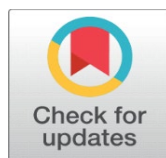
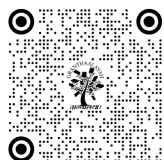


GRAFFITI IN INDIAN ELECTION CAMPAIGNING AND ITS DECLINE

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DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.2207](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.2207)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

Graffiti has been an integral part of political campaigning across the Globe including India for a significant period of time. This paper seeks to explore the role of Graffiti in Indian election campaigning and the reasons behind its decline in recent years. By examining various scholarly resources and analyzing political trends, this research paper delves into the impact of Graffiti on political messaging, public perceptions and the changing dynamics of election campaigning in India.

Keywords: Graffiti, Political Graffiti, Election Campaigning, Decline

1. INTRODUCTION

Graffiti has often been viewed with disdain by society, primarily because it involves the unauthorized use of public property for campaigning during election times, without respect for the space. This form of expression is sometimes seen as a way for individuals to deal with the challenges of identity in overcrowded or self-denying environments, serving as an outlet for people to publish their thoughts, philosophies, or political views. In India, graffiti has been particularly prevalent during elections, with urban and semi-urban walls often becoming canvases for political propaganda. Political graffiti emerges strongly during election seasons, with people eager to express their views in public spaces. It is a cost-effective way for political parties to canvass, with wall writings ranging from rhymes and slogans to cartoons and argumentative texts. For some, this practice represents a form of democratic expression, as public spaces are used to highlight and counter public issues.

Graffiti has long been a tool for election campaigning in developing or underdeveloped countries like India. The country, known as the largest democracy in the world, is famous for various aspects of its elections, and political graffiti is one of them. Artists often view these wall paintings as a creative form of expression, with graffiti gaining maximum

prominence during election time. However, the roots of mural art in India run deep, with a history dating back to Buddhist cave paintings of the 2nd century BC. Over time, it has evolved into vibrant wall paintings and rural mud-hut decorations. In the past, political propaganda was often associated with wall art in urban areas, especially in politically active regions like West Bengal and Kerala, where walls became canvases for party symbols and slogans during elections. (Tiwary, - 2022)

During the 1980s and 1990s, hand-painted Bollywood movie posters dominated Indian streets, reinforcing the idea that art can find a canvas in any form. (Plate: 1 & 2). The rise of street art and graffiti as a distinct form of expression became more prominent in the 1980s. For decades, graffiti played a critical role in Indian political campaigns, providing a low-cost, highly visible way for political parties to reach the masses. City walls and village lanes alike were adorned with party logos, slogans, and images of political leaders, making graffiti a unique medium that connected with voters directly in their neighborhoods. Political symbols on walls reflected the political leanings of particular areas and often marked territorial influence. (Sarkar & Baig, - 2021)

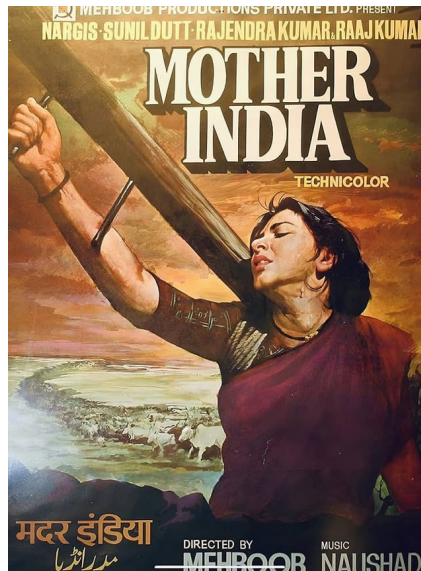


Plate – 1, Mother India, (1957). by B.M. Gupta.

Retrieved from <https://homegrown.co.in/homegrown-creators/a-homage-to-the-dying-art-of-hand-painted-bollywood-posters>

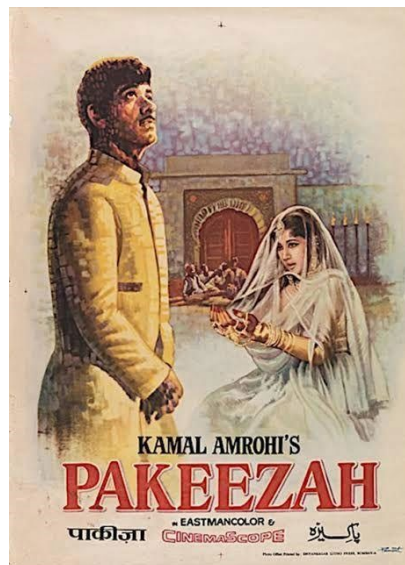


Plate – 2, Pakeezah (1972) by B.M. Gupta.

Retrieved from <https://homegrown.co.in/homegrown-creators/a-homage-to-the-dying-art-of-hand-painted-bollywood-posters>

In recent years, the importance of graffiti in political campaigns has diminished due to stricter regulations, the rise of social media, and shifts in political advertising strategies. While graffiti once dominated the streets during elections, it is increasingly being replaced by digital campaigning and more modern forms of communication. (Chattopadhyay, - 2015)

2. RESEARCH GOALS

The following are the article's goals:

- Graffiti and its existence in Indian election campaigns
- Graffiti has gradually declined and transformed over time

3. METHODOLOGY

This study combines descriptive and exploratory methods to learn more about the history of Graffiti worldwide. Information was gathered from books, journals, newspapers, documentaries, internet sources, and several interviews with Graffiti artists were analyzed. To understand the ideology and cultural diplomacy of Graffiti that is included in election campaigning and the reasons behind its decline, analysis has been done using secondary data gathered throughout the research.

4. GRAFFITI IN POLITICS

Historically Graffiti or wall writing dates back to the Greek and Roman eras. With time, it has evolved to be an integral part of human civilization. Writing on walls is very cost-effective and since it is an open forum, it attracts huge clientele. In India, wall writing is mainly used for election purposes, in other countries it has been used for different purposes; however, mainly for government-oriented reasons. For example, in the United Kingdom, in the middle part of the 20th century, Graffiti played a pivotal role in the epic campaign against nuclear disarmament. (Plate – 3) All over the country of England, in London, in towns and villages, there was only one predominant thing, Graffiti. In European countries, Graffiti has time and again played a dominant role. In France, whether you go over ground or down in a Metro, Graffiti has always made its presence felt whether for or against *Gertrude Stein* (an American novelist, poet, playwright, and art collector) or against existentialism, for or against the projected new labour laws and many more. Latin America has seen campaigning against *Yanqui* (YANKEE) imperialism through Graffiti. (Glynos, Howarth, - 2007)



Plate – 3, Peace symbols graffiti on a black wall

Retrieved from <https://www.gettyimages.ae/detail/illustration/peace-symbols-graffiti-on-a-black-wall-royalty-free-illustration/1195352945>

India is caught in the fever of Graffiti during general elections. The wall writings have ranged from being statistical, and argumentative, to rhymes, slogans and cartoons. (indianartworksblog, - 25.04.2009). This is the most splendid way of bringing life to democracy. It is very common to use public space to thrust and counter-thrust on public issues. Graffiti can easily be considered the ideal method for election campaigning in a poor country. Election Graffiti in India has been the livelihood for many artists, while some are involved in them as part-time workers. The Graffiti artists working during

the elections are usually art students and are rarely political party workers. Often the same artist is engaged by different political parties.

Reisner, & Wechsler in their *'Encyclopaedia of Graffiti'* stated that

"Graffiti is the voice of the common man. We are used to taking our history from aristocrats and statesmen and their paid scribes. But through Graffiti we discover evidence of another version of history, characterized by oppression and opposition to the official point of view. Topics too sensitive, too bigoted, too outrageous for the official version are the natural province". (Reisner & Wechsler, 1974)

Following these lines, other anthropologists have investigated the characteristics of a resistance movement in society along similar lines. Graffiti has long been used as a form of political opposition because of its supposedly universal appeal and use. It is crucial to remember that, even if graffiti's primary message—that is, a critique of private authority over public space—remains relevant, it is equally vital to highlight the art form's secondary meaning. Graffiti's fundamental quality is the promotion of a second message; the substance of each piece varies according to the background and conditions from which each writer writes. Thus, Graffiti is not only a form of political resistance but also, remains a way by which people may assume a sense of cohesiveness, rallying around shared ideology.

In third-world countries, graffiti has frequently been employed as a form of political opposition. These anonymous, expressive works of political rhetoric serve as a cultural commentary on the pros and cons of social policies. This cultural phenomenon is discussed by Stephen Leavitt in his article *"Cargo Beliefs and Religious Experience"*. He upholds the notion that, in the face of governmental authority, people busy themselves with a certain behaviour, action, or object.

"Graffiti writing is one of the easiest and most efficient ways for individuals and opposing groups to register political dissidence, express social alienation, propagate anti-system ideas, and establish an alternative collective memory. Groups can use Graffiti to push their agendas or generally to make their presence felt, for 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 recognized by groups and if organized sufficiently, an important medium for breaking the dominant control and censorship which authoritarian governments exercise". (Chaffee, 1990.127)

Graffiti is a kind of discourse and communication that may accomplish a lot of things. Its portrayal occasionally overtly conveys the hostility and/or neglect that members of a specific group may experience. It is also feasible for many individuals to band together in their protest and declaration even when they are not acquainted. Writers have formed an identity via this Graffiti; artists share Graffiti as an expressive medium to convey societal turmoil, rooted in resistance to a prevailing system. Graffiti "walls" continue to serve as a public forum where many people may express their thoughts and have their anti-structuralist views reinforced.

In creating Graffiti many procedures and technicalities are literally directed but creating the election campaigning related Graffiti, it tries to accumulate all the styles and genres of Graffiti in connection to give more and more emphasis on visual attractiveness, simplified as direct to the point, less expansive, strong counter attacks to the opposition, strong in humour and so on. (Menis, - 2000).

5. GRAFFITI TEXT

Indian democracy saw the emergence of very interesting cum meaningful slogans and catchwords since the first Lok Sabha polls of 1952. In 1966 when Indira Gandhi became the prime minister for the first time, she was known for her reticent attitude. She could hardly deliver lectures in those days. Naturally, the opposition parties, mainly *Jana Sangha*, coined the term *Goongi Gudiya* (dumb doll) to denote her. This two-word term virtually became a synonym of Indira.

As the electioneering has heated up, we find the political parties cutting across ideological barriers are really not able to frame sentences to create limericks that could influence the masses. When we look at the Indian political scenario, we find that earlier it was mainly the Congress, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP) and the *Rashtriya Janata Dal* (RJD) that showed ingenuity in creating catchy slogans to gun each other. The Left Parties, including the Communist Party Marxist (CPM) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Naxalite parties like the Communist Party of India – Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML), never paid much heed towards catchy slogans. One of the primary factors for this is that they have assured or committed voters. The traditional slogan of CPI (ML) remains *Naxalbari Lal Salam* (Red Salute to Naxalbari from where the Ultra-Leftist movement started in 1967). In that year, Charu Mazumder launched his

Naxalite Movement with the slogan in Bengali: *Aamar Bari-tomar bari, Naxalbari-Naxalbari* (my house is your house, hail Naxalbari). In 1960 Subhendu Dasgupta he used to create political Graffiti for Communist Party of India (Marxist), he used charcoal from Pyrus to write. (Plate – 4) It was in Naxalbari under Phansidewa Police station in West Bengal where India's Naxal movement was started.



Plate – 4, Old photos of Kolkata walls

Photographs courtesy Chitrabani/S.Paul, Retrieved from <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/1hz5MN3UkUxFfIZUeMuGCL/Primetime-politics-on-the-wall.html>

Some of the very interesting slogans were created during the 1967-2004 phases. All Lok Sabha polls taking place during this particular phase really could boast of creative and politically very meaningful slogans be it *Aadhi roti Khayenge, Indira ji ko wapas layenge* (we may eat half a piece of bread but shall ensure that Indira Gandhi again becomes India's prime minister) of Congress or *Indira Hatao desh bachao* of Loknayak Jayaprakash Narayan during the anti-Indira movement of 1974. Loknayaks slogan *Sampoorna Kranti* (total revolution) was so powerful that it virtually shook the entire India forcing Indira to declare 'the emergency' (Plate – 5) by suspending the basic democratic rights of people including imposition of censorship to the media.



Plate – 5, 'Political cartoons and graphic narratives about the national Emergency' by Abu Abraham.

Retrieved from <https://homegrown.co.in/homegrown-voices/unsung-hero-one-judges-dissent-during-emergency-1975-needs-to-be-remembered>

When BJP launched massive protest against Indira, the party coined *Atal Behari bol raha hai, Indira shashan dol raha hai* (Atal Behari Vajpayee's lectures are so powerful that it virtually shakes the rule of Indira Gandhi). *Wah re Congress tera khel, sasti daaru, mahanga tel*, this too intoxicated the Indians when BJP wanted to protest the reduction of on liquor by the BJP. But nothing like a poll-limerick by Jan Sangha that created massive impact on the common folk as it was really weaved in a very rustic-manner. But it was supremely successful a slogan in rural India in yesteryears. It ran as:

Jansangha ko vote do

Beedi pina chhor do

Beedi mein tambakhu hai

Congresswallah chore hai.

(Folks, do not smoke as it contains tobacco which is toxic. Similarly, Congress too is vile as it a group of thieves. What you should do is to vote for Jan Sangha.)

Whether it is India is Indira, Indira is India of ex-Union Minister Devkanta Baruah Dev Raj Urss very famous slogan *Ek sherni-sau languor*, *Chikmaglur*, *Chikmaglur* (slogan composed when Indira Gandhi was contesting Lok Sabha polls from Chickmaglur seat), and the Congress in the yesteryears really had very catchy slogans. Here, *ek sherni* meant Indira and *sau languor* (100 monkeys) meant the opposition parties. Even Indira Gandhis very famous slogan *Garibi hatao* too had a mesmerizing effect on the electorate in India. Perhaps the slogan coined by ex-prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri *Jai jawan, jai kisan*, Lal Bahadur Shastri can prove the efficacy of it as this particular line had greatly impacted the voters in favour of Congress.

A series of very interesting slogans were composed in Bihar when the BJP and RJD of Laloo Prasad Yadav were engaged in much-pitched poll battles. Have you forgotten the BJP's very famous limerick used to oust Laloo Prasad Yadav from No. 1, Anne Marg of Patna: the Bihar chief minister's official residence. Let us rewind the saga of slogans to find out what it was? The historic slogan runs like this: *Murgi chore, chara chore, Jaldi jaldi gaddi chore* (the thief who stole fodder of animals must vacate the chair of the chief minister). Soon after Laloo Prasad Yadav, Railway Minister, found his politics derailed in 1997 following charge sheet in Rs. 950 crore Fodder Scam, the BJP coined the above slogan to successfully gun him politically. Laloo resigned and went to jail. This was one of the most interesting political slogans that India ever had. But the Laloo-loyalists too did not lag as far as orchestrating the praise of their leader. The Rashtriya Janata Dals (RJD) following slogan had been getting played most vociferously at least for the last one decade:

Jab Tak Rahega, Samose mein aloo

Tab tak Rahega, Bihar mein Laloo

(as long as you use potato to make samosas, so would Laloo remain in power in Bihar). Can you really imagine a samosa without *aloo* (potato)? The reply has to be an emphatic no. What Laloo-loyalists meant is that Bihar too cannot even be imagined without Laloo. This slogan was a hit in Bihar together with the personal slogan of Laloo: MY Equation (Muslim-Yadava equation for polls). This Lok Sabha poll is also fought by RJD with these two slogans.

The regional parties in Uttar Pradesh like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) also excel in discovering catchy slogans to target each other. The BSP's Behenji Mayabati really is an expert in coining slogans to foment the masses. Her very famous caste-line slogan *Tilak-Taraju- Kalam-Talwar, Maaro inko joote chaar* really mobilized the Backward Castes to vote for the party. The slogan meant: throw shoes on Brahmins, Baniya, Kayasthas and Rajputs. In fact, the BSP's slogans categorically meant very powerful. To project its poll symbol as elephant, a BSP slogan said:

Chalega haathi, udega dhool (when an elephant moves, dust storm takes place)

Na Rahe panja, na rehega phool (neither congress will stand this storm nor

BJP can withstand the elephant: the party's symbol).

In fact, BSP really has been projecting its symbol elephant in the most effective way. When we make an x-ray of *Chad goondo ki chhati par* (put your leg on the anti-socials, meaning Samajwadi Party), *button dabega haathi par* (people would press the button on EVMs on the elephant symbol). Similarly, *Haathi nahin Ganesh Hai* (it is not elephant, but the manifestation of Lord Ganesha), *Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh hain* (meaning BSP means everything for UP).

Behenjis mentor and founder of BSP Kanshi Ram too was simply excellent in framing slogans. Kanshi Rams *Vote hamara-Raj - tumhara Nahi chalega-nahi chalega* was as much successful as his *Jo zamin sarkari hai, who zamin hamari hai*. Kanshi Rams historic slogan *Jiski jitni sankhya bhari, utni uski hissedari*, had gone a long way in netting the support from the 'Backward' and 'Other Backward Community' in garnering supports from the BSP.

Most interestingly, the hijacking of slogans also takes place in poll-time Indian politics. Though the BJP and the Sangha Parivaar had mooted the slogan *Atal* or a *Behari*? (who would be the next prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee or Laloo Prasad Yadav?), its main rival RJD had very cunningly hijacked it in the last Lok Sabha polls to cash upon the sentiment of Bihari electorate. Putting the entire Sangha Parivaar in a mighty swoop, the RJDs star campaigner Laloo invariably asked the electorate who would they vote for: Atal or a Bihari? It had created a major problem for the BJP as RJD used their very own slogans.

In India, what differentiates this time's general election from the past polls for the lower house of the Indian Parliament is the selection of rather dull slogans both by Congress and BJP. Have political slogans dulled over the years? Selection of the song *Jai Ho* of the film *Slumdog Millionaire* by Congress and *Kushal Neta, Nirnayak Sarkaar* (Able leader, decisive government) by BJP prove both the political parties need think tanks with more poetic senses and greater mental acumen.

In West Bengal at time of poll a full-scale slogan war is on as election fever soars. Parties are either blowing their own trumpet or poking fun at rival outfits through catchy slogans. In this state, slogans harp on anything from the India-US civil nuclear deal, secularism and the Third Front to local issues like land acquisition and industrialization. For instance The CPI-M is focusing on four national level issues like independent foreign policy, unity and integrity of the country, pro-people economic policy and reduction in social inequality. Their slogans raised bases of these issues, said Mohammed Salim, Deputy leader of the CPI-M in the 14th Lok Sabha is contesting from Kolkata North.

One slogan says:

'Americar hath

Ekhon Congress er hat.

Ei 'hat' e vote noy,

Hater ghashful e o vote noy

(America's hand is now Congress' hand. Don't vote for this symbol, don't vote for its ally Trinamool either).

'Deshe chai swanirbhar,

Janamukhi dharmanirapeksha sarkar,

Ejonne chai kendre Third Front

(We need a self-sufficient, secular government at the Centre, for which we need the Third Front).

6. GRAFFITI DECLINE

Nowadays in India, the Election Commission restricts Graffiti activities during election time through the Highest Court of India saying that without prior intimation or permission or respect from the owner of the 'Walls' such type of activities are offensive. It comes under crime which is against the state law. For instance,

'It's the end of Graffiti days in Bengal. The state government on Monday issued a directive, ordering a blanket ban on Graffiti, no matter what the property is public, private or corporate. Home secretary Prasad Ranjan Ray instructed the police top brass to enforce the West Bengal (Prevention of) Defacement of Public Properties Act, 1976, in a bid to prevent defacing of walls. This Act does not allow for any household giving a political party permission to write on its wall'. (Timesofindia, 27.02.2006)

But in the time of poll, politicians in India have a literary bend of mind with poetic sense or not may remain a matter to be questioned but the poll time in the world's biggest democracy really sees the political parties inclining a great deal for limericks or slogans to gun each other in the electoral arena.

Nevertheless, the recent prohibition imposed by the Election Commission on Graffiti, postcards, and billboards in certain states has had a detrimental effect on the livelihood of these artists. As stated by a Graffiti artist, the advent of modern technology in printing has had a negative impact on this art form, leading many artists to abandon their profession. In today's era, flex boards have gained popularity due to their efficiency in terms of time and coverage. Unlike Graffiti, flex boards can be easily installed in various locations and require less time for completion. This convenience has prompted artists to opt for flex boards, as they no longer need to stay up late at night to work on their art. Additionally, the scarcity of available walls has further encouraged the utilization of flex boards as an alternative medium for artistic expression.

7. CONCLUSION

Graffiti in Indian political campaigning has long served as a dynamic and expressive canvas, reflecting the pulse of public sentiment and acting as a visual amplifier of the people's voice. Historically, it wasn't just about spreading party propaganda, but also about giving form to the wit, humor, and sharp political commentary that resonated with the masses. Walls in cities like Kolkata, in particular, became living murals of political struggle, festooned with clever slogans and pointed satire that captured the imagination. These slogans, often crafted with a sharp eye for rhythm and rhyme, became integral to political messaging, making complex political ideas accessible and memorable to the everyday citizen. Souvik Mishra, an executive creative director of Bstes CHI & Partners, Kolkata, points out, while many cities across India have outsourced this creative endeavor to advertising agencies, Kolkata has remained something of an outlier, where party workers still bear the torch of crafting these lines by hand, ensuring they remain rooted in grassroots sentiment.

The recent decline in political graffiti—particularly in Kolkata, once a hub for this form of public art—signals a shift that transcends the fading of an artistic medium. This decline can be attributed to several factors, including government-imposed restrictions, the shrinking availability of wall space, and the growing dominance of electronic media in political communication. Where once the walls spoke freely through vibrant, thought-provoking imagery and slogans, today they often reflect a more restrained and sterile form of expression. The creativity and boldness that characterized political graffiti in its heyday seem to have been curtailed, replaced by slogans that lack the cultural richness and aesthetic flair of previous decades.

Veteran cartoonist Chandi Lahiri laments this erosion, noting that the once vibrant humor and satire that enlivened political discourse have significantly diminished, particularly under the Left Front's extended rule in West Bengal. This shift has dulled the once sharp edge of political commentary that graffiti offered, turning what was once a powerful form of democratic expression into something far more muted.

Today, what remains on walls is a pale shadow of its former self—slogans stripped of the humor, irony, and creativity that once made graffiti a uniquely powerful tool for engaging with political ideas. Like the oral poetry of the Bedouins, graffiti once functioned as a passive yet profound way of challenging societal norms and celebrating democratic values. Its decline marks not only the loss of a vibrant art form but also the diminishing of a critical public voice that once thrived within India's political landscape. The once colorful and critical writing on the wall has faded, leaving behind an echo of the vibrant discourse that graffiti once facilitated.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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