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Ambiguous Visualities: Gender, Governmentality and Graffiti in Urban India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a series of murals produced by a street art collective in an Indian city, situating them within the rapid expansion of state- and privately commissioned street art projects across Indian urban centres over the last decade. While street art has historically been associated with claims to urban democracy and challenges to elite cultural authority, its recent institutionalization within city-led beautification and revitalization programmes signals a significant shift in its political and administrative function. In contemporary Indian cities marked by rapid financialization, speculative urban development, and cultural regeneration, street art increasingly operates at the intersection of symbolic inclusion and material exclusion. Focusing on murals that foreground feminist and transgender themes, the paper analyzes how visual languages of gender justice, empowerment, and inclusion are mobilized within officially sanctioned urban art projects. These murals draw upon the moral economy of the "right to the city" discourse, invoking ideas of visibility, belonging, and public recognition for marginalized gendered subjects. At the same time, the conditions of their commissioning, funding, and spatial placement embed them within a political economy of neoliberal urban governance, where art is deployed as a tool for place-branding, tourism, and investment-friendly urban transformation. Through close visual analysis and contextual examination of commissioning frameworks, funding structures, and site selection, the paper argues that feminist and queer iconographies are incorporated into urban revitalization efforts in ways that often depoliticize their radical potential. Rather

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than challenging existing power relations, these interventions risk producing a form of curated inclusivity and visibility that dovetails gendered claims to citizenship with middle-class aesthetics and urban policy agendas of redevelopment.
Keywords: Street Art; Neoliberalism; Gender; Transgender; Urban India

1. Introduction

Urban aesthetic practices ranging from murals and workshops to public art festivals and collaborations have proliferated in Indian cities, positioning themselves within the public sphere as a counterpoint to the perceived elitism of the mainstream art world. This proliferation is part of a longer, though uneven, history of graffiti and mural culture in India, which has moved from informal and largely unsanctioned practices to increasingly institutionalized forms of commissioned street art. In cities such as Delhi, initiatives like Delhi Street Art and large-scale projects led by organizations such as the St+Art India Foundation have played a significant role in transforming walls, underpasses, and public infrastructure into curated sites of cultural production, often in collaboration with municipal authorities and private sponsors, based on the author's long-term ethnographic and archival research on these organizations. Invoking populist narratives of inclusion, these art projects often frame both art and the city as democratic panaceas. While they espouse civic engagement, urban art initiatives often obscure deeper urban exclusions and further agendas of urban redevelopment and social control.

With a view to generating a larger understanding of the newly emergent commissioned street art movement in urban India, the focus in this paper is specifically on the mural art by Aravani Art Project (henceforth referred to as AAP), an urban art collective based in Bangalore (but functional now in many Indian cities), that aims to "create (a) platform for the transgender community, creating consciousness (and) well-being through art and social participation."Founded in 2016 by Poornima Sukumar, a fine arts graduate by training, a former teacher, and now a muralist by profession, AAP attempts to engage women who identify across the spectrum as transgender-women, gender-fluid, and cis-gender women, in painting murals. *'Aravani'* is the Tamil equivalent for the Hindi term, a term commonly used to refer to transgender women. While the core team of 4–5 artists and entrepreneurs is based in Bangalore, quite characteristically of contemporary community art, a new team of volunteer collaborators is said to emerge from among the transgender community in every city that they take up projects in. The collective has now completed around 50 such projects in various neighborhoods, some of them ghettoes and slums, some where sex workers live, across many Indian cities.

What is interesting is that their art is often funded by the state. While they undertake commissioned projects which are paid for by private companies, the public projects usually find support from city planners in different forms, such as travel and stay/supplies, as well as easy provision of walls of government buildings for painting. One of their most talked about collaborations was with street art organization St+Art India Foundation and the Central Public Works Department (CPWD), for the Lodhi Art District in Delhi in 2019. AAP has also worked with several research, non-profit, and cultural organizations such as the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, India Culture Labs, Instagram, the Mission for Indian Gay & Lesbian Empowerment, etc.

Transgender individuals in India, especially those marginalized by class and caste, face pervasive discrimination that often limits their access to formal employment. According to the *Census of India 2011* conducted by the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, approximately 488,000 individuals (0.04% of the total population) identified as transgender, a figure widely understood to be a significant underestimation due to stigma, misclassification, and exclusion from enumeration processes. Transgender populations in Indian cities are disproportionately affected by caste- and class-based marginalization, with limited access to formal employment, housing, and healthcare, often surviving through informal economies such as begging, sex work, or ritual performance. It is within this context of structural precarity that urban art initiatives invoking inclusion and empowerment acquire their political significance. Poornima Sukumar, a cisgender street artist, seeks to challenge this marginalization by helping transgender persons 'reclaim' urban space through artistic engagement. Importantly, these artists are compensated for their

labour, and through the interventions of AAP, some have been able to establish alternative, sustainable livelihoods.

Taking all this into account, I argue that AAP's work embodies the unique interplay of form and content in India's contemporary urban art movement, situating it within the moral economy of the 'right to the city' discourse, as well as the political economy of urban revitalization. Examining the mural practices of AAP, this paper asks how art that explicitly mobilizes the language of inclusion, participation, and empowerment is embedded within state and corporate frameworks of urban governance, and what this embedding means for the politics of gendered citizenship. It thus argues that contemporary commissioned street art in India operates as a form of symbolic inclusion through aestheticized governance, a mode of urban management in which visual culture is mobilized to signal diversity, participation, and social justice, while leaving existing relations of power largely intact. Methodologically, the paper combines visual analysis of murals, spatial analysis of their locations, and contextual study of commissioning and funding structures, alongside interviews and field observations. Structurally, the paper first situates the rise of commissioned street art within broader processes of neoliberal urbanization in India, then offers a close reading of AAP's murals, and finally analyzes how visibility and participation function as key representational frames through which feminist and transgender subjects may be incorporated into urban cultural governance.

2. Materials and Methods

While studying neoliberal urban policy, it is important to recognize that Western policy models remain a big influence on the aspirational urbanism of Asian cities, with the 'global city' becoming the primary model for metropolitan cities in India too, particularly so when the cultural movement under study (graffiti and street art), and its subsequent co-optation by city governments, are known to have first happened in cities like New York and Philadelphia. However, it is equally important to remember that the developmental pattern of cities in the global South may have imitated patterns of urban development in the North, especially the USA, but urban policy reform interacts with national, regional, and local realities differently across contexts.

An important headway within urban policy studies has been made with the development of the field of policy mobility, which looks at policy not as a static and complete package but as something mobile, and contingent on situational institutions. This has been one of the methodological tools for comparisons between city contexts in this research. Allan Cochrane writes in his book *Understanding Urban Policy: A Critical Approach* that "there is powerful evidence that urban policy has become a global phenomenon, rather than merely an aggregation of nationally distinctive urban policies, but it is less clear how this globalization finds its 'localized' expression"[1]. Peck and Tickell also highlight in their work the increasing significance and prevalence of transatlantic policy transfer, primarily because of the increased role of think tanks that spread neoliberal thought[2].

However, it has also been borne in mind that the Indian government, especially since 2014, has been criticized for lifting policy templates from the West without changing them to suit local contexts. Using Brenner and Theodore's framework of "actually existing neoliberalism"[3] to understand the specificity of neoliberal manifestation across contexts, I analyze street art projects as an example of place-specific neoliberalization. Sangeeta Kamat, who has analyzed the city of Hyderabad in India as a 'global city', is an influence here: " 'Actually existing neoliberalism' has proven to be a very productive framework to study the particular evolution of neoliberalism at the subnational and national level in India, and the contradictions generated therein for the postcolonial state. The analytical shift to neoliberalism as process helps to make sense of why and how certain neoliberal policies and programs are chosen over others, how these intersect with existing socio-political configurations at the provincial level, and the particular strategies that the postcolonial state deploys to mediate contradictions and conflicts"[4].

Although not as specific in nature as studies of neoliberal contestation in cities of the West, there is enough literature on the impact of economic reform on the transformation of post-colonial cities, which has been useful in this research. Sapana Doshi, a seminal urban theorist in rethinking definitions of gentrification in the 'global South', contends that Indian cities evince a blurring of political-economic aspects of urban development with various forms of meaning-making socio-spatial practices that would normally be analyzed under the domain of cultural politics[5]. Factors that trigger and influence urban change in India range from informal

settlements and their relationship to urban governance, legal/extra-legal means of land enclosure, and most significantly, developmentalist interventions of the Indian state, NGOs, and transnational agencies. It is within the latter category that I locate the unique form and mode in which the commissioned street art movement has emerged in Indian cities. Both St+Art India Foundation, the most famous and biggest street art organization in India, and Aravani Art Project, in fact, refer to themselves as non-profits.

On the one hand, the growth of individual and community (artistic) expression in cities may be seen as leading to an increased citizen participation, particularly with respect to disadvantaged communities who are finding a voice through the arts in the city. On the other hand, however, it is important to remember that urban (artistic) interventionism is intricately intertwined with urban policy implementation on the ground, particularly when it comes to forms like street art which have been incorporated into urban planning widely. While the right to the city discourse is certainly helpful, and may have helped understand resistance movements emerging in urban centers across the world, for cities in the 'global South', the discourse may need a differential and more contextualized understanding. This paper tries to make possible such a geographical-political nuance in studying the implementation of neoliberal urban policy as well as the employment of the language of rights in the context of the Indian city.

As a result of this, the paper is perhaps able to also open up the space to rethink varied articulations and implications of feminist urban interventionism, by highlighting how the right to the city discourse as well as discourses around visibility (via art) may bear different meanings for differently situated groups. It tries to temper the peculiar interactions between the state and gender advocacy groups, as well as art organizations such as AAP, with a localized understanding of feminism. One could perhaps bring together the emergence of what has been called "governance feminism"[6] along with the recently evolved tonalities of "homonationalism"[7] in India to understand the compulsory acceptance of sexual minorities by the right-wing state in recent years. As cities become financial and cultural centers, citizenship is increasingly defined in terms of urban alliance rather than via the nation-state. Urban art, thus, may be seen as an important locus of performing this citizenship.

Further, in cultural theory, the centrality of visuality in establishing and maintaining aesthetic values, gender stereotypes, and power relations within culture has long been identified. The constructions of gender and space are also often interrelated and are reproduced through and within complex webs of socio-cultural norms of power. Using inspiration from Henri Lefebvre, who in *The Production of Space* has spoken of spatial analysis as negating the illusion of transparency of power, this paper attempts to uncover the ideological underpinnings of the visual content of street art as rooted within the process of neoliberal city-making[8]. It is this illusion of transparency that naturalizes power relations, but more importantly, this illusion is located in the field of vision and is maintained in this case through the democratizing narrative of the very form of street art. This project views the necessary enrollment of communities in street art projects as giving way to governmental models of governance and as producing disciplinary citizen-subjects. Thus, one of the primary methodologies for it has been closely reviewing artworks for their content and the sites at which they are located, as well as interviewing artists, members from participating communities, and some viewers in Lodhi Colony, Delhi.

The art of AAP, via both its form and content, is deeply imbricated in questions of identity and citizenship. Apart from class analysis, it is important to ask more questions of art that claims to be for the community. Identities emerging from caste, ethnicity and gender quickly devolve into fixed categories that function as demarcations for urban distribution in India. Using studies about gendered citizenship[9], this paper pioneers an investigation into the politics of identity in the enrollment of communities in urban forms of art in Delhi, as well as the politics of *flaneurie* and "loitering" in the Indian city, elaborated on by feminist thinkers like Phadke et al.[10]. It builds on and attempts to rethink these debates around the female gaze and deliberate 'presencing' in the city. While doing this, it tries to understand the double cadence that such mural art gives to the idea, as well as to the field, of representation. It does so via two frames of representation that the work of AAP invokes, i.e., visibility and participation.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach combining visual analysis, spatial contextualization, and ethnographic methods. The primary

material consists of mural projects executed by the Aravani Art Project between 2016 and 2019, with particular attention to works produced in Delhi and Bangalore. These murals are analyzed for their visual content, iconography, and narrative strategies, as well as for the meanings generated through their placement on specific urban surfaces such as government buildings, residential neighborhoods, and redevelopment zones. This visual and spatial analysis is supplemented by semi-structured interviews conducted with AAP members, collaborating artists, and participants from transgender communities, alongside informal conversations with residents and viewers in sites such as Lodhi Colony. Additionally, the study draws on archival materials including project documentation, organizational statements, media coverage, and policy texts related to urban art initiatives. Analytically, these materials are read through critical frameworks drawn from urban studies, feminist theory, and cultural studies, particularly debates on neoliberal urban governmentality, governance feminism, and the right to the city. Together, these methods allow the paper to trace how aesthetic practices, institutional arrangements, and discourses of inclusion converge in the production of gendered urban citizenship.

3. Discussion

3.1. Visibility

Self-professedly, the primary way in which AAP works towards representing the transgender community is by claiming to give them visibility in public space. By virtue of the location of the murals, the sight of a transgender person painting a wall is, in itself, an act of radical visibility. But symbolic implications aside, each wall project literally portrays the face of a transgender person (sometimes, a mix of multiple faces in one), surrounded by colorful and culturally-specific motifs. Sukumar explains in a press interview that it started with "camouflage art" with the faces of a few transgender people merged in one (mural), and has now "transitioned to mostly portraits with a social message in the local vernacular"[11]. Whether it is the subtle refusal to be clearly defined as a singular identity as seen in the blending faces, or the reference to a symbolic shift in vision, in murals such as '*Drushtikon Badla*' (**Figure 1**), which literally translates to 'the perspective changed', their aesthetic is a conscious reference to the visibilization of the community.

Figure 1. AAP, 'Drushtikon Badla', Budhwar Peth, Pune, 2017.

Source: Aravani Art Project Facebook.

I like to refer to their meta-referential series of self and community portraits, and their interplay, as representation via identification, in which transgender activist and artist Vicky Shinde is seen posing against an AAP mural, which is then later turned into a mural of Vicky Shinde with the community mural (**Figures 2** and **3**). Purushi, a transgender artist who has been part of many projects with AAP, told a journalist, referring to their very first project 'Inclusivity' (2016) (**Figure 4**) in K. R. Market, Bangalore, that after they painted the wall, they also got their backs painted, and

stood against it as if to camouflage themselves. Titled after their intention, this mural was painted and performed by 8 artists and 7 volunteers, and carried out by AAP in collaboration with the organization Samaara, a sexual & gender minorities human rights organization based in Bangalore. Purushi says that "it was to signify that we are there in the community and are not visible"[12]. The performative improvisation seen in 'Inclusivity', which they refer to as a 'mural installation', according to me, is an ambivalent display not just of the transgender body, but also of an acute political awareness about the gendered nature of vision itself.

Figure 2. Vicky Shinde with mural, Dharavi, Mumbai 2016.

Source:aravaniartproject.com.

Figure 3. Portrait of Vicky Shinde, Freedom Park, Bangalore, 2017.

Source:aravaniartproject.com.

Figure 4. AAP, 'Inclusivity', K.R.Market, Bangalore, 2016.

Source:aravaniartproject.com.

Irit Rogoff goads the reader to an understanding of vision in (terms of) the field of difference, whether it is racial or sexual. The field of vision for her becomes a site of contestation "in which unstable normativity constantly and vehemently attempts to shore itself up"[13]. She follows Rosalyn Deutsche in highlighting that feminist art works often "facilitate a recognition—through spatialization, geographization, and location—of the constitutive dimensions of disavowed difference"[14]. This recognition plays an important role because it allows difference to be re-positioned through a manipulation of the ocular/spectatorial regime, permitting a fresher reception of difference within the field of vision and trains the onlooker into perceiving the Other differently. Sukumar highlights that "the community really celebrates it because they feel… at par with the politicians. It's not just those faces that we need to see every day. People don't anticipate a trans-woman's portrait on a wall"[15]. By inverting conventional urban iconography, these portraits confront the semiotic codes that shape the city, an intervention especially significant in the context of India's deeply masculinized urban spaces. Furthermore, the playful engagement with the genre of portraiture, including self-portraiture, not only subverts its art-historical associations, that is, from depicting the elite and powerful to intentionally centering the underrepresented, but also interrogates the very terms and boundaries of representation itself.

However, an examination is still warranted into how these murals, which certainly, in the organization's own words, "create a striking visibility in public", may inadvertently signify an appropriation of the transgender identity at the hands of (or at least run the risk of an uncritical endorsement of) a state that is seen to increasingly employ disciplinary technologies to govern. Consider, for example, a mural in Jaipur where a life-sized portrait of a transgender woman is accompanied by the words '*Meri* ID, *Meri Pehchaan*' (2018) (**Figure 5**), which was painted by 8 artists and 4 volunteers, funded by Cartist Jaipur and carried out in collaboration with the Jaipur Metro Authority. While the portrait carries the signature style of portraiture of AAP artists, the accompanying phrase instantly invokes the slogan '*Mera Aadhaar, Meri Pehchan*' (which translates as 'my Aadhar, my identity') popularized as the tagline of the Aadhar project of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), mandating biometric citizen enrollment into a controversial information database. The Aadhar Act, passed by the BJP government in 2016, faced severe criticism for its tendency to violate individual privacy and for representing a move towards a surveillance state. In a Supreme Court judgment in 2018, several parts of the Aadhar Act were declared unconstitutional, along with the passing of the Right to Privacy. Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, one of the judges comprising the five-member bench that passed the judgment, held that de-

spite the amendments made to the act, Aadhar continues to pose a "grave threat to privacy, liberty, autonomy"[16].

Figure 5. AAP, 'Meri ID, Meri Pehchaan', Jaipur, 2018.

Source:aravaniartproject.com.

The organization's website says of the mural that the aim was "to get visibility, identity (the basic right of every citizen) (…) in the hope of getting their identity accepted by the state" and Sukumar added that they "want to document the confusion, dilemma, and happiness the community experienced before and after they were recognized as a third gender in India"[17]. The mural raises concerns not about the right to refuse identification through a numerical system, but about the very process and politics of identification within the UIDAI framework. It speaks in the same register as the state, engaging directly with its discourse of identification, and enters the ongoing debates around third-gender recognition that emerged within the transgender community following the mandate of Aadhaar as a tool of citizen verification. Under the notion of identity pride, the enrollment in UIDAI mandates the disclosure of transgender status by members of the community, and is violative of their right to privacy. As the state now seeks to mainstream the transgender community, referring to them as the 'third gender' through cultural initiatives and legal frameworks, any substantive challenge to the regulation of transgender citizenship is increasingly preempted. This aligns with what LGBTQ scholar Ani Dutta critiques as the imposition of a "compulsory thirdness"[18] which forecloses more nuanced or resistant forms of gender self-definition.

The identity question is further complicated considering the fact that in an information leak recently, this very phrase was used as a key hook on the internet to search and access a huge database of citizen information maintained by the state. One report in Business Insider states that "multiple news reports suggested that by just typing '*Mera Aadhaar, Meri Pehchan*', on Google, the search opens several PDF files containing Aadhaar information like name, parents' name, address, Aadhaar number, picture, and even date of birth"[19]. Understandably, such data being in the public domain puts the transgender community doubly at risk, not only because they stand the chance to be exposed to targeted violence, especially as there is no privacy law in the country, but also because it was not until September 2018 that the Supreme Court of India decriminalized Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.

Transgender activists and lawyers have been vocal about the special vulnerability that Aadhar puts the community at. Brindaalakshmi K asks some hard-hitting questions in an article discussing the safety of Aadhar for the transgender community: "In the light of incidents of violence

against transgender persons and the mandate to link mobile numbers to Aadhaar number, how safe is the transgender community? Can a community of people, many of whom are involved in sex work, be tracked with their mobile numbers? How safe are they with a proof of identification that tracks them with their biometrics? Will it leave them vulnerable to targeted attacks in the future?"[20]. The intent behind the enrollment of the transgender community is made doubly suspect when one considers that the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, a nation-wide campaign in India introduced in 2014, that aims to clean up the street, roads and infrastructure of cities towns, urban and rural cities and area in India, and the main government scheme commissioning the street art projects including some by AAP, has recently been shown to directly employ methods to live-track sanitation workers on duty using tracking devices. It has received criticism for giving way to a kind of "surveillance slavery," especially since the workers employed in sanitation jobs are mostly Dalit (a term commonly used to refer to members of lower castes who have historically been subjected to untouchability and systemic social exclusion). A *Huffington Post* report on this contextualizes the mechanism within a larger "surveillance revolution"[21] sweeping Indian government departments, particularly under the programs pitched by PM Narendra Modi.

With this background in mind, it must be understood that within visual regimes, visibility carries ambivalence, since its effects are necessarily located within the subject's politico-economic positioning. Artistic movements representing the Other's body generate an economy of visibility, and simultaneously a certain kind of invisibility, by which members of a certain community are subject to a disciplinary gaze that serves to fix their position within a given socio-political landscape through techniques of exhibition. Several critiques have already pointed out the role of museums in legitimizing a politics of display of the Other, and the body in politico-philosophical feminist discourse has especially been seen as both a site of resistance and of normalization. Gonzalez suggests that discourses of Otherness produce the subject that they supposedly describe (or, in our case, delineate). Building on this process of subjection through representation in art or via other means in the dominant culture, she highlights the centrality of the human body as a vehicle displaying signs of otherness: "there is no escape from the fact of its 'epidermalized' status; the materiality of the body is understood to offer a continuous surface of legible information"[22]. The urban Other's body, therefore, like the raced body, in the process of becoming a subject, runs the threat of becoming an object. Here, then, we see a different kind of visibilization of the citizen-subject: one may contrast this with the absent figure of the middle-class, heteronormative, and heterosexual woman who is assumed to be an embodiment of Bharat Mata, the feminized nation-state, much iconized in art history. While such visibilization in public space may symbolize inclusion, it also highlights the contradictions of participatory democracies.

3.2. Participation

The other conceptual impetus behind contemporary street art, such as that by AAP, is its claim of accessibility by participation: that is, the making available of rights that were not available to the participating community earlier. The fact that the rhetoric of such art is phrased in terms of citizenship, and that citizenship rhetoric itself is phrased in universalist terms ('art for everyone,' 'right to the city,' for example), serves to conceal the exclusions set in place by both the city and the art world. While it may be deemed desirable to explore and introduce democratizing and participatory opportunities that attempt to close gaps between art and non-art publics and seek to enhance cultural democracy, it is increasingly necessary to tease out the contradictions between the social purpose of such art and its institutionalization.

The mural titled '*Trans Lives Matter*' (2019) (**Figure 6**), painted by 8 trans-women and several volunteers, has been hailed as one of the best examples of AAP's participatory art. Painted opposite N.P. Co-ed Senior Secondary School in Lodhi Art District, as part of the Lodhi Art Festival 2019, conducted by St+Art India Foundation, the mural was commissioned and supported by the CPWD and the Swachch Bharat Abhiyan of the central government. The primary rationale behind this collaboration was based on a rhetoric of inclusion that is aimed at bringing to the forefront "resilient identities"[23]; the very rhetoric of inclusion which was used by the same government the same year to bulldoze the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2019 in the Parliament, without due consultation with representatives and despite vocal opposition from the transgender community to this version of the bill. India's Minister of

State for Social Justice and Empowerment, Krishan Pal Gurjar, while introducing the controversial Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019, in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament, on August 5, had said that, "transgenders are an *abhinn ang* ('integral part')" of our society. Any counter arguments by those who the bill claims to represent were quelled using a charged rhetoric of nationalism. Transgender activist Grace Banu went on record to mark the day as 'Gender Justice Murder Day' and Journalist Anish Gawande wrote that, "all of this seems to suggest that the push for transgender rights by the government was never about empowering the 440,000 transgender Indians, but a publicity stunt to showcase inclusive nationalism to the world at large"[24].

Figure 6. AAP, 'Trans Lives Matter', Lodhi Art District, Delhi, 2019.

Source: aravaniartproject.com.

On the very same day in the same Lok Sabha session, the Home Minister of India, Amit Shah, had used the same words to describe Jammu and Kashmir while introducing radical provisions, that is, the revocation of special status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of Parliament, to make the region an "integral part" of India. This bill, too, was passed without debate with the stakeholders or the opposition leaders, despite vocal protests in the Parliament. Ironically, the revocation of Article 370, was supported by the right-wing in popular debate with the justification that the special status accorded to Kashmir, a Muslim-dominated state, with Article 370 prevented the state from implementing the Supreme Court's 2018 directive to decriminalize homosexuality. Abhik Bhattacharya, in his article "Have Homonationalism and Pinkwashing Come to India?" traces echoes of queer theory scholar Jasbir Puar's formulation of 'homonationalism' and 'pinkwashing' in these debates[25]. Puar, in her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, had famously highlighted (in the context of the US and Israel) how in the 21st century there has been a shift from treating the homosexual/queer figure as a threat to the nation, towards a notion of homosexuals as integral to the liberal-democratic nation-state and its citizenship. She describes this as "nationalist homonormativity".

Tellingly, one of the main critiques of the Transgender Persons bill by scholars from the community was its attempts to legitimize and legalize the gatekeeping of transgender identity by making them appear before a screening committee in order to be certified as transgender, a criticism that seems eerily fit even for the government-commissioned 'inclusive' street art projects. Nick Pachelli, in an article about AAP, writes that, "with a burgeoning collective of socially conscious creatives like Sukumar, efforts both uncomplicated

and elaborate will continue to integrate marginalized groups into India's mainstream society and dialogue"[26]. But such arm-twisting by the state via techniques of surveillance of a community, while claiming to include them, reminds one of Miller's proposition that the very role of citizenship is a disciplinary one: it is to train subjects in the cultural realm of capitalist social formations and it does so under the pretext of reinforcing one's own right(s)[27]. In the context of rights, David Harvey has famously written that, "the freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights"[28].

Within discourses such as the right to the city, however, what is often forgotten is that 'rights' do not represent the same abstract category for everyone. Rights are complex and multi-leveled, and are experienced materially and spatially by each person, and the city is not always that site where raced or sexed bodies enjoy the anonymity associated with the poetic figure of the *flaneur* or the artist-provocateur. It has also historically been a space where vulnerable bodies receive unwanted attention. Deliberately seeking attention in a public space riven with violent hierarchies is often an act of privilege, allowed only to the artist provocateur, and that too with limitations, as in the case of the independent female or trans graffiti writer. Often, transgender persons, Dalits, and Muslims have been assaulted in Indian cities for somehow conveying the desire to be seen as equals. The art of AAP does at times refer consciously to this violence, such as in the mural 'Let Humanity Bloom' (2018) that was dedicated to Tara, a transgender woman who was found burnt outside a police station in Chennai. Shanthi Munuswamy, the documentarian at AAP, says that it was the community's suggestion that they paint the portrait of Tara on the facade of the building where she lived.

Thus, the discourse of participation must also be understood against the recent reshaping of (the idea of) the middle-class citizen in a new regime of governmental urban politics in India. The street art movement represents and facilitates not only the move towards the neoliberalization/financialization of Indian cities, but also hints at a shift in governance mechanisms of the neoliberal state, for which participation becomes a modality to be incorporated. In the last two decades, metropolitan cities in India have witnessed a shift in the citizen-state relationship, with the citizen becoming a key locus through which governance is effected. A reshaping of the citizen-self accompanies and is inherent in the ways in which governmental models of urban discipline are implemented in Indian cities. The ideal of citizenship has already been duly criticized by members of those groups that were not included in the very idea of it, such as by feminism and other social justice movements, owing to which the ambit of citizenship has been expanded.

But neoliberal governance seems to have incorporated social justice movements into its fold, making them seem necessary, while keeping the power structures emanating from the neoliberal city intact. Linda Peake and Martina Rieker point out how Hardt and Negri (2000) have talked about neoliberalism's ability to absorb difference and translate it into a question of governmentality, which has posed a challenge for social movements[29]. The institutionalization of transgender movements and advocacy of a certain kind may very well be understood as within the emergence of a specific kind of "governance feminism" in India, enlarged upon by Prabha Kotiswaran. To explain the rise of this, Kotiswaran argues that Indian feminism has been in the "governance mode" since the 1980s, highlighting a diluted oppositional stance vis-à-vis the state as one of the parameters to judge this. Showing that the Indian Women's Movement in the 1990s came to be dominated by the organizational form of the funded NGO, as feminist organizations that received external funding dwindled, she goes on to argue that the Seventh National Conference of Autonomous Women's Movements in 2006 was attended almost entirely by funded NGOs.

The question of representation in the city is intricately bound up with representation of the city and by the city, compelling one to ask what the relationship between the three processes: representation of the city, the city as representation, and representation in the city, is. In the mural-portrait, the resident comes to be physically projected onto the visible surfaces of the built environment in the city, while helping the city seem artistic. As the individual face of an 'unknown' inhabitant is made visible in such a scalar proportion, the interaction between this facial representation and the texture of the city results in a claim for this new kind of city. The claim of a city that bears the faces of its (oppressed) dwellers is that it is democratic in that it represents and celebrates their expressions and feelings. The impact of neoliberalism on urban

lives, however, is always uneven and the only way in which the marginalized have any representation in these cities is through (such) symbolic gestures. While such visibilization in public space may symbolize inclusion, it also highlights the contradictions of participatory democracies. Moreover, participating in visual symbolism may register presence for those either considered invisible to the imagination, at best, or visualized in a deterministic way, such as Indian cinema has time and again done with various marginalized communities, at worst. But often, the visibility is undesired and may come in exchange for a disciplinary regime that further precarizes the community in question.

4. Conclusions

The murals of the Aravani Art Project (AAP) operate within a complex visual economy. Positioned at the intersection of gender, governmentality, and urban aesthetics, these works render visible a community historically denied representation in public space. Yet, this visibility is not unambiguous. As explored in this paper, the very acts of visibilization and participation—central to AAP's practice—exist within a terrain of ambivalence. Central to this ambivalence are the twin logics of *visibility* and *participation*, which constitute the paper's primary analytical contribution. On one hand, AAP's murals mobilize visibility as a mode of recognition, foregrounding transgender lives, labor, and creativity in urban spaces that have traditionally excluded or stigmatized them. Participation in mural-making enables forms of collective authorship, paid artistic labor, and symbolic claims to the city, resonating with feminist and queer articulations of the "right to the city" as a demand for presence, belonging, and cultural citizenship. On the other hand, these same logics function as mechanisms of regulation and discipline. Visibility, when mediated through state-sanctioned art projects, becomes a means through which marginalized bodies are rendered legible, governable, and incorporable into urban regimes that leave underlying relations of power intact.

This tension between visibility as recognition and visibility as regulation is particularly evident in AAP's collaborations with state agencies and city-led initiatives. Projects undertaken under programmes such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan or in partnership with institutions like the UIDAI reveal how participatory art practices can be folded into broader apparatuses of governance, surveillance, and moral regulation. In such contexts, participation risks becoming instrumentalized, transforming transgender artists into symbolic tokens of inclusion within a neoliberal cityscape that celebrates diversity while continuing to produce material exclusions. The trans subject is welcomed into public space, but only in depoliticized, aestheticized, and carefully managed forms that align with middle-class sensibilities, development narratives, and investment-friendly imaginaries of the city.

Situating this analysis within Brenner and Theodore's framework of "actually existing neoliberalism" allows for a more grounded understanding of how these dynamics unfold in the Indian context. Rather than viewing neoliberalism as a uniform or abstract process, this paper highlights how it is locally articulated through specific institutional arrangements, cultural practices, and historical conditions. In Indian cities, neoliberal urbanism operates through hybrid formations that combine state-led welfare rhetoric, NGO-driven governance feminism, and market-oriented redevelopment agendas. Street art, in this configuration, emerges as a cultural technology through which neoliberal governance is rendered effective and visually palatable, absorbing feminist and queer claims into its repertoire without fundamentally redistributing power or resources. This specificity complicates dominant 'right to the city' debates, which have largely emerged from 'Global North' contexts characterized by formal citizenship regimes, comparatively stable welfare infrastructures, and different histories of urban activism. In contrast, the Indian case demonstrates how claims to visibility and participation are negotiated in cities marked by informality, caste hierarchies, uneven citizenship, and deeply stratified access to rights. Here, symbolic inclusion through art may coexist with, or even mask, intensified precarity, displacement, and surveillance. The right to the city, as articulated through murals and participatory art, thus risks being reduced to a representational claim rather than a material one.

At the same time, this paper does not suggest that AAP's interventions are politically empty or entirely coopted. Rather, their significance lies precisely in their ambiguity. The murals constitute a political site where competing forces of recognition and regulation, empowerment and governance, subversion and incorporation collide. They

make visible both the possibilities and the limits of cultural politics under neoliberal urbanism, foregrounding the contingent nature of feminist claims to the city. As Indian cities continue to aestheticize marginality and mobilize social justice iconographies in the service of urban renewal, a critical question remains: how might artistic practices move beyond symbolic inclusion to unsettle the normative frameworks through which gendered and marginalized bodies are governed, surveilled, and contained? Addressing this question requires not only attending to what is made visible in the city, but also interrogating the political conditions under which visibility itself becomes a technology of power. In doing so, this paper contributes to broader debates on urban art, gendered citizenship, and neoliberal governance, underscoring the need to rethink visibility not simply as a goal of social justice, but as a terrain of struggle within the contemporary city.

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