

The Evolution of Street art and Graffiti in India

Aparajita Bhasin

Independent Researcher

aparajita.bhasin@gmail.com

Abstract

This working essay attempts to trace the history of art making in the public space in India. This is important for understanding the evolutionary process of the local graffiti and street art culture and the organisation of many street art festivals across the country. This festival structure often leads to a collaboration with various government bodies in order to work within a city or a neighbourhood to create a large scale immersive experience. This essay will try to argue the importance of people in the creation and evaluation of street art while collaborating and negotiating with various government institutions.

1. Street art in India

The practice of painting in public and communal spaces is an old one in India. The oldest evidence of mural making comes from the Buddhist cave painting in Ajanta, Maharashtra. These caves were accidentally discovered in 1819 and date back to the second century BC (Mitra, 2004). Having inspired artists and sculptors for generations, the Ajanta murals continue to be an important part of Indian history of art. Folk art can also be seen painted on the interior and exterior walls of the homes of tribal communities as part of the local traditions (Figure1).

Cultural marking of the streets has long prevalence in all regions of the country, urban and semi urban. The mode of expression and manifestations have been quite unique, for example, hand painted Bollywood posters, typographic signboards, truck art, slogans, images of gods painted along sidewalks or tiles affixed to walls to prevent people from urinating in public, painted advertisements by small businesses, and political graffiti (for examples, see Figures 2a,b,c,d,e,f). West Bengal, which was the epicentre for political graffiti in 1960-1990, had a thriving culture where political parties and the common man equally expressed themselves in the public sphere, as aptly explained by Kamayani Sharma:

It was a multi-layered and textured conversation between the frequently anonymous artist, the public and the constructed environment. Ranging from drawings of Naxalite party workers killed

by the police sketched using pieces of charcoal taken from their funeral pyres to Portraits of Indira Gandhi in psychedelic colours, these images were subversive, irreverent, socially aware and gave vent to a deeply felt resentment and anger against the establishment. (Sharma, 2018: 41)

These graffiti practices have since disappeared from the streets of Kolkata, the centre of political power in West Bengal. As graffiti practices declined in Kolkata, a rise in tags could be observed in Delhi and Mumbai by artists like Yantra in 2006, Zine in 2007 and Daku in 2008 (Shukla, 2012).

While the community of graffiti artists is growing slowly over time, the practice of street art in an organised fashion is also rapidly growing. Many street art festivals are being organised across the country like those by St+art India Foundation, Delhi street art, Shillong Street art festival (April 2018), or the Kolkata street art festival organised by Jogen Chowdhury. The first instance of a street art event being organised was in Delhi, 2012, called 'Khirkee extention' organised by Astha Chauhan and Matteo Ferraresi. For Aastha, the impetus was to see if a public art project can exist without funding and by its own merit, because, in her opinion, receiving funding can dilute the artistic expression and act as a censor to the ideas you want to portray (Chauhan, 2018). This event brought together like-minded people in an organic and unplanned manner. The local b-boys came to the event on their own accord and performed and artists approached the organisers to paint as part of the festival, for example. The success of the festival according to Aastha was the

economic independence and transparency and the trust of the residents (Chauhan, 2018).

Up until 2012, and before Extension Khirkee, there was a small scene for graffiti and street artists who acted independently and did not have a large community to engage with. Artists mostly acted locally, tagging or painting murals, while collaborating with local patrons.

Post 2012, with the rise of social media and the outreach it provided to the Extension Khirkee festival, a market was created for the consumption of murals (Chauhan, 2018). This led to the creation of what we now term as the Indian Street Art scene. Organisations such as Delhi street art and St+art India Foundation were established in the following years, and they developed a style of working that brought various government organisations on-board. The idea was to create Murals to beautify public spaces with all permissions in place, says Hanif Kureshi, a co-founder of St+art India Foundation and an artist himself (Sharma, 2018). But joining hands with government bodies such as NDMC, DMRC, Swachh Bharat, Ministry of urban development and CPWD, inadvertently gives away the artist's freedom of expression. The images created as a consequence are un-offensive and devoid of any strong meaning (Sharma, 2018).

At the same time, the graffiti practice in India took shape in unique ways visually, with the artists commentating on ongoing socio-political debates. For example, Daku's many interventions in the city's available infrastructure, *Mat do* (Figure 3) is a commentary on the then upcoming elections of 2014 and the ongoing debate of whether one should vote or not considering the recent political upheaval the city of Delhi had witnessed. Figure 4 comments on the social problems of rape and consumerism on already existing "Stop" signs.

Over the years, one can observe the absence of such commentary in the public space. In 2016, Daku created an artwork for St+art India's Lodhi Art District 'Time changes everything' as part of the 'St+art Delhi 2016 festival' which displays the slow assimilation of the graffiti artist into the street art format. Though Daku still engages in making graffiti, he has since moved more towards street art. Similarly, many graffiti artists have moved from an unsanctioned graffiti practice towards street art which is either commissioned or created with sanctions from government organisations or various patrons. The practice of graffiti thus never took root in India in a big way, as Sharma states, "with any subversive spirit being tamed by the adoption of the less offensive genre of street art." (Sharma, 2018: 35)

2. The people

Most organisers of street art festivals or mural festivals have asserted their aim to take art out of the gallery space to take it to the people; thereby, making it more accessible (Sharma, 2018: 34; St+art Kolkata Press release, 2018). Such a claim, to begin with, establishes the importance given to the people, who are not necessarily 'the art world public' (Dickie, 1984:80) but also includes people who would otherwise, for example, not visit a museum or a gallery. This would include a wide range of people – art professionals, art enthusiasts, students, residents of the neighbourhood in question and passers-by.

Since the art form in question is practiced in communal places, de Certeau's discussion plays an important role here. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau talks about the important relationship a place has with the people, the transformation of the many "configuration of positions" called 'places,' by differentiating places from 'space' arguing that a "place is a practiced space. Thus, the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into space by walkers" (de Certeau, 1984:117). This is further explored by Merleau Ponty who distinguishes between geometrical space and anthropological space. According to Merleau Ponty, "there are as many spaces as there are distinct spatial experiences." (as cited in de Certeau, 1984:118) Taking into consideration this phenomenological perspective on spaces any person traverses, the experience of the various artistic interventions in the fabric of the city will lead to a range of responses.

Considering the involvement of various government bodies in the organisation of street art events and festivals and the reach of such art works and events, it is worth questioning the process of putting together a festival that, as a consequence, stands between the government institution exerting control and a large audience base. Do street art festivals successfully negotiate between the restrictions directly and indirectly imposed by the government institutions and the intention of putting forward art that is for the people. It is also essential to study the extent to which the local community is affected by an intervention like the creation of Lodhi Art District in New Delhi or the Sassoon Dock art project in Mumbai. Both of these projects intended to reinvigorate the neighbourhoods by an organised artistic intervention. In Lodhi Art District, over 30 murals have been painted in a single neighbourhood over a period of two years, and as a



Fig.1 A mud house in Bihar, painted in Madhubani art
Image source: <http://blog.aobihar.com/the-story-of-mud-houses-of-bihar/>

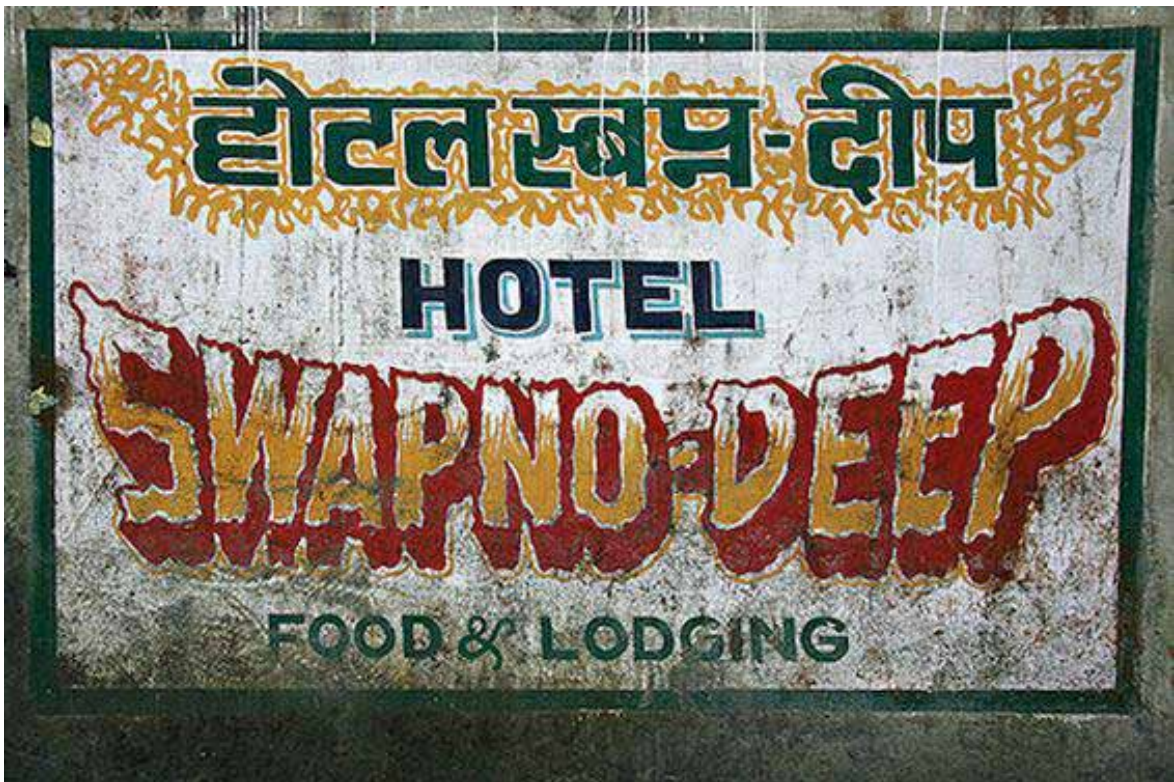


Figure 2 a) Hand painted advertisement
Image source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/66357794487351690/>



Figure 2 b) Hand painted Bollywood film posters. Image source: <https://scroll.in/article/719468/the-magic-of-mumbais-alfred-talkies-and-the-dying-art-of-hand-painted-posters>



Figure 2 c) Truck art - Image Source: <https://www.quora.com/>, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-05-27/prancing-horses-peacock-feathers-and-spaceship-these-pakistani-trucks-aren-t-any>



Figure 2 d) Hand-painted signboards
Image Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/195977021256085172/>



Figure 2 e) Political graffiti, West Bengal Image source: <http://indianexpress.com/article/elections-2016/cities/kolkata/west-bengal-election-2016-the-writing-on-the-wall/>



Figure2 f) Gods idols along foot-paths to avoid public urination
Image source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20601552>



Figure 3. Daku, Mat Do, 2014
Image Source: St+art India Foundation



Figure 4 a),b) Daku, Stickers on existing stop sign
Image Source: St+art India Foundation

result can provide ample information to better understand the implications of an ongoing project over a long period of time. The Sassoon Dock art project, on the other hand, was organised in the Sassoon dock area with the support of the Mumbai port trust (MBPT) in an attempt to revitalise the dock area. This project lasted three months with a temporary exhibition inside a warehouse with multiple murals created in the surrounding areas. The Sassoon Dock Art project will be crucial in analysing the impact of an event on the local fishing community and possibly a changing relationship with government organisations (MBPT).

Alison Young (2014) said in *Street Art, Public City*, this growing popularity of street art has led to “changes in school curriculum, the generation of profit in the art market, changes in curatorial practice as galleries adapt to the difficulties of exhibiting work originally meant for this street and architectural developments incorporating graffiti and street art into urban design.” Another change that I would want to study through Lodhi Art District and Sassoon Dock Art project would be a change in curatorial practices when applied to a large-scale festival organised in the public space for a medium of art that was supposed to thrive without any intervention and control.

References

- Chauhan, A., 2018. Interview with Aastha Chauhan.
- De Certeau, M. 1984. *The practice of everyday life*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Dickie, G., 1984. *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art*. Haven, New York.
- Mitra, D., 2004. Ajanta, Director General Archaeological Survey of India.
- Sharma, K., 2018. In Full View. *Art India Magazine* 21(4), Quarter 4.
- Shukla, S., 2012, Street Smart, The Telegraph, https://www.telegraphindia.com/1120527/jsp/graphiti/story_15535282.jsp
- St+art Kolkata 2018 Press release, shared by St+art India team
- Young, A., 2014. *Street art, public city: Law, crime and the urban imagination*. Routledge, London.

Other References

- Interview with Nilesh Artist, 2018
- Interview with Siddharth Gohil Aka Khatra, 2018
- Lu Pan., 2015. *Aestheticizing Public Space: Street visual politics In East Asian Countries*, Intellect.
- Montefiore, C. S., 2014. Graffiti tests the limits of free expression in China, BBC Culture <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20131206-the-great-scrawl-of-china>
- Novak, D., 2017. Historical dissemination of graffiti art. *Street art and urban creativity scientific journal*, 29-42
- Sanada, R., Hassan, S. (201). *Graffiti Asia*. Laurence King publishing.