



Research Paper

Graffiti Art: A Modern Approach to Address Social Concern

Ramesh Sampui

Research Scholar (Ph.D.)
Department of Visual arts
Himachal Pradesh University
Shimla- 171005

ABSTRACT: Graffiti is an expressive art form made on the surface (wall) of public places. It reflects the characteristics and lifestyle of a particular society; moreover it is one of the important art forms which show the cultural growth of the country. Graffiti is a well-known form of art expression in western countries; they have graffiti culture and museum for graffiti art. In India non-political urban graffiti is a newer form of expression, but it is trying to spam the city walls rapidly in the last few years. Within the short period of time, ten to fifteen years Indian graffiti artists have shown their talent and skill to attract attention. They are creating the environment to rethink on various issues which they are addressing. In my proposed article I try to concentrate on the area of urban graffiti which mainly focuses on the various social and environmental issues.

Keywords: Graffiti, Modern, Society, issue, expression.

Statement of problem: Though Graffiti art has its own distinct spontaneous characteristic yet it has not been noticed properly in India; and we are yet to gain a position in the world graffiti map.

Methodology: Based on field study and data collection.

Analysis and findings: Different stylistic forms of graffiti art, various approaches of presentation, art as a tool of social criticism, and critical aesthetic analysis.

Received 13 July, 2021; Revised: 27 July, 2021; Accepted 29 July, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.
Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

Graffiti, a plural form of *graffito*, derived from the Greek word *Graphien* means to write, mostly illicitly. Generally graffiti indicates writing or drawing, scratch or scribble on walls which are visually accessible to the general public. Graffiti includes bathroom wall markings, proclamation of love, signatures on cultural heritage sites as a form of vandalism; there are other forms of graffiti which claim it's position above vandalism such as political and social graffiti. Nowadays graffiti artists in India are commenting on socio-political issues through the medium of street art. Beside political graffiti there is the form of social graffiti which too has a serious purpose. This paper aims to focus and to understand the importance of social graffiti in India which is quite new but modern in approach.

This modern Graffiti is considered a form of artistic expression and creativity; made on the surface of public places. It is a cross-cultural phenomenon and accessible to common people. It reflects the characteristic and lifestyle of a particular society; moreover, it is one of the important art forms that show the cultural growth of the country. Graffiti art is a flexible and expressive medium which has its own communicative strategy to animate people to engage in visual dialogue. Through this medium people can publish their ideas, can speak about problems and highlight the darker side of a self-denying society. With striking visuals it manifests personal and collective ideologies or expresses a wide range of issues, unlike vandalism. It is a form of visual communication and those artists attached to this form of art are passionate about their work and are socially conscious. Usually, graffiti artists do not sign their real name, instead they use a nickname or a symbol related to the aesthetics of their works.

There are various artists and collectives who have been taken charge of the city walls across the country to express underlying social and environmental messages through their artistic expression. Each artist and each group has his own style of representation and own point of view. My search is to understand the nature of their works and connection, and the impact on the larger society. To understand it, I have to concentrate on the works of various influential graffiti artists and groups across the nation. Some of these artists have hidden their name and identities and remain anonymous; while others are open to tag their name on their works. These

artists are working in various cities. These artist or collectives are such as Daku, Yantra, they are working on the Delhi circuit; Tyler and Jheel Goradia in Mumbai, Guess Who in Kochi, Baadal Nanjundaswamy in Bengaluru and various others.

II. DAKU

Daku, a Delhi-based anonymous graffiti artist, best known for writing his symbolic name in *Devnagari* script to add a *Desi* twist to his graffiti and to reach to the larger section of the Indian population. This is also his way to protest against the established typography which generally used by other painters. He has been doing graffiti since 2006, mostly by using stencil and spray paints. He comments on social issues regularly by his works. Though there is a very thin boundary between political and social graffiti. Sometimes it is very hard to differentiate between them as they are much interconnected, some of Daku's work stands between that thin boundaries.



i. 'Stop' and ii. 'Mat Do' (don't give) – Graffiti works by Daku.



ii. Mat Do (Don't give)

2.1 STOP

He modified several 'STOP' sign in Delhi before the 2010 Commonwealth Games to deliver messages like 'Stop corruption', 'Stop promising', 'Stop Raping', 'Stop Bribing' and 'Stop Pretending' to provoke reactions.

2.2 Mat Do

He pasted a big hand signed 'Mat Do' before the Indian general election of 2014 across various places in South Delhi. It displayed a fist hand with an inked middle finger pointing up, giving a variety of possible hidden meanings.



iii. Rocket Cylinders- Graffiti by Daku.



iv. Rocket Cylinders

2.3 Rocket Cylinders

Some years ago after the LPG price “sky-rocketed”, Daku spray-painted these rocket shaped cylinders.



v. Row of Snails, Graffiti work by Daku.

2.4 Row of Snails

To mock and to highlight Bengaluru’s chronic *Traffic jam* Daku pasted a row of snails across the city.

2.5 Daku+Kuda

One of his work at the *Delhi Street Art Festival* in 2014 is signed ‘D A K U + K U D A’ is an anagram of his name; is a clever play of words as KUDA is also a *Hindi* word for garbage. He targeted garbage bins to create an awareness of garbage disposal.



vi. **Installation:** Shadow and reflection, by Daku.

Other than graffiti Daku extended his creativity to various other activities such as installation art, commissioned work and street art. These include his experimental street art with light, shadow and reflection at the Kochi Biennale in 2012. He participated in the *India Art Fair Delhi* in 2015 and created a stencilled mural with the slogan ‘*Commissioned Vandalism*’. His *Shadow Art Installation* in Lodhi colony, Delhi in 2016, *Time Changes Everything*’ a work inspired from the ancient technique of measuring time; this is graffiti in motion. The variety of work that he has done cannot be expressed in a few terms. His work is a meeting point of various art forms.

III. YANTRA

Yantra is a *Sanskrit* word for “machine”. *Yantra*’s art looks like a complexity of machines and organic forms; it is a bio-mechanical style. Their art expression covers a wide range of topic, criticise various socio-political issues, particularly neglected issues like water and air pollution or preservation of endangered animals. These issues are placed in front of the general public to think what is it and why is it here? Such works are like:

3.1 Parmanu Muskaan

This work done on a wall in the Khirki Village in New Delhi, a part of the Khirki street art Festival. This piece of work refers to ‘Smiling Buddha’, an assigned code name of India’s first nuclear weapon explosion in Pokhran. Many of us heard about the devastating aftermath scenario of that place. This piece of work raise many questions related to social, environmental and ethical!



vii. Parmanu Muskaan: painted in Delhi. By Yantra.

3.2 Save Rhino

Yantra creating awareness on preservation of endangered animals. He is actively running a visual campaign to save One Horned Rhino in Assam.



viii. and ix. Save Rhino campaign graffiti Painted in Guwahati, Assam. By Yantra

These two images tell the story of human greed, that doesn’t even left innocent animal; and raised a questioned of our ethical behaviour.

3.3 Lost Butterfly

This visual campaign created in Assam, to create awareness against extinction of butterflies.



x. Lost Butterfly

IV. GUESS WHO

A Kochi-based artist or collective, who is famous for black and white stencil graffiti. *Guess Who* has been influenced by the famous anonymous British Graffiti artist *Banksy*. *Guess Who's* works represent the assimilation of Indian and Western traditions of art. Their works criticise gender stereotypes and various social oddities, but it also celebrates national achievements.

His work just reverses the very familiar image of domestic work scenario and conventional mindset of society. The artwork he creates that can make someone stop in front of it and think what this piece of work meant for? Then people can discover the very familiar stereotype mindset of the society that need to be change.



xi. A work by Guess Who.



xii. Grand ma in a Sari with a macho pose, riding a bike. Xiii. And a lady on a Skating Board, by Guess Who.



xiv. **Sold**, Graffiti works by Guess Who.



Xv. A national achievement

4.1 **SOLD**

The work has a very symbolic meaning. It's pointing that while following religion we are being biased or sold to the particular religion knowingly or unknowingly. And the work is very relevant to the situation of contemporary India today.

The last image is a national achievement and pride for all of us; India's Mars mission Celebration leading by a female scientist.

V. **BAADAL NANJUNDASWAMY**

Baadal Nanjundaswamy is a Bengaluru-based artist who works in multi-disciplinary areas such as graffiti-street art, sculpture, installation. His works aims at highlighting civic issues. He is able to elevate his work to the level of activism. His work creates waves on social networks and makes a huge impact among people. Some of his interventions are: placing a life-size crocodile sculpture next to unattended street-hole; painting gigantic portraits of gods, devils or any creatures to highlight open manholes, or placing lotuses on a waterlogged street. These graffiti have shaken the government bodies so as to take action immediately to solve the problems.



xvi. Baadal's work



xvii. Portraits of gods on open manhole.



xviii. Repaired manhole after Baadal's work



xix. Baadal's activist works (I)



xx. Baadal's activist works (II)

VI. FEMALE GRAFFITI ARTISTS

There are a few female graffiti artists whose works are sensible and socially aware.; among them are Jheel Goradia, Leena Kejriwal, Jas Charanjiva and Anup Varkey.

6.1 JHEEL GORADIA

Jheel Goradia is a Mumbai-based woman graffiti artist. Her works are targeted to expose gender injustice and sexual violence. They are to some extent based on technology; her digitally illustrated poster images incorporate elements of Bollywood themes which are placed into the pictures in a collage style. Often, they carry witty punch lines. Her campaign *'#Breaking the Silence'* is a mirror of Indian society and women's position in it.



xxi. Breaking the Silence: Against Eve Teasing

This brave and confident woman represents women of India condemning sexual violence and widespread street harassment across the nation. Goradia's statement about *eve teasing* is "Tomorrow it could be your mother, your sister, your fiancée, or even your friend. Say no to eve teasing".



xxii. Breaking the Silence: Against Rape.

With this Work Jheel Goradia stated that "Rape is the only crime in which the victim becomes accused". She is breaking the silence and asking society when will you do?



xxiii. Breaking the Silence: Against Human Trafficking..

“Every minute of the day a woman or child is sold, say no to human trafficking”, writes *Goradia*.

There are a few female graffiti artists whose works are sensible and socially aware. Among them are Leena Kejriwal, Jas Charanjiva and Anup Varkey.

6.2 LEENA KEJRIWAL

Her ‘Missing Project’ aims to highlight the issue of *Women Trafficking* to general public.

6.3 JAS CHARANJIVA

Jas Charanjiva born and brought up abroad and has shifted to Mumbai some years ago. Her work entitled ‘Don’t mess with me’ became famous as *‘the pink lady’* which was done just after the Delhi rape case in 2012. The work symbolizes both victim and the protester demanding change.

VII. TYLER

Tyler is a Mumbai based graffiti artist. He has taken his pen name from Tyler Durden, a fictional character, the narrator and anti-establishment figure of *Chuck Palahniuk’s* novel *Fight Club* (1996). He is famous for his witty statements on local to global issues, from poverty to social injustice, inequality to anti-capitalism, secularism to women’s safety and consumer culture to politics. According to *Tyler*, he works on topics that matters to common people. People generally protest as a way of writing letters to concern authority or writes article on news platforms. His way of protest is creating graffiti, as the medium itself is the message.

7.1 Invisible Reality

This simple innocent image showcases the society of inequality and rampant poverty in India which lies open to everyone but it seems people choose to ignore the reality. Little kids bathing on the roadside is a common sight for everyone in every metro city on the other hand you can see shopping malls and high rise buildings. In the world of such ignorance this kinds of black and white graffiti acts like mirror and keeps reminded us the reality.

7.2 Little Girl

This work is an adaptation of Norman Rockwell painting “The Problem we all live with”. With this work, Tyler raises the concern about the protection of little girls. We are familiar with the news of child trafficking and child abuse in this country decade after decades that need to be change. Little girls need to be protected, their safety and rights has to be ensured by the authority indeed it is a duty.



xxiv. Invisible Reality



xxv. Little Girls

One of Tyler’s important work ‘Never forget, the world is yours’ with sub script **Terms and condition apply*, remind us about our ownership and responsibility towards our world.



xxvi. Graffiti by Tyler.

7.3 Our Success is a lie



xxvii. Our Success is a lie, Graffiti work by Tyler.

The tragic death of three year old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi (2nd sept 2015). This image is showing the serious declination of humanity, and questioning on the so-called success of human civilization.

7.4 Evolution

The Evolution of Human Race is heading towards a consumer culture globally; seeing that Tyler paint message like "Warning: Shopping is injurious to health".



xxviii. Evolution, Graffiti work by Tyler

VIII. Conclusion

Though Graffiti Art has its own distinct spontaneous characteristics, yet it has not been properly noticed in India, and we are yet to gain recognition on the world graffiti map. But in the last 7-8 years, the scenario has been changing. At present, there are around twelve graffiti artists or collectives working across the nation. Among them, twenty to twenty five artists are working regularly. Artists involved in it are passionate and have spirit that is catching the public attention on various issues and creating space for discussion on Graffiti art. Social media is plays important role to circulate images quickly on various social platforms. Through Smartphone and social media almost every concern citizens are familiar with the graffiti art, which is enjoyable and meaningful. Probably this is the joy and spirit of doing graffiti art keeping aside so many risks. Other than authority nowadays people are becoming more receptive towards graffiti art here in India. Unlike West here is a welcoming environment for this sort of public art, its means there is hope for graffiti culture in India.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Decoding Indian graffiti scene: How the artform has evolved to convey social messages
<https://www.newsgram.com/decoding-indian-graffiti-seen-how-the-artform-has-evolved-to-convey-social-messages/>
- [2]. Swaraj Art Archive <https://swarajarchive.org.in/2015/07/21/indian-street-art-series/>
- [3]. Breaking gender stereotypes and depicting the daily struggle of the Indian woman using street art
<https://yourstory.com/2016/09/indian-woman-street-art/amp>
- [4]. Graffiti : Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graffiti>
- [5]. Relevance of Graffiti Art as an Art Form in Indian Context, Researcher Saday Chandra Das.Shodhganga@INFLIBNET:
<http://hdl.handle.net/10603/97079>
- [6]. Graffiti and street art have arrived, Hindustan Times, Manit Moorjani, May 11, 2013.
<http://www.hindustantimes.com/brunch/graffiti-and-street-art-have-arrived/story-SUNF33c99goVyi4r3ejVAO.html>
- [7]. The Rise of Street Art in India, Harpreet Kaur Creative. <https://harpreetkaurcreative.wordpress.com/2015/04/01/the-rise-of-street-art-in-india/>
- [8]. Daku (artist) Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daku_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daku_(artist))
- [9]. The Telegraph, Street smart, Sunday , May 27 , 2012. Shreya Shukla.
https://www.telegraphindia.com/1120527/jsp/graphiti/story_15535282.jsp
- [10]. The Wall Street Journal, Meet India's Banksy, Isha Singh ,Apr 27, 2013 10:00 am IST.
<https://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2013/04/27/meet-indias-banksy/>
- [11]. Indiatoday.in Magazine, Writing On The Wall <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/street-art-artists-writing-on-wallcanvases-to-public-spaces/1/258036.html>
- [12]. VAGABOMB, Art-film-and-culture, 7 Indian Female Street Artists Who Are Breaking Barriers and Smashing Stereotypes, Prerna Prakash 19 May, 2017
<https://www.vagabomb.com/5-Indian-female-street-artists-who-should-really-get-more-attention/>
- [13]. 9 Incredible Works Of Art By The Bangalore Crocodile Artist, Adrija Bose Social Media Editor. 23/06/2015 5:41 PM IST | Updated 15/07/2016 8:25 AM IST
http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2015/06/23/bangalore-artist-crocodile_n_7642696.html
- [14]. Death of Alan Kurdi, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Alان_Kurdi