

REVISITING CULTURAL LEGACY THROUGH THE MURALS OF HIM CHATTERJEE IN DELHI

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ABSTRACT

Wall painting has been in vogue since antiquity. When displayed in public space, it becomes public art. This study explores the cultural importance of Him Chatterjee's murals in Delhi, emphasising their artistic merit and contribution to the preservation of India's heritage. Historically, narrative murals have used religious themes to teach and reinforce our cultural practices. Similarly, Him Chatterjee's murals in New Delhi particularly at the Pragati Maidan Tunnel and Dwarka Tunnel reflect our rich cultural heritage. They contain in them the themes which are celebrated in every part of the country. They not only serve as a reminder but also invites the viewers in, to take pleasure from it. They contain in them the visual representations of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of India. The artist has creatively conceptualized an abstract idea and given it a visual form which is not only colossal in size but is also aesthetic. Primary and secondary sources were referred, interviews and personal visits to the murals in Pragati Maidan Tunnel and Dwarka Tunnel were also conducted. Public art in such accessible spaces transforms the environment, adding value and creating awe and pleasure in viewers. The murals in the national capital also provide visual information for tourists interested in experiencing India's rich culture and heritage.

Keywords: Public Art, Murals, Pragati Maidan Tunnel, Tangible cultural heritage, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Him Chatterjee.

Introduction

The art of wall painting has been prevalent in India from the prehistoric era. The earliest example is the Bhimbetka cave paintings in Madhya Pradesh which consists of the life and rituals of the people during the time then. As we delve deeper in our rich cultural history the Ajanta frescoes are an indispensable part of it. These narrative frescoes depict the Jataka stories along with intricate patterns taken from the rich flora and fauna. Throughout our history we have witnessed art in the form of wall paintings or murals and sculptural reliefs which are narrative in nature and depict a particular religious theme so as to educate and inculcate the teachings and culture of that particular time. The term mural refers to a picture painted directly on a wall (Dixon, 2008). These have a noteworthy cultural importance and depict the traditions, beliefs and artistic practices of a society (P, 2017).

Public art on the other hand consists of art that we see outdoors in a public space which includes sculptures, installations, murals, street art, performance art to name a few examples (Šilić, 2020). In the words of the artist himself "Public art is a kind of an open book to study" (H. Chatterjee, personal communication, June 12, 2024). This kind of artwork is something which is open to all irrespective of the kind of viewer who views it. The viewer in some way or the other will connect to the work of art and gain an aesthetic pleasure from it. This experience is somewhat different from when one visits a particular monument or a museum. Here the artwork is directly inserted into the everyday life of people where they do not have to specially come to visit it but has become a part and parcel of their existence (Šilić, 2020). It is as if you were walking inside a work of art. The artwork is more like a huge installation where one enjoys the artefacts as well as can be a part it. For a layman it is not easy to understand the content and the philosophy behind the creation of the artwork yet even they can relish it through the colours and familiar objects that they witness.

The artistic journey of Prof. Him Chatterjee exemplifies this philosophy, as it demonstrates how his monumental works have inspired community engagement and appreciation in addition to transforming

public spaces. The artist was born in Shimla in 1968 and developed an early interest in art and honed his skills under the tutelage of his father, Shri Sanat Kumar Chatterjee, a prominent figure of the Bengal School of Art. The Vice Chancellor of the H.P. University has also recognised him for creating the world's largest outdoor mural in New Delhi, and the Governor and Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh praised him for his contributions to art and the beautification of the H.P. University Campus as well. Him Chatterjee, a nationally and internationally recognised artist, has had numerous solo and group exhibitions and is represented by several prestigious Indian and international art galleries. His most notable achievement is the 28,991-square-meter mural at New Delhi's integrated Transit Corridor, which is regarded as the world's largest outdoor art mural.

The artist, who is also an academic and visual arts practitioner, integrates theoretical knowledge and artistic practice. His works exude a spiritual essence, enriched by his skilful techniques that captivates the viewers. His paintings, which reflect his deep admiration for the Himalayas, use of expressive strokes as well as light and shade immerses the viewers in captivating landscapes. Professor Him Chatterjee is currently the chairman of Himachal Pradesh University's Department of Visual Arts.

Objective

This paper aims to examine the cultural and artistic importance of Him Chatterjee's murals in Delhi, specifically highlighting the works located at Pragati Maidan Tunnel and Dwarka Tunnel. This study seeks to explore the ways in which these murals act as significant representations of India's cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, highlighting the nation's rich diversity through artistic expression. This research aims to explore how these murals influence community involvement, emphasizing their significance in transforming ordinary public areas into lively cultural icons. Furthermore, the paper explores thematic elements utilized by Him Chatterjee to express the seasonal and regional diversity of India. This paper explores how these murals promote cultural awareness and social cohesion among varied audiences, highlighting the significant role of public art in preserving and celebrating India's cultural identity.

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach using primary and secondary data sources. The artist was interviewed to gain information regarding the murals. The sites where the murals are were also visited and documented by the scholar and personal interviews were conducted. Secondary sources such as books, research papers, articles etc, were referred to gather all related information regarding the research area.

Description of Murals

Mural in Pragati Maidan Tunnel, New Delhi: The world's longest mural which is over 28,991 sq m area at the Integrated Transit Corridor in New Delhi completed in 2022, was designed and conceptualized by Prof. Him Chatterjee. The theme of this humongous project was - Celebration of life through six seasons of India. The 1.36 km tunnel is adorned with hand painted and manufactured on mild steel sheets which have turned an ordinary space into something extraordinary. The artwork in the tunnel has different colours representing each season. At the beginning is spring from the Purana Qila Road and it ends with winter on the Ring Road (Mishra, 2022). The designing of this project has been done after a considerable amount of research of the Indian Knowledge System. Based on Kalidasa's Ritusamhara, each season is associated with a specific colour. After studying this text, the artist deciphered these colors and applied them accordingly (H. Chatterjee, personal communication, June 12, 2024). Each season is divided into six parts each with a distinct colour for example for spring green is used, where flying birds are depicting the changing season, the colour of summer is orange which beholds Mount Abu of

Rajasthan, Ganga Dussehra, Vishnu- Moatsu festival celebrated in Nagaland, the procession of Jagannath Temple Rath Yatra and Eid-ul-Fitr and Guru Purnima (Mishra, 2022). Every festival occurring in that particular season has been showcased in the mural. There are also 87 columns painted in mandala style in rainbow colours which adds more colour to the design. There is something for everyone in this artwork. The rain is depicted by a welcoming and dancing peacock and other elements such as grass, frogs, fish and mushrooms all in greenish light blue colour along with Onam which is commonly celebrated in Kerala. Autumn is expressed through the colour purple depicting Gandhi Jayanti, Marwar Festival at Umaid Palace along with monkeys and birds. Winter and pre-winter is represented through red and faded pink portraying the festival of lights i.e. Diwali, rangoli, Christmas, Republic Day and Ganga Snan (Mishra, 2022). Among these murals are the depictions of our national tree, the Peepal tree, and the worship of cows. Each element depicted in the artwork resonates with everyone. The work was inaugurated by the prime minister, Narendra Modi and termed it as “Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat ka ek uttam education centre”.



Figure 1: Depiction of the spring season, Mural in Pragati Maidan Tunnel, New Delhi, 2022. (Source: Internet)



Figure 2: Another view of the Pragati maidan tunnel Mural in Pragati Maidan Tunnel, New Delhi, 2022. (Source: From the Artist's collection)

Shallow Tunnel in Dwarka, New Delhi

In a way the successor of the first project this is another humongous project taken up by Prof. Him Chatterjee. The concept behind this is – Bharat Bhagya Vidhata. Each and every corner of India has something to offer due to its rich cultural heritage. The total length of the wall is 3600 meters and the 36 states along with the union territories have been depicted in the total space. All the elements are beautifully composed inside the national flag. The various elements that have been depicted are running in between the two colours of our national flag from start to end. The tunnel begins with a depiction of the Ganga River at the ramp areas, followed by the dancing national bird Peacock at the tunnel's start and end points. The majestic Ganga river, flying birds along with our national Banyan tree welcome all. Ganga originates in Uttarakhand, and the artwork depicts the fragrance of the state. The entrance is adorned with our National Bird, a symbol of beauty, grace, and mysticism, along with the Ashoka Chakra which is located at both ends of the tunnel. These are accompanied by the Rising Sun, which symbolises leadership development and progress. As we move forward, one can see the grandeur of the Badrinath Temple, as well as the region's musical instruments, which welcome visitors. The three triangles that appear throughout the panel represent the three primary gunas, or qualities. The three fundamental gunas (energy qualities) that comprise all of nature—matter, energy, and consciousness—are derived from this ethereal Prakriti. The three gunas are sattva (beingness and harmony), rajas (activity and passion), and tamas (darkness and disorder). Controlling the three gunas can reduce stress, promote inner peace, and lead to enlightenment. As we proceed, one can worship the Kedarnath Temple and Yamnotri. As we

advance, one sees the Rishi working with various herbs and a bowl which signify Ayurveda and ahead of it we see the Kavadi Yatra. As we move ahead one can see the murals depicting Uttar Pradesh's cultural heritage, beginning with the Ashoka Chakra from Sarnath and continuing with Kathak dance narratives. They also include the Taj Mahal, Ganga Arti at Banaras Ghat, and the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya (**H. Chatterjee, personal communication, June 12, 2024**).

The artwork not only highlights the distinctive qualities of each state and union territory but also fosters communication between them, showing how various customs contribute to India's collective identity, as we navigate through this rich tapestry of cultural representation. Eighteen states and union territories, including Uttarakhand, Delhi, Haryana, Chandigarh, Daman and Diu, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Goa, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry, and Lakshadweep, are shown in vivid detail on the left side. India's many regions are creatively composed and aesthetically portrayed as each area with their unique features has something to offer visually and cultural relatability to each and every individual who witnesses it.

Assam, Sikkim, West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh are among the remaining eighteen states and union territories that are portrayed on the right side of the mural. A colourful display of flying birds marks the end of the illustration. By showing the unique performances, dances, and famous monuments of each state, the artwork honours each state's cultural legacy.

The pillars across from each state represent the folk art and cultural identity that are intrinsic to each area. This well composed arrangement serves as a valuable educational tool that promotes an appreciation of India's rich cultural diversity in addition to improving the aesthetic landscape of the space. For example, the traditional tribal painting known as Warli art is prominently displayed on the pillar facing Maharashtra. Warli art is an essential tool for storytelling and maintaining cultural continuity because it captures the everyday activities, customs, and spiritual beliefs of the tribe in a way that is more than just ornamental. The way this art form is portrayed encourages viewers to appreciate the traditional customs of the state. Phulkari, the intricate embroidery technique, is displayed on the pillar across the area of the Punjab side of the mural. Distinguished by its vivid hues and detailed patterns, Phulkari is a representation of Punjab's rural traditions and group celebrations. Frequently associated with individual stories, the arts represent ties to one's cultural legacy, strengthening the state's social cohesion. Similarly, the Open Hand symbol, created by famed architect Le Corbusier, is featured on the pillar across Chandigarh part of the mural. Mirroring the city's identity as a modernist urban centre that embraces progressive ideals, this emblem stands for peace, reconciliation, and the philosophy of openness.

In addition to showcasing the distinctive qualities of each state, the well chosen artistic representations on the pillars also establish a visual dialogue that represents the interconnectedness of India's cultural heritage. Every pillar provides insights into the values and customs that define regional identities while serving as a monument to the ingenuity and perseverance of local artisans. When taken as a whole, they help to inspire, educate, and promote harmony among India's various communities.



Figure 3: Depiction of the Kedamath Temple, Shallow Tunnel in Dwarka, New Delhi, 2024. (Source: Field Study by the Scholar)



Fig 4: Depiction of the Peacock and the Rising Sun Shallow Tunnel in Dwarka, New Delhi, 2024. (Source: Field Study by the Scholar)

The technicians as well as the authorities heading the project found it to be a unique endeavour that not only transforms a regular space but also created a dialogue with their own cultural backgrounds. Their interaction with the artwork enabled them to connect personally with various elements, resulting in a greater appreciation for the cultural narratives represented. This experience demonstrates the power of art to bridge professional expertise and personal identity, thereby creating a space for everyone to engage, gain knowledge and take pleasure from it.

Conclusion

In addition to adding an aesthetic appeal, an artwork can serve a greater purpose. Artworks serve as a storehouse of cultural traditions, historical narratives by depicting varied themes, styles and techniques. Either through the ancient cave paintings, the intricate and ornate sculptures or the contemporary artworks, Indian art is not only used to beautify a space but also serves to enlighten and enrich the viewers which results in fostering a stronger connection to the country's cultural heritage. Here, the artworks serve as important landmarks that change an otherwise regular space into an aesthetically stimulating one. The artworks which are depicted in such spaces not only enhances the visual experience but also gives the area historical significance, giving spectators a fleeting pleasure that the general public finds extremely appealing. Such encounters are essential for community involvement because they provide an inadvertent joy that strengthens a person's bond with the world around them. The artworks support a feeling of connectivity and cultural identity by serving as unintentional landmarks in this way. This can be witnessed through the murals created by Him Chatterjee in New Delhi. The artist has skilfully transformed an abstract idea and made it into visuals accessible to the people. When artwork leaves the confines of a building and enters public spaces, it changes in context and impact. This shift from the private realm of galleries and museums to the public sphere enables art to reach a larger audience, fostering a dynamic interaction between the artwork and people's daily lives. Public art becomes an essential component of the urban landscape. It encourages spontaneous engagement and dialogue as people encounter these artworks during their daily activities. This accessibility democratises art, allowing it to reach people who might not otherwise visit traditional art spaces. As a result, art in public spaces has the potential to inspire, provoke thought, and elicit visceral emotions. Furthermore, the presence of art in everyday settings contributes to the cultural fabric of a community. It contributes to a sense of place by establishing landmarks that can boost local pride and foster collective memory. The emotional resonance of experiencing art of one's own community in a public space can lead to a greater appreciation for cultural narratives and further adds to cultural belonging. Cultural heritage is the identity

of any region and with the advancement of technology the old teachings and customs seem to be gradually fading away. Art created in such spaces in a way act as a reminder to the people of the old traditions and throw light upon them for the generations to come.

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