Maximum City.

The sculpture is part of art collector Harsh Goenka-led RPG Foundation's attempt to "start conversations around art in public space", a programme that includes the installation of sculptures by prominent artists at traffic intersections to create an "art corridor". Anupa Mehta's curatorial choice of Upadhyay, Valay Shende and Jaideep Mehrotra might be unorthodox but it is nonetheless pertinent, a starting point that might trigger similar philanthropic undertakings by other well-heeled citizens of Maximum City.

This column, though, isn't about Goenka or the artists but the curious ennui that our local governments and municipalities have with regard to art. At a time when the distinguishing character and architecture of our cities has been relentlessly photocopied so a Jaipur is no longer distinguishable from a Lucknow, Surat, Coimbatore or Bangalore, art can make at least some difference in public spaces. Aesthetic or provocative art has the capability of drawing visitors from around the world.

Frequent tourists I meet in India know of Anish Kapoor whose installations are part of their city's skylines in the US and across European capitals. They might be disappointed not to find anything by this "Indian" artist in any public space in India, but not so much as we are at the absence of public art in our increasingly sterile cities.

Why can't legislators and bureaucrats find some spot in our cities for art that, however appropriate or argumentative, will divert our attention from the immediate chaos, develop interest beyond Bollywood and cricket, and contribute to the idea of India as a civilisation that seems to have been left behind in the decades since independence? Why must the only art we are familiar with be of the past in our increasingly sallow present? When, or even how, can we hope to trigger our own Renaissance moment?

Kishore Singh is a Delhi-based writer and art critic.

These views are personal and do not reflect those of the organisation with which he is associated