

Graffiti, Communication and Censorship in Kashmir

Ab Rouf Bhat

Ph.D scholar, Media Education Research Centre, University of Kashmir, J&K (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 10 January 2019

Keywords

Graffiti, Censorship, Freedom of Expression, Kashmir, Street Art

*Corresponding Author

Email: roufbhat7890[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Amateur graffiti, expressing political aspirations, has emerged as a medium of free expression amid growing censorship of dissenting political voices in Kashmir. Since large-scale violent response by government during mass mobilization of people against State in 2010 summer, graffiti has emerged as a lexicon of young protesters. Drawn on the walls of public structures, graffiti is used by local populace to talk to State directly into the face by circumventing all means of censorship. Graffiti, demanding political rights, highlighting State violence on citizens, glorifying slain, resistance against State, is ubiquitous to both rural and urban landscape.

Graffiti in Kashmir is an understudied subject with few scholarly readings available on it. This work explores the production of graffiti as a free carrier of public expression in an environment where sharp political views are censored not only by the government but also by media. These colorful profusions on walls cannot be dismissed as mere aesthetic drawings but their content and meaning need to be understood in the light of circumstances in which they come up. The significance of graffiti as a medium of free expression during censorship is central to this work.

1. Introduction

Graffiti, street art, murals, posters remain a powerful tool of communication even after the influx of different communicative mediums like television, Internet, etc. Oxford dictionary(2018) defines "graffiti" as "writing or drawings scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surfaces in a public place." Attempts have been made to define, classify and differentiate graffiti from other street arts. However, there is no consensus among scholars of graffiti and artists drawing it. Jeffery Ian Ross (2015) proposes four categories of graffiti on the basis of different definitions. According to him, these categories are interrelated. These include: legal/sanctioned/authorized versus illegal/unsanctioned/unauthorized; content/aesthetic; perpetrator; and location. Kimberly A. McCormick and David Weiss(2009) in Sociopolitical Messages of Graffiti Art explain graffiti as an "emotional demonstration of worldviews." For them, graffiti can express "views of sociopolitical controversial issues, demand for universal freedom, diligence in protecting lands and peoples, and a command for the freedom."

Graffiti is considered as a traditional means of communication. However, it has carved a space for itself even in the age of technology-driven mass communication mediums. Lyman G. Chaffe (1993) suggests that since street art has universal reach, it should be treated as a mass communication medium. "[Graffiti] graphically render an historical awareness, ... document changing events and sentiments on the ground... to a multiplicity of audiences"(Peteet, 1996).

Every society has a communication system which functions according to the culture and political system in place. In the age of high technology, the communication is dominated by mediums of mass communication. "Mass communication is imposed from above by state with the control and flow of information from above down to the masses"(Chaffee, 1993). He suggests that street art or graphics are other processes

involved in the flow of information. Communication through art starts from ground and proliferates to a wide space. Sandra Žuvela(2012) defines graffiti as a "struggle, feeling and the desire for the anonymous to be heard", however, she thinks it is a "controversial form of expression and communication."

Graffiti and Conflict: Graffiti as a medium of communication has strong roots in places of conflict where media content is often controlled by State agencies. Graffiti thrives when people have little or no access to media to express their political opinions. Communication becomes the first casualty in conflict with states controlling all means through which people articulate their sufferings to the outside world. In these turbulent situations people innovate ways to raise their voice against oppression or they go back to the traditional means of communication: word of the mouth, street art, underground literature, etc. People in conflict torn places like Palestine, Northern Ireland, Egypt, have used graffiti extensively to communicate their feelings to the world outside.

Graffiti and Kashmir: Graffiti, as a carrier of communication, has gained prominence among political and social activists, around the world to put across their word to the people in power without caring much for the censors. It has become a tool of defiance for them and an expression of political discontent. Graffiti, since its modest beginning in Philadelphia and New York in 1960 and 1970s, has reached to every corner of the world – from Latin America to Middle East and to a small place like Kashmir.

Political graffiti surfaced mostly in Kashmir during the street protests of 2007-08 but it gained momentum since 2010 when around 120 people were killed by government forces during anti-State uprising. However, people would paint political slogans during 1950s after a famous political figure, Sheikh Abdullah, was arrested by India. People, in protest, "scribbled "Go India Go" on roads (Maqbool, 2016), sending a

strong message to Indian State over their leader's arrest. Unlike in Palestine or Ireland, graffiti in Kashmir is more amateur with few trained artists involved in scribbling messages on walls. But young people, in early 20s, are making an "attempt to disseminate political ideologies" (Bashir, 2018) to international community. Drawn on prominent thoroughfares, alleys, educational institutes, government offices, shop shutters, railway bridges, culverts, graffiti in Kashmir predominantly carry strong political messages like: "Go India, Go Back", "We Want Freedom", "Plebiscite Our Birth Right", "Azaadi, freedom", "Stop Killing Kashmiris". "The very use of *Azaadi* signifies a political discourse that Kashmiris seek to disseminate and convey to the world" (Bashir, 2016). The scope for the inclusion of these political statements in media is very bleak. Media terminology of newspapers in Kashmir has undergone a drastic change due to the fear of censorship from authorities. "The media spin is visible when it comes to framing a story" (Umar, 2016) in Kashmir. In graffiti, people see a disseminator of their political beliefs when all other media platforms twist them to suit the State narrative. "The crafting and circulation of images and words opens a conversation about the abnormality of everyday life" (Peteet, 2016). Graffiti scene flourishes in Kashmir during abnormal times like the summer agitations of 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2016.

Unlike in USA, Brazil, Ireland, and Palestine, where graffiti has become an organized activity, it is largely an individualized attempt by anonymous activists in Kashmir. Fewer attempts by groups like Al Hourriya (El Horiah), after making their presence felt in political corridors and news reports, (J, 2016) to make graffiti an organized activity, have failed to take off. Artist A (names of several graffiti writers have been changed for security reason) feels that the diversity of opinion regarding Kashmir conflict makes it difficult for them to create groups of graffiti artists on the lines of groups behind graffiti in Palestine (Artist A, personal communication, November 13, 2018). He feels that a section of graffiti writers are very aggressive in their messages while others use subtle message to get their word across. The contemporary graffiti that started emerging in Srinagar in 2007 were "simple in their writing style and message" (Amin & Majid, 2018). Artist B (personal communication, November 1, 2018) who pooled money for graffiti during 2016 summer unrest in Kashmir said his aim was to ensure everybody's participation in peaceful protests against government forces. He said he hired a professional painter to draw slogans on strategic road surfaces in Nowgam area in uptown Srinagar.

In early 1990s, armed groups like Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), Hizbul Mujahideen also painted stencils on electric poles and empty wall spaces across Srinagar city to claim spaces in heavily-militarized Srinagar.

Art and Communication: Graffiti is drawn mostly on public spaces that are frequented by people. Although some graffiti is written in private places also but the public nature of graffiti increases its communicative value. "To write graffiti is to communicate; one never finds graffiti where they cannot be seen by others" (Bruner and Kelso, 1980). Žuvela (2012) argues that "whether it is political or social, the subject matter and the purpose of graffiti is always the same: to communicate issues

that are perhaps swept under the rug." Akhter Rasool, a renowned graphic designer from Kashmir, said: "people can be silent but art has never been silent. When you feel choked you go out to draw," According to Rasool, "the emergence of art as a tool of communication depends on how brave your artists are" (Rasool, Akhter, personal communication, November 10, 2018).

People who oppose governments and have no means of expressing themselves, exercise graffiti to make a statement (Žuvela, 2012).

"It is an extremely easy means of communicating ideas and establishing a collective identity with the masses by putting a government on notice that anti-system sentiments exist with a definite historical memory. Given by the circumstances of doctoral regimes, graffiti communication can be, if recognized by groups and if organized sufficiently, an important medium for breaking the dominant control and censorship which authoritarian governments exercise" (Chaffe, 1993).

Anna Waclawek (2011) writes that "politically motivated graffiti often gives voice to issues relevant to the citizens of a particular place." The issues, she says of graffiti in Montréal, are "political in nature and carried slogans, calls for action and expression of disdain via legible phrases." Rasool (personal communication) believes that graffiti in Kashmir is symbolic, ongoing and cannot be controlled by the government.

"Underground street art can break the censorship imposed on information by authoritarian states and pierce the complicity of silence with the regime. If regimes did not believe ideas have an effect, then they would not worry about suppressing them; but they do believe" (Chaffee 1993).

Kashmir and excommunication: Holly Eva Ryan (2017) points out that certain communities have found themselves shut out of formal political processes and Chaffe (1993) believes that street art acts as a vehicle for marginalized groups. Government in Kashmir often censors anti-State views either by directly instructing the media to blackout the news or by playing with the jargon. But the social media is turning out to be a boon for the people of Kashmir to communicate their conflict to the world. To control the political space in Kashmir, social media, Internet service, newspapers, have been banned in Kashmir in past (Al Jazeera, 2017). Young people have taken it on their shoulders to "talk back" (Ryan, 2017) to the State about their political aspirations. Ryan in her book *Political Street Art: Communication, Culture and Resistance in Latin America* writes: "street art has provided a unique resource for groups that have been denied access to institutionalized channels of communications." Having denied any means to communicate their dissenting political opinions, people of Kashmir with cans of paint, brush in their hands started to express themselves on the walls because walls are "the only places where [they] could talk back to tyrants" (Headlee, 2013).

All the graffiti writers interviewed for this work have studied in college but have never expressed their opinions in media. They (Artist A, 2018), (Artist B, 2018), (Artist C, 2018) are of the opinion that media content is confined but graffiti is not. It

can communicate in a powerful way to every section of society regardless of their political opinions. Inspired by a movie on Palestine, Artist B said there were enough people on social media sites writing about Kashmir, he tried "something new" which caught the attention of people of Kashmir who happened to be running the administration of State as well.

Graffiti, as a mode of communication by the weaker, marginalized, social, ethnic and political groups, thrives in spite of censorship. It records repression (Peteet, 1996) of voices while facilitating itself as a career of the gagged messages. Chaffe (1993) says it gives expression to groups that otherwise could not comment. Graffiti has found resonance among activists, resulting in its proliferation on the public surfaces across the length and breath of Kashmir. The ubiquitousness of graffiti in Kashmir and its appeal on young generation has made it one of the visible but lopsided means of entering into a dialogue with a reluctant State. "People of Kashmir didn't engage much with graffiti initially, but soon it resonated among them. Even Hurriyat Conference (an amalgam of parties which demands resolution of Kashmir dispute according to the wishes of people of Kashmir) during 2016 summer protests appealed people to paint slogans on walls against the atrocities on the people of Kashmir" (Artist B, personal communication). It is a weapon of communication for the people of Kashmir who have been sidelined by the "mainstream" politics.

Graffiti, in Kashmir, serves as an agent of communication between the censoring agents (State), key world bodies, different political observers, human rights organizations, and local people who wish to be heard. The purpose of graffiti, according to Žuvela, is to communicate issues that are swept under the rug. Kashmir conflict is one of those few political conflicts, which have remained constant for decades without any resolution in sight. It attracts world attention only in times of major political events like the unrests of 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2016. For the rest of the time, major political players—India and Pakistan—let this issue go on the backburner. In 2017, India told Turkish President that Kashmir was a bilateral issue and needed no mediation (Hindustan Times, 2017). This implies not even people of Kashmir (or Hurriyat Conference as their representative) or other third party country are to be considered for the resolution of Kashmir dispute. But the presence of colorful lines painted in public spaces all over Kashmir is an omnipresent cry of people of Kashmir demanding to be heard.

Circumvention of censorship: Graffiti is often a result of censorship of views held by common people. It thrives in an atmosphere of gag on public opinions in mainstream media. A product of censorship, graffiti and other street art are used as tools to circumvent government censorship. "In authoritative regimes, where governments dominate public space, graffiti becomes the primary medium" (Chaffee, 1993). "Writing or speaking anything on resistance in media involves some sort of censorship. When you paint walls with messages of resistance, graffiti itself falls in the bracket of censorship. There is surveillance and lot of danger in doing graffiti" (Artist B, personal communication). Using an economy of words, ideas and graphics, graffiti articulates thoughts unambiguously. The

easy production of graffiti makes it a preferred form of expression. Chaffe states that an emotional catharsis takes place under harsh authoritarian regimes. After long spells of repression, an outburst of sentiments outpour in the form of graffiti. The evolution of graffiti over years in Kashmir is linked to the ongoing political conflict and people's response to State control. Graffiti in Kashmir is strictly political aimed to intervene in the communication process of conflict.

Alternative to communication through popular media:

When all other forms of communication are made inaccessible to common people, street arts like graffiti are used as alternative to popular mediums of communication. Graffiti, as a tool of communication, is controlled by masses and the content communicated is free from any form of censorship unless it's wiped off from walls. Graffiti is a medium of communication by people and for people with no style sheet or editorial policy governing its content. Iftikhar Hussain, an art teacher at University of Kashmir's said: "those who cannot pick up stone or gun, express through graffiti. It is an easy way of expressing anger. What stone pelting couldn't achieve was achieved by graffiti. But graffiti lags in terms of reach as compared to modern means of mass communication" (personal communication, November 1, 2018). Hussain questioned the longevity of censorship of sentiments. "Censorship doesn't work in times of internet," Hussain said. But, the proliferation of graffiti by media and support of free-speech activists enhances its reach beyond the local audience. However, communication through graffiti starts and ends with censorship. Expression of political beliefs via public art is a result of censorship of free expression in publicly-available channels of communication and it culminates with a stroke of paint on walls covered by messages. It is a communiqué and a response of censored masses of Kashmir. It is a weapon of articulation with trigger in the hands of public.

Open dialogue: People who are marginalized and not given space in mainstream media resort to easily-available modes of communication to get themselves heard by authorities and society in general. John Lennon (2015) described messages scribbled on walls as an "open dialogue that is overheard by passerby". The graffiti in Kashmir is drawn mostly on strategic points like on roads leading to the only airport in the region, highway, main market places, on busy roads, culverts, etc. This can be appropriated to Lennon's words where he says that graffiti is a forbidden language that allows circulation of knowledge. People passing by these sites take part in conversation. The "airport roads are the perfect places... to paint graffiti and let people from the outside know what [people are] witnessing here" (Maqbool, 2016). In times of crisis, the politicians and officials from India often drive through these roads, and the message painted (mostly whitewashed) serve their purpose of speaking to their intended audience. The State, in a way, unwillingly enters into a dialogue with dissenting population of Kashmir. As Lennon (2015) puts, graffiti, in times of conflict, are a roar; they are immediate and intense in forming a discourse. In a conflict, walls littered with political desires enter into a collective dialogue with the ruler and people around the globe for want of a change in the status quo. "A political dialogue between the State of India and people of Kashmir

aimed at the settlement of conflict never took off”(Wani, 2017). Street art in Kashmir is an unwilling political engagement with State. Intra-society communication in Kashmir usually occurs at shop fronts where people irrespective of age, profession assemble to chitchat. The downed shop shutters smudged with graffiti facilitate a dialogue between graffiti drawers, common citizenry and State.

Public presentation of the conflict: “Kashmir conflict spans 7 decades with 30 years of armed struggle, the longest-ever in any conflict around the globe” (Mir, 2018). The conflict continues to claim numerous lives every year. Otherwise a dormant conflict, Kashmir erupts every now and then in spell, attracting less world attention as compared to Palestine and other conflicts. Doha-based English news channel, Al Jazeera, called Kashmir a “forgotten conflict” (Al Jazeera, n.d.) while Amnesty International hoped that “Kashmir won’t be a forgotten conflict” (Amnesty International, n.d.). In times of heightened tensions, Indian government cracks whip on media outlets and other modes of communication, making it difficult for people to access current and accurate information (CPJ, 2016) and reach out to the world bodies for intervention. The State has managed tight control over information flowing out of Kashmir. “Kashmir has always remained a sideshow compared to the much bloodier wars” (Mir, 2018). People of Kashmir have taken it on their shoulders to highlight and explain the conflict to international community using different tools. From social media blogging, participation in international conferences, writing for foreign publications to locally-organized general strikes, stone throwing, street protests, Kashmir conflict is highlighted at every level. “Ubiquitous graffiti is a constant reminder of abnormal in Kashmir. The most common graffiti found around the towns and villages of

Kashmir is “Go India, go back” (Drèze, 2016). This slogan is a refusal to accept India’s authority on Kashmir. In the words of Hussain, the potential of graffiti as a communicative art has not been explored. For him the reason responsible for this is that Kashmir has not produced artists who use graffiti as a mode of communication. “Conflict zones in other parts of the world have been able to give birth to and sustain a very rich and diverse heritage of street art and graffiti, Kashmir still struggles to catch a breath in that sphere” (Khan, n.d.).

Whitewashing facts: “The street art and graffiti that we see today is but the latest layer in an ongoing urban palimpsest of spray paint and whitewash that hides away its own history” (Ferrell, 2016). The State authorities in Kashmir have started taking note of the graffiti on strategic points across the region. Once a not-so-popular means of communication, dissenting graffiti is met with counter graffiti by authorities. “To write graffiti or paint street is to negotiate situations of vulnerability and risk far different than those inside the confines of the art studio” (Ferrell, 2016). Graffiti is often defined by the situations that produce the art. Graffiti in Kashmir is a response to human rights violations and censorship of a particular political opinion. It is a critique of heavy-handedness of State over people. In Kashmir, anti-State graffiti is whitewashed or responded with counter graffiti by government. There is a war of words between graffiti activists and authorities on shop shutters, walls in Kashmir. Slogans like “Go India, Go back”, “*BurhanWani, our hero*”, “*Quit Kashmir*” drawn at public spaces have been smudged or disfigured by police and other departments” (Ashiq, 2016). In Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, graffiti “*We Want Freedom*” has been manipulated by government by adding an extra line “from pelters” below it. Pelters here refer to young people who pelt stones on government forces in response to State violence on common people.



Photo: RoufBhat



Photo: RoufBhat

Political Participation: Early researches on graffiti have undermined the role of graffiti as a tool of political participation. Graffiti was and is still seen as an act of vandalism when seen through the perspective of state and an act of resistance by people against state. However, not much attention has been paid to the role of graffiti in facilitating people the participation in politics without formally entering into it. Not only dissenting

people but pro-India political parties in Kashmir have also tried their hands on graffiti. Although on a very small scale, these parties have canvassed walls in rural and urban Kashmir during election campaigns. However, the same has found little resonance among the people of Kashmir and has been responded by anti-election graffiti at times.



Photo: RoufBhat

Knowledge on graffiti: When it comes to graffiti, a lot of academic writing has focused on Latin and South America, US, Palestine while very few works have been carried on South Asia. However, graffiti as an academic subject is still considered to be in its infancy. Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art edited by Jeffery Ian Ross is a comprehensive attempt to explain graffiti through the eyes of different experts belonging to Ethnography, Criminology, Criminal justice, Political Science, Photography, Psychology, Sociology, and Visual Communication. The accounts included in the volume deal with the history, theoretical explanation and effects of graffiti and other street arts on society, culture and politics. The evolution of graffiti from ancient caves to trains and alleys in America to the walls of Palestine and Egypt and Brazil, this book theorizes graffiti in political, social and economic context. This book, according to its editor, is able to capture the complexity of graffiti while exploring the manifold contradictions that continue to shape them. It aims to take the debate of graffiti beyond descriptions and give context to graffiti sprawled on walls throughout the globe.

Political Street Art: Communication, Culture, and Resistance in Latin America by Holly Eva Ryan, explores the role of street arts in Latin American countries. This book, according to Ryan, "highlights some of the difficulties in theorizing and understanding the complex interplay between art and political practice." Graffiti, as an academic subject, is still growing with researchers finding ways to study it. This book offers a glimpse of the challenges of researching political street art in Latin America, which boast a vibrant history of graffiti and other street arts. Marginalized by mainstream media and state, several downtrodden groups in Latin America have given a vent to their feelings through this medium.

Graffiti as an art form has thrived mostly in conflict-torn places like Palestine, Egypt, Northern Ireland. The scholarship defining the phenomenon of graffiti in Palestine is huge with several research papers, newspaper articles, book chapters attempting to define it. The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada by Julie Peteet is one of the most cited research articles of Palestinian graffiti. Peteet writes "for a Palestinian readership, graffiti affirms community and resistance, debates tradition, envisions competing futures, records historical events and processes, and registers memory. It provides political commentary as well as issues directives both for confronting occupation and transforming oneself in the process." It answers how graffiti is produced during occupation. Bill Rolston (2014) in Messages of Allegiance and Defiance: the Murals of Gaza writes how young Palestinians risk their lives

by drawing graffiti on the walls of Gaza. The act is considered as an allegiance to a political cause in Palestine. It touches the history of graffiti in Palestine and the adoption of this art form by different political parties as a weapon of resistance against the occupation of Israel.

The body of work both online and offline preserving and decoding graffiti in Kashmir is very small. A couple of research papers and online articles have recorded the rise of the usage of this art form in Kashmir. An unpublished work in Delhi University by Furkan Khan explores graffiti as a form of resistance by local citizenry in Kashmir. Khan argues graffiti has emerged as tool of non-violent protest in Kashmir. An unorganized activity by amateur artists has managed to use public spaces for a visual dialogue in times of unrest in Kashmir. Politicizing the Street: Graffiti in Kashmir by two doctoral scholars, Mudassir Amin and Ilymon Majid show how public spaces in both urban and rural Kashmir have been politicized by a new generation of Kashmiris. Despite heavy presence of state forces, graffiti scene in Kashmir has flourished in response to the state oppression. A web article, The Art of Graffiti in Kashmir, argues that if graffiti needs to evolve in Kashmir, it needs to be merged with cultural history and language.

For Lisa K. Waldner and Betty A. Dobratz (2013), "Politically themed graffiti is a type of political discourse that communicates ideas, values, and information including current grievances and disputes. It is a form of contentious politics and micro-level political activism that is often used by marginalized persons who lack access to institutionalized forms of political participation or who do not believe that politics as usual will bring about desired change."

Very few attempts have been made to understand graffiti in Kashmir. Graffiti, as an academic subject, is still in its infancy stage. Efforts have to be made to link graffiti with the socio-political dimensions of Kashmir. Also it should be seen through historical prism to understand its genesis and future as a mode of expression in Kashmir where communication mediums like internet and phone services are often disrupted by State during protests against government.

Visuals: This study features political graffiti, which has emerged in Kashmir since 2008. The graffiti from different politically volatile areas of Kashmir were taken up for the study. These include the district of Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, where the graffiti caught attention of media and authorities initially. The other areas include Shopian, Anantnag – which

are considered to be politically active and have a rich supply of

graffiti coming and going.



Photo: Faisal Khan



Photo Hashim Hakeem



Photo: Insha Bint Bashir



Photo: Hashim Hakeem



Photo: Insha Bint Bashir



Photo: Muneebul Islam



Photo: Hashim Hakeem



Photo: Hashim Hakeem

2. Methodology, Research Difficulties

This work is based on two research goals: To understand why a particular section of youth use graffiti to communicate to the world outside. What kinds of messages are disseminated through graffiti.

To understand the proliferation of graffiti in Kashmir, a two-pronged approach was adopted. First, the amateur graffiti writers were interviewed and then an understanding of their work was developed through reputed artists of Kashmir. The names of graffiti writers have been changed for fear of security.

However, the real names of famous artists, who were interviewed for this study, have been used in the text.

While conducting this research, I came across many difficulties, whether it was in the collection of graffiti photos or the artists behind them. The graffiti writers, mostly in their 20s, have been splashing walls across Kashmir without tagging their works. It was hard to locate them and pursue them for the interview. One of the artists (here referred as Artist A), who paints socio-political graffiti, described working for conflict related things as a "taboo" (Personal communication). He said the surveillance (by government) has increased in places he would draw graffiti when he tried his hand on graffiti in 2012.

“There is a transition in resistance from stone-throwing to more violent means like guns. Anybody might compel us to create art for a particular group which we don’t want.” Another graffiti artist, (here referred as Artist B), and one of the pioneers of contemporary graffiti in Kashmir, refused to accept invitation for a face-to-face interview, but agreed to answer a questionnaire on WhatsApp chat application.

3. Analysis

The graffiti in other parts of the world emerged parallel to the development of other mechanical mediums of communication. But in Kashmir, the presence of graffiti was observed when communication mediums like TV, radio and Internet had established their places. Inspired by Hollywood movies, works of reputed graffiti artists and conflict graffiti of Palestine, the graffiti in Kashmir is mostly political in nature. Expressing political sentiments, it is directed towards government, however, its immediate aim is to resonate the beliefs of commoners. It mostly emerges during heightened tensions between government, forces and people. Graffiti in Kashmir may not be rich in aesthetics but they have a very powerful communicative value. Mere scribbling of political slogans has invited a whitewashing or defacement response from the irked government. Language, graphics and content play an important role in the effectiveness of a graffiti. In Kashmir, most of the graffiti found is written in English, a few in Urdu and rarely anyone in the *Kashur*, the native language of Kashmir.

- **Need:**Based on the responses of the graffiti writers and well-known artists, this form of communication is easily understood by common people. It is a non-violent way of expressing opinions about political and social issues plaguing Kashmir. People of Kashmir have explored a range of tools –guns, stone pelting, talks– to highlight Kashmir issue. Graffiti along with social media is the latest addition to the list. Although there is a lot of surveillance and danger involved in doing graffiti, a section of young generation in Kashmir feels liberated while expressing their political beliefs through graffiti. It is a political participation of people in a political system where dissenting opinions have no space.
- **Audience:**The main target of graffiti in Kashmir, according to the people who draw it, is local population. But an assessment of the messages scribbled on walls across Kashmir suggest otherwise. Government, armed forces, officials are equally addressed in the messages painted over public structures. Anybody, irrespective of political ideology,

who uses motorways, alleys becomes the audience of graffiti in Kashmir. Mostly drawn on strategically important carriageways like airport road, which is frequented by visiting Indian officials and visitors, highways, tourist spots, commercial centers in districts, it attracts attention of one and all.

- **Effectiveness:**The response of state administration against dissenting graffiti is an indicator of its effectiveness. State government with the help of municipal corporations or police has responded against it with heavy handedness. Government, in order to stop the proliferation of dissenting graffiti, has invoked municipal laws to deal with people drawing it. The graffiti scene in Kashmir has featured in news stories of international media outlets, indicating the reach of its messages. Initially started by a small number of boys in Srinagar city, today graffiti is drawn by youths throughout the length and breadth of Kashmir. A new graffiti immediately becomes a part of shop front discussions in the locality it comes up. Local symbols like *Kangir*, a firepot used in winter, *Pheran*, a long woolen dress worn in winter, are missing from graffiti scene in Kashmir. The inclusion of these elements will have more resonance with the local population than the iconic symbols created by artists in the west.
- **Censorship:**Censorship is central to graffiti in Kashmir. People who scribble it feel chocked or left out from the dialogue leading to the change in the status quo of Kashmir dispute. Young activists feel liberated to express their opinions and make their presence felt in the power corridors. Government, in return, has resorted to draw their own graffiti by twisting the messages in their favor. The state government has ordered whitewashing of graffiti from prominent places from time to time. Intimidation of artists by invoking laws of sedition, vandalism, etc. has not stopped young generation from communicating state into its ear.

Acknowledgment:

I am thankful to Faisal Khan, Hashim Hakeem, Insha Bint Bashir and Muneebul Islam for giving me permission to use their photographs for this research paper.

Disclaimer!

This paper is only for academic purpose and if any social, political, religion related controversy arises then Author of the article will sole be responsible for the outcomes.

References

1. Amin, Mudasir & Majid, Iymon. (2018). Graffiti in Kashmir: Politicising the Street. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 53(14), 61-66.
2. Ashiq, Peerzada. (2016, September 4). Graffiti Gone From Kashmir walls. *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/Graffiti-gone-from-Kashmir-walls/article14621965.ece>
3. Amnesty International. (n.d.). Hopefully Kashmir Won't be a Forgotten Conflict. Retrieved from <https://www.amnestyusa.org/hopefully-kashmir-wont-be-a-forgotten-conflict/>
4. Al Jazeera. (2017). Social Media Banned in Kashmir. Retrieved from

- <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/04/facebook-twitter-social-media-banned-kashmir-170426132038275.html>
5. Al Jazeera. (n.d.). Kashmir: The Forgotten Conflict. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/kashmirtheforgottenconflict/>
 6. Bashir, Insha. (2018, July 12). Reclaiming street spaces – A photo essay. *Wande Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.wandemag.com/graffiti-reclaiming-street-spaces-photo-essay/>
 7. Bruner, E.M., & Kelso, J.P. (1980). Gender differences in graffiti: A semiotic perspective. *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 3(2/3), 239-252.
 8. Chaffe, Lyman. G. (1993). *Political Protest and Street Art: Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries*. Westport, USA, Greenwood Press.
 9. Committee to Protect Journalists. (2016, July 18). Indian authorities shut down media outlets in Jammu and Kashmir. Retrieved from <https://cpj.org/2016/07/indian-authorities-shut-down-media-outlets-in-jamm.php>
 10. Drèze, Jean. (2016, November 25). The New Abnormal in Kashmir. *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/The-new-abnormal-in-Kashmir/article16695599.ece>
 11. Ferrell, Jeff. (2016). Graffiti Street Art and the Politics of Complexity. In Ross, Jeffery.(Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*. (pp. xxx-xxxviii). New York, USA: Routledge.
 12. Headlee, Celeste. (2013, November 7). Art Revolution Blooms After Arab Spring. *NPR*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2013/11/07/243720260/Arab-spring-artists-paint-the-town-rebel>
 13. Hindustan Times. (2017). Kashmir a Bilateral Issue With Pakistan, India tells Turkish President. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kashmir-a-bilateral-issue-with-pakistan-india-tells-turkish-president-erdogan/story-cgV9TTPgrblQwBnOYfFjYJ.html>
 14. J, Ishtiyag. (2016, May 31). Writing on the Wall. *Kashmir Ink*. Retrieved from <http://kashmirink.in/news/features/writing-on-the-wall/177.html>
 15. Khan, Furkan. (n.d.) *Writing on the Wall: Graffiti as Popular Resistance in Kashmir*. (Bachelor's thesis). Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi, India.
 16. Lennon, John. (2015). Writing With a Global Accent, Cairo and the Roots/Routes of Conflict Graffiti. In Lovata, Troy & Olton, Elizabeth (Eds.), *Understanding Graffiti: Multidisciplinary Studies From Prehistory to the Present*. New York, USA: Routledge.
 17. Maqbool, Majid. (2016, October 8). The Writing on the Walls in Kashmir. *The Wire*. Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/politics/kashmir-graffiti>
 18. Mir, Hilal. (2018, January 30). Kashmir's everlasting insurgency. *TRT World*. Retrieved from <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/essay-in-the-kashmir-valley-insurgency-is-a-way-of-life-14724>
 19. McCormick, Kimberly. A. & Weiss, David. (2009). The Sociopolitical Messages of Graffiti Art. In Foss, Sonja (Ed.), *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice* (pp. 128-134). Prospect, Illinois: Waveland Press.
 20. Oxford dictionaries online. (2018). Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/graffiti>
 21. Peteet, Julie. (1996). The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada. *Cultural Anthropology*, 11(2), 139-159. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/656446>
 22. Peteet, Julie. (2016). Wall Talk: Palestinian Graffiti. In Ross, Jeffery (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*. (pp. 334-344). New York, USA: Routledge.
 23. Ross, Jeffery. Ian. (Ed.). (2016). *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*. (1sted.). New York, USA: Routledge.
 24. Rolston, Bill. (2014). Messages of Allegiance and Defiance: The Murals of Gaza. *Race and Class*. 55(4),40–64.
 25. Ryan, Holly Eva. (2017). *Political Street Art: Communication, Culture and Resistance in Latin America*. (1sted.). Oxon and New York: Routledge.
 26. Umar, Baba. (2016, June 10). Kashmir: Battlefield of terminologies. *Kashmir Reader*. Retrieved from <https://kashmirreader.com/2016/06/10/kashmir-battlefield-of-terminologies/>
 27. Waclawek, Anna. (2011). *Graffiti and Street Art*. (1sted.). London, United Kingdom: Thames & Hudson.
 28. Wani, Riyaz. (2017, May 17). Little chance of any dialogue between the Centre & the Hurriyat. *New Laundry*. Retrieved from <https://www.newslaundry.com/2017/05/17/there-is-little-chance-of-any-dialogue-between-the-centre-the-hurriyat-heres-why>
 29. Waldner, Lisa K & Dobratz, Betty A. (2013). Graffiti as a Form of Contentious Political Participation. *Sociology Compass*. 7(5), 377-389.
 30. Žuvela, Sandra. (2012). Graffiti: A Form of International Communication. *Communication Management Quarterly*, 23(7), 23-36. Retrieved from <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=545476>