Politicising the Street Graffiti in Kashmir

Mudasir Amin, Iymon Majid

As the Kashmir conflict entered a low-intensity armed phase and saw greater street protest in the 2000s, new expressions of political dissidence have emerged in the Valley. Political graffiti has found resonance, across urban and rural areas, as a form of resistance against state narratives whilst also shielding participants from direct persecution. After initial concessions, the state has now begun to respond with counter-graffiti.

Modern conflicts are complex. They not only involve armies and weaponry from two sides fighting each other, but also entire landscapes and populations. What is remarkable and terrifying about these conflicts is the affect they have on civilian populations (Kaldor 1999, 2013). In most cases, reluctant civilian populations become targets, beyond just collateral damage, in a war they would not have necessarily wanted to participate in at all. However, as they become participants, they develop mechanisms of survival and possibilities of resistance. Thus, in a place like Kashmir, the past few years have seen a burgeoning growth of writers, musicians, and other artists, who have tried to produce art and literature which can be essentially placed in a broad scheme of resistance and political protest.

Streets: Site of Contestation

As conflicts deepen, every “space” in the conflict zone becomes contested between the warring factions, transforming the same into “battlegrounds.” What ensues is a conflict over the effective control of public spaces, which becomes a prerogative of the different parties involved in the conflict. The state’s armed institutions often try to assert sovereign claim over the streets through different acts of policing (Herbert 1998). The territorial ambitions of states are, thus, not only related to making gains beyond “borders” but also within borders, that is, the streets. The state considers it essential to control the streets so as to control the population. Even in times of peace, control over the streets is contested. Most democratic countries have laws which make it a cognisable offence to damage public property through street art.

Streets are an essential part of community life, a part of the mohalla, like elsewhere in South Asia. Thus, state agencies exerting control over street spaces are often seen as intrusions into the private domain of community life. Civilian population, too, contests dominant power and wrestles for the control of public spaces, especially the street. Stone-throwing incidents by the youth in urban and semi-urban places, and in some villages of Kashmir, exemplify such contestation by citizens. In this sense, the street becomes the most contested of spaces (Herbert 1998), also because it is the very essence of civilian imagination—of what belongs to them and what does not. In civilian imagination, the street belongs to the people and thus, the people will decide its fate, social texture, and more importantly, control. As Don Mitchell (1996: 129) argues, it is only on the streets that marginalised or oppressed groups can manifest their politics and be considered as “legitimate members of the polity.”

In Kashmir, this contestation reaches another level, where a whole population is branded as “enemy” (Majid and Amin 2016). The four popular uprisings in the Kashmir Valley in the last eight years demonstrate why the streets are important and how the two parties (“state” through police and paramilitary forces, and “society” through civilians) use different means and methods to control and contest the streets. At the same time, the contestation has evolved and changed its dynamics. Stone throwing is an open confrontation, much like a battlefield with two parties holding their position and as the “battles” proceed, gains are made on either side. In that, graffiti entails contestation by stealth confrontation, which is a mostly nocturnal and one-directional activity. It contests control of the streets through the visual arts and thus, forms a new expression of political dissidence among Kashmiris in the same way that literature or music does.

Graffiti: Contexts, Meaning

Graffiti is often defined as the art or practice of writing or painting images on walls in a public space. Kenneth Bush (2013) argues that despite the universality
and prevalence of graffiti through the ages, it is hard to point to any consistent definition. He presents four reasons for it: (i) heterogeneity in its forms and functions; (ii) inconsistency in using the term; (iii) normative lenses of commentators; and (iv) disciplinary blinkers of researchers. There is also a fifth reason, that of locating the art form in the legal discourse of a region. But a legal definition of graffiti is more relatable to criminalising the art. Often associated with cities, graffiti has evolved from being a reactionary method of protest to incorporating deep political messages (Green 2014). Street artists like Banksy achieve much more than simple provocation, conveying critical political messages on contemporary events to people and the state.

Graffiti artists prefer anonymity as they cannot afford to come out in the open and disclose their identities. Their messages are context-specific with a powerful political undertone against what they consider political hegemons of the day. Madeleynn Green (2014) argues that where the socio-economic gap and social instability are less severe, graffiti tends to get depoliticised. However, the case is reversed in places where instability or political turmoil is severe. She cites the example of Salvador and Brazil and points out how the political commentary of graffiti there was more political than what is drawn on the walls in Western countries, especially in the United States and Western Europe. As Green (2014) is more focused on socio-economic inequality, her analysis does not provide a picture of the evolution of graffiti in conflict zones or war-like situations, where politics is central to society.

The cases of Latin American countries and conflicts in West Asia provide deeper insights with respect to Kashmir. For example, “political graffiti” became an important tool of resistance for Sandinistas fighting the dictatorial regime in Nicaragua (Cardenal et al 1989). For Nicaraguans, the “images” (graffiti) on public walls was a strategic part of their resistance against the oppressive regime (Benavides-Vanegas 2005). In many Latin countries, artists draw or paint iconic figures of resistance movements like Che Guevara or Mao Tse-tung in order to showcase symbolic resistance “as a means to oppose authority” (Benavides-Vanegas 2005). Similarly, in West Asia, graffiti has emerged as a political expression against occupational regimes (in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq) and against dictatorial regimes in most West Asian countries (cardenal 1996; Phillips 1999; Waldner and Dobratz 2013). Graffiti is always site-specific and yet one thing becomes essentially clear from West Asian graffiti scene, as Julie Peteet (1996: 139–40) shows in her study on graffiti of the first intifada (uprising) that it is “a means of resistance … developed within the specific space of repression, within the constraints and possibilities it entails.”

Contextualisation is, thus, important to understand the state of graffiti in any sociopolitical environment (Bush 2013). The abnormally high military and paramilitary presence in Kashmir and the conflict in itself bear a heavy mark on the graffiti culture. As this article focuses on the four popular civilian uprisings since 2008, their politics also leaves a mark on what kind of political communication is conveyed through graffiti.

Phases of Popular Protest

The movement of right to self-determination in Kashmir has witnessed multiple phases. As an idea, azadi (freedom) has constantly evolved and the movement has developed over time, and continues to do so. From the politics of Plebiscite Front (1955–75) to a vacuum created with the reformation of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference in 1975 and then subsequently, to insurgency, whose demand in the initial years was greater political activity, with new expressions of political dissidence emerging in the Valley. This was a period when the centre stage of resistance was taken up by an amalgam of political groups known...
as the Hurriyat Conference. Their mode of political expression spanned calls for peaceful protests, strikes, and boycotting elections. However, some of them even engaged in dialogues with the Indian state, which eventually led to their split (Watson 2003).

In 2008, mass protests erupted in the Valley when the government ordered a controversial land transfer of 99 acres at Baltal Pahalgam to Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board (SASB) (Chowdhary 2010). The state responded to the protests against the land transfer with police firings. This, in turn, led to more violent protests wherein Kashmiri youth engaged the forces in fierce stone-pelting clashes. The young protestors also used social media to their advantage. Facebook and YouTube became new (virtual) spaces for the youth where they engaged a larger audience to express their political aspirations (Rowlatt 2016).

Writing on the Wall

With at least 60 civilians killed, mostly youth and children, the state curbed almost every form of political expression detaining stone-pelters and protesting youth under the infamous Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act (PSA), 1978. The cyber cell of the state police arrested people for posting “controversial” things on Facebook and YouTube amid continuous surveillance (News18 2012). This is when graffiti as an alternative and creative form of political expression emerged and fashioned the already contested and politicised streets. In fact, the trend started in 2007 when some boys from Old City, Srinagar started painting messages such as “azaadi” and “free Kashmir” by roadside walls.

The first graffiti that emerged in different localities of Srinagar city were simple in their writing style and message. “Pakistan zindabad” was one such graffiti whose political message was but a continuation of the same political thought process that had peaked in the 1990s. Over the years, there has been a transformation of political opinion in Kashmir, which now focuses on the right to self-determination exclusively rather than locating itself in the nationalism espoused by either India or Pakistan (Free Press Kashmir 2017; News18 2007). However, these nationalisms and Kashmir’s merger in them continue to remain central to the political narratives that emerge in Kashmir.

Subsequently, in 2009 and 2010, Kashmir again witnessed mass protests (see note 2). Here, the graffiti took on a more sophisticated outlook. Inspired by Palestinian and other Arab art, Kashmiri graffiti artists tried to represent the daily struggles of common people in their works and assert it as a form of resistance (Shah 2012). A group of graffiti artists calling themselves El-Horiah (the freedom) painted graffiti which was internationalist in character (Shah 2012). For example, one of their graffiti portrayed a stone-pelter throwing flowers instead of stones, titled “love is in the air.” Originally conceived by Banksy, it deals with the violent nature of the state and its institutions, and how ordinary people oppose such violent structures with symbols of love and friendship. Another graffiti by them states “this is a PSA zone,” referring to the draconian Public Safety Act.

For most graffiti artists in Kashmir, publicity of the group is not the purpose. Instead, anonymity ensures safety (personal interview 2016). So while many groups do not tag their graffiti, they do have similar politically-charged messages. Twin graffiti in uptown Srinagar displays “police state” written in black over a pink wall and adjacent to which is a call for public morality. The latter graffiti written in Urdu encourages women to veil their heads, stating that “the veil provides solemnity and respect to women.”

The two graffiti, divergent in their messages, show a new pattern that has developed in Kashmir post-2011; that of an increasingly reactionary attitude of artists. If, on the one hand, they were against the state, certain graffiti were made only as an irritant: for example, the “welcome Taliban” and ISIS graffiti from 2013 which emerged on the walls of Hari Parpat Fort, a 17th-century fort in Srinagar city (PTI 2013).

One important pattern emerging in Kashmir is the identification with the Palestinian cause. Graffiti announcing “free Gaza; intifada; Gaza tigers; free Palestine, free Kashmir” have been on the rise. The solidarity with the Palestinian cause is not limited to graffiti but Muslims in Kashmir generally relate it to the onslaught on Islam (Falak 2014).

Graffiti artists, being aware of the fact that they can be hauled and roughed up by state agencies, generally move out in the evenings or before dawn. Speaking about the dangers associated with graffiti, one of the artists said:

“It is always risky. Once I was chased by a car for almost half an hour. On another occasion, crossing a CRPF [Central Reserve Police Force] personnel on one end of the bridge, I sprayed on the pillars and left from the other end with a CRPF personnel at that end too. But then when you have a purpose one ought to take the risk. (personal communication 2016)

This shows how graffiti is a youthful expression, involving risk and thrill. When asked about the felt need for and inspiration to take up such risk, one of the members of a group active since 2007 reveals that

There was no graffiti at that time in Kashmir and the resistance movement was at its lowest ebb (sic). So the gap had to be filled. Our inspiration was neither a person nor some cause elsewhere. For us, it was the desire to be free from Indian occupation. The purpose was simple public awareness and motivating young people to be proactive. (personal communication 2016)

2016 Mass Protests

On the evening of 8 July 2016, a popular insurgent, Burhan Wani, belonging to the Hizbul Mujahideen was killed in an encounter (Dasgupta 2016). His death sparked widespread protests throughout the Valley and expectedly, the state response was brutal. Curfew was imposed in all districts of the Valley. In a few days, the nature of the mass protests changed as they became organised and disciplined. During this time, Hurriyat Conference, as part of its protest calendars, asked people to paint graffiti on roads and walls. S A S Geelani, Hurriyat chairman, himself joined in, painting one outside his home in Hyderpora, Srinagar (Greater Kashmir 2016).

It effectively translocated the already-established graffiti culture in urban areas to rural areas. In Srinagar and semi-urban areas like Anantnag, and
Sopore the graffiti was provocative, imaginative, and artistic. Consider the two graffiti that emerged near the Jamia Masjid Hanfia Masjid in Reshi Bazar, Anantnag: three girls are playing jump rope with a barbed wire instead of a rope—a comment on the state's brutalities on children. On the left side, is another graffiti, equally imaginative showing three balloons (resembling children) and on one of the balloons is a target sign, as if someone is about to take a shot. The balloon is a symbolic representation of the journey that the children are about to commence or have already commenced. The target sign refers to state response; it could mean a bullet shot or pellet that is being aimed to burst the balloon (or the child). Given that a balloon is also a representation of the head, the graffiti also implies that there is no restraint from the state to kill or seriously maim.

Such creative depiction of the situation in Kashmir was the focal point of the graffiti produced in 2016. The political artwork in this period also employed a different range of texts. The focus was majorly on Wani with graffiti such as “Burhan our hero; Burhan still in our hearts; Burhan still alive; leader of resistance Burhan; Today we mourn, lion [Burhan] is no more; etc.” A particular graffiti written in Urdu summed up how Kashmiris perceived the slain militant. It said, “Burhan you have become a martyr, you have left us alone” (see Bazaz 2016).

Some graffiti in Srinagar painted Wani’s face on walls—this was a first for faces of popular leaders surfacing in Kashmir’s graffiti scene. Graffiti such as “India, your game is over,” spotted in Old City, Srinagar, took bold political positions.

In rural areas, as the researchers witnessed first-hand, the absence of armed forces’ vigil meant that artists could use ample time to paint or write. Consequently, the graffiti was meticulous yet simplistic. Given that most of the artists were novices, the artwork lacked sophistication in creativity or political commentary. Usually, texts such as “go India, go back” or the ubiquitous “azaadi” were used. There are, however, some interesting, if not creative, messages in southern Kashmir’s Tral area, which has been the centre of the armed insurgency in recent years. Graffiti, such as “land of Moosa,” referring to the rise of another militant commander Zakir alias Moosa, were also spotted. Another important distinction pertains to the usage of art material—urban artists use spray cans and paints while artists in rural areas mostly use chalk and charcoal, and sparingly paint for the lack of accessibility to better material.

Another important aspect of the 2016 graffiti has been the naming and threatening of Jammu and Kashmir Police (JKP) personnel. There were messages like “JK [Jammu and Kashmir] police, we are coming” in the past as well, but the naming of individual officers is a new phenomenon. In Anantnag town, messages for police officials were painted, warning them to refrain from the use of force against civilians. In Srinagar, the graffiti “Yasir Qadri—the murderer” was reported extensively in both electronic and print media. Qadri, deputy superintendent of JKP, allegedly killed a youth Shabir Ahmad Mir of Tengpora, Srinagar in his home on 12 July 2016. The court has issued multiple orders to register a case against the said official, which has yet to see the light of day (see Parry 2016; Tantry 2016). Similarly, in northern Kashmir’s Sopore town, one graffiti read, “Harmeeet, a warning for you. Your death is our mission,” threatening a superintendent of JKP, Harmeeet Singh.

**State Response**

In the initial days of graffiti in Kashmir, state forces were not so quick to efface them. For instance, the famous azaadi graffiti at the Jawahar Nagar Bridge, Srinagar took authorities 15 days to wipe out.9 Though most of the graffiti was smudged or effaced by state authorities, there was no adequate counter-response to them. For instance, many walls in Srinagar “bear mysterious shapes and hieroglyphs” intended to disfigure the underlying graffiti and thereby, render the messages “unintelligible for the intended audience” (Najaq 2016). In 2015, the authorities sanctioned a project and deputed some artists to draw murals at different places in Srinagar, claiming it to be an initiative for showcasing the Valley’s rich cultural heritage (Mohidin 2015). The locations for these commissioned artworks were primarily walls painted with “anti-India” graffiti.

The police have so far failed to take action or arrest any graffiti artist. However, they maintain that whenever they catch such artists, strict action would be taken (Saha 2016).

In September 2016, counter-graffiti appeared at many places in Srinagar, which modified or manipulated only a few letters in the existing graffiti to change the meaning of the text. For instance, the message “we want freedom” on a shop shutter was modified to “we want freedom from stone pelters.” The graffiti “India, your game is over” was changed to “India, your game is good” and “Burhan’s downtown” to “Burhan down, down” (Najaq 2016). Thus, the streets in Kashmir continue to be contested through stones and also through a “war of words.”

The state response to graffiti has been two sided: first, the state is ready to make concessions for graffiti artists because of its non-violent character and second, the state seeks to efface the same for they know the effectiveness of graffiti in fermenting and influencing political opinion. Further, a recent trend in state response has been the culture of counter-graffiti, wherein they alter the existing text or message. Thus, the state also acknowledges the usefulness of art in a political situation such as Kashmir’s and promotes its own versions as demonstrated above.

Yet, is one man’s defacement another man’s mark? Graffiti is supposed to be a counter to what should be. If the state defaces graffiti or makes counter-graffiti, which is political in every sense, it does complicate the notion of audience. If the audience is Kashmiri for graffiti artists, then the state will have the same effect on them through their counter-graffiti, thereby hijacking the political message and popular protest expressed in the graffiti.

**Conclusions**

As the Kashmir conflict entered into a low-intensity armed phase and saw greater street protests, new expressions of political dissidence emerged. From a
burgeoning growth of writers (see Peer 2009; Waheed 2011), rappers (Mishra 2014), graphic novelists (for instance, Sajad 2015) to an effective usage of social media platforms, political protest has transformed. Though these forms are nascent, they have enabled new discourses to emerge. It does not, however, mean that old forms of dissent like stone-pelting or armed violence are completely sidelined. If older forms of political dissent exemplified physical strength and were often articulated in a manner where the protesters’ identities were preferably shrouded, the new forms depend on the creative abilities of the active participants and are more visible.

One such form which combines the features of both is street art in the form of graffiti. Most street artists in Kashmir (as elsewhere) prefer anonymity. Primarily, graffiti art is used as a means of communication but in Kashmir it also evolves into a form of resistance trying to defy state narratives and shielding participants from direct persecution for articulating counter-narratives. This inevitably makes the art of graffiti more political in Kashmir than traditionally understood. This article examined the historical roots and significance of graffiti and the underlying politics and ideological moorings of artists in a place like Kashmir, where even streets are contested spaces.

Graffiti artists in Kashmir, despite state hostility and propaganda, continue to evolve their talent, drawing inspiration from around the world. What differentiates graffiti from other art is its illegality, whereby there is an apprehension that artists can be policed. However, in Kashmir, extrajudicial ways are adopted by common citizens to respond to such activities that the state deems suitable to “normalise” the situation. The painting of threats is, in that sense, a clearly-directed message. “Go India go” is a message from an anonymous artist addressed to an amorphous Indian public. However, to name is to be specific and by naming policemen it also suggests the framing of not only martyrs but traitors and which calls on local social relations. An important issue in the graffiti scene of Kashmir is its localisation. Much like the insurgency that was an urban phenomenon initially, the graffiti scene percolated to rural areas and semi-urban areas. Though rural graffiti is not that creative (with the exception of semi-urban areas), it does comment on the way Kashmiri’s right to self-determination movement has progressed. Moreover, the rural street is more ingrained in the community or the village, despite heavily militarisation under strategic area domination. What type of contestation is then entailed in such a confrontation? If the graffiti scene emerges under the eye of militarisation, it will possibly reflect the political culture of rural areas and give us a better sense of the efficacy of art as resistance across the Valley.

NOTES

1. The infamous massacres in Sopore, Bijbehara, Hauz-Harana and other places have all been recorded on the streets where the two factions were armed forces and civilians respectively (see Jammu Kashmir Coalition for Civil Society 2015). Further, despite the lack of data on it, there have been numerous “encounters” between militants and armed state forces, once again on the streets.

2. The four uprisings took place between a span of eight years from 2008 to 2016. In June 2008, the government transferred 800 canals of land to Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board which was seen as an attempt to alter the demography of the Valley, leading to a wave of protests. These protests met with disproportionate violence by the state, which killed more than 50 civilians and injured hundreds. The protests that began with demands for revocation of the land transfer order, advanced into an autonomous mass uprising with hundreds of thousands demanding an end to an Indian rule. In May 2009, people again came out on the streets against the double rape and murder of two young women in Kashmiri’s Shopian demanding justice. In 2010, a brutal crackdown on unarmed civilians was carried out after protests broke against the killing of three villagers in Machil area of Kupwara in a fake encounter. In the ensuing violence, 112 civilians were killed by the armed forces. The fourth, and latest, uprising was triggered by the killing of the 22-year-old Hizbul Mujahideen commander, Burhan Wani, during an encounter “in Kokernag, Anantnag on 8 July 2016.”

3. Bansky is a London-based street artist and political activist, whose graffiti on public spaces, street walls and bridges depicts a political and social commentary. Plebiscite Front was formed on 9 August 1955 by Mirza Muhammad Afzal Beg, a trusted lieutenant of Sheikh Abdullah, to advocate self-determination for the people of Jammu and Kashmir. In the period between its formation and the Kashmir Accord (1975) when it was dissolved, the party attained prominence for its opposition to the different regimes placed to rule the state. It did not participate in electoral politics and on some occasions, the state government banned it from participating by the regime but it often used proxy candidates in state and union elections (see Gokhali 2011).

5. Al Fatah was a Kashmiri armed resistance group formed in the late 1960s. Inspired by Algerian anti-colonial revolutionaries and Palestinian militants, the group believed in guerrilla warfare to weaken the Indian state. Seeing their struggle as a re-establishment of lost nationhood and a fight against oppression, they believed in civil disobedience, non-payment of taxes, attacking and defiling government offices, and finally attacking cantonments and convoys. The group resorted to robberies to finance their activities and sent members for arms training across the Line of Control. Before it came into conflict with the Indian state members were arrested but granted parole after Sheikh Abdullah became chief minister in 1975 (see Swami 2007).

6. National Liberation Front (NLF) was formed by Amanullah Khan and Maqbool Bhat in August 1965 as an armed underground group so that conditions can be created for the people of Jammu and Kashmir to determine their future. In 1975, a few members of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) (Jamal 2009).

7. The original Urdu text reads pars a aurat ko waqar aur altaeana atta karta hai (see this graffito in a photo essay by Hakeem 2013).

8. For most political commentators, these messages are meant to irritate the Indian state and have nothing to do with the Kashmiri resistance movement. Almost all the Hurriyat groups have time and again issued statements asserting that Talibani and ISIS have no role in Kashmir. For one of the artists, the wall is a public space where people can write anything. But the opinions vary for another artist refutes the above claim, asserting that every message is well-planned and the writing on the walls are depictions of the artists’ politics.

9. It was revealed to us by an artist who claimed to be the particular graffito as his own work.

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Various, at times unscrupulous politicians and corrupt media outlets have joined the campaign to politicize the battle against the Coronavirus. The latter have increasingly often published false information that deliberately discredits efforts made by China, Russia and a number of other countries to help nations and its citizens suffering from COVID-19. Oddly this politicization is based in positive cases (and not hospitalizations) ostensibly linked to the novel coronavirus. It is, and always has been, a political and politicized position to listen to some scientists, and not others. And so what of our term “reset”? Indeed, it is itself misleading, and we would propose it is intentionally so if we understand Orwell’s critique of the use of language “newspeak” in technocratic oligarchies.