

Impact of Civil Society in Policy and Governance: How Art Impacts the Society's Awareness

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Abstract

As we progress towards an informed and participatory society, we seek more creative ways to express our support or dissent towards the state or our fellow citizens. Arts provide a unique platform for such expressions and have been influencing the collective conscience of people for generations. It has given a voice to the people against injustice and political apathy and has been building a stronger community that stands against the wrath of the government. In December 2019, when the Indian Parliament approved the Citizenship Amendment, the nation witnessed a massive surge in reliance on different forms of art to raise awareness and bring people together. The Internet and social media have propelled these artworks to the global arena and have made protesting more accessible. From human rights violations to corruption, art has touched every arena of social activism. This paper seeks to explore the influence of arts on society and how it has been a catalyst for social change.

Key-words: Social Change, Art, Civil Society, Social Media, Protest.

1. What is Art?

Since the time humans could think creatively, art has been used to express and appeal to a range of human senses and emotions. Art can be defined as the product or even the process of systematically arranging elements in a manner that they form something alluring and aesthetic. (Isrow, 2017) Now, this can include a myriad number of aspects, the most common examples being music, literature, painting, films, and sculptures. However, the definition remains open for debate and deliberation as art remains an ever-changing concept and forever open to interpretation. In addition to appealing to human senses, art is used for representing and communicating political and

philosophical ideas to move perceptions and direct sensitivities in people. Art is never just a personal reflection of an artist. It is engaged with the world and is an intertwined web of possible meanings (Towsend, 2014)

2. Brief History of Art in Indian Subcontinent

India has often been described as the land of culture. The wide cultural diversity is reflected in the long-range of various art forms in the nation. The country has a rich history of mesmerising paintings, exquisite handicrafts, divine music/dance forms, fascinating architecture, and a massive collection of literary works. At the same time, modern times have seen newer and better orchestration of these forms of arts. The coalescing of these makes India seamlessly sparkle in the bright shades of artistic perfection.

Nearly every state and union territory in India has its distinct way of arts which is stimulated by the culture of the people who have been inhabitants of the region for epochs. The purpose of these various forms of arts in India has changed over time. In ancient times art stood as a symbol of the power of the kings and told their mighty tales. Many rulers had official painters in their court. These artists painted the kingdom of the rulers in light of prosperity and these paintings stood as a reminder to the people, of the generosity of the king and the need for obedience to the royal family. It symbolized the religious and ethnic belief of the people and also was a form of entertainment which showcased the genius of the artists (Desai, 1990). The seals and bronze figures excavated in the Indus Valley Civilisation signify the importance of nature in those times. The influx of the Aryans, who overpowered the indigenous people, brought with them the blessing of literature in the form of Vedas and Upanishads containing hymns. The social division suggested in the Vedas is the basis of the social division based on caste even today (Karmvir, 2018). The religious depiction of art increased again after the rise of Buddhism which was furthered by the Mauryan Emperor, King Asoka. After the 1st century AD, there was a rise in international trade and the belief of Buddhism spread across the world in the form of small portable works of art that merchants carried with them. The period following the fall of the Gupta Kingdom and before the Muslim Invasions saw extraordinary work in carved stones and paintings, which give us insight into that time even today (Rao & Ketkar, 2017).

A major turning point in the purpose of art and its various forms was seen in India under the rule of Muslims who brought with them the artistic capabilities of Central Asia. Mughals realized the potential of propaganda art. Political dimension was often present in Mughal paintings and much of the artistic works glorified the rulers. The onset of the Colonial rule in India led to the styles of

various art forms having European influence. Visual arts in the 18th century were multifaceted which attended to the socio-political needs of the British and as nationalism spread, art was also used as means of spreading a message to the people. The most influential voice against the European *Avant grade* in India was the Bengal School which fought to keep the identity of Indian art and not let it be lost in the wants of the British clergy.

Today these works have helped us lay down the history of our country and spread the word of our heritage.

3. Civil Society: The Rise and Development of Civil Society in India

Civil Society can be best described as a realm working parallel and separate to the state. In this sphere, the citizens of the state come together and associate for their wishes and interests (Jayaram, 2005). Every page in the history of the world is marked by the civil society which has been a center of independent political activity, struggling against or with the state to bring about the necessary changes in the law and policy of the state. The global rise of democracy opened up more space for civil society to be a beacon of hope whenever and wherever the state could not reach. The onset of the internet age and the information revolution dramatically increased the power in the hands of the civil society, empowering them and providing them with better and advanced tools.

The civil society includes Non- Governmental Organizations, Social Movements, Trade Unions, Faith Groups, Online Networks/Communities, and Grassroots Organizations, etc. It performs the role of providing services like education or healthcare, advocating/campaigning for several causes like road safety or environment. It is a watchdog for the activities of the government and works towards making the citizens more engaged with the governance at the local or regional level at the least. It is an important aspect of the democratic principles on which our country rests as civil society organizations give power to the people to challenge the government.

In the pre-colonial era, the political sphere was not concerned with the life and living of local people (Prakash, 2002). Back in the day too, people formed groups for trading or faith but these remained autonomous from the control of the state (Tandon & Mohanty, 2004). In British controlled India, the most significant example of Civil Society working for the upliftment of people was by Gandhi. While the Father of the Nation never explicitly referred to civil society, he called for support from the common people to serve the poor, fight against social injustice such as caste discrimination and resist British rule. Gandhi taught the people to be virtuous, tolerant, and non-violent and have mutual respect for one another. Through his ashram living and teachings, Gandhi's notion of moral

individualism gave way to a thriving civil society. He created a safe space for diversity and humanity while mobilizing the people to collective action (Pathak, 2008).

After becoming a sovereign state, India adopted 'welfare state' principles and reached out to the citizens in every avenue of their lives including health, education, social security, etc. Even after the establishment of principles of equality, fraternity, justice in social, political, and economic life and many more in the robust constitution, the people have never really been free from marginalization, discrimination, poverty, etc. These loopholes between the governance by state and the people have always been filled by civil societies, especially in the form of NGOs. During the dark days of an emergency when the state curtailed the most basic right of people that is right to life and personal liberty, there was a rapid increase in activism and raising awareness against authoritarian ways of the government. This trend has been ever-increasing where civil society groups have been filling the socio-economic gap between the citizens and the state. Some civil society struggles have manifested into large scale people movements such as the Chipko Movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Jan Lokpal Bill Movement, Nirbhaya Movement, and many more.

4. What gives Art the Power to Move the People

Western thinkers and philosophers have acknowledged the power of art to transform feelings and shape behaviors in humans. Plato believed that arts must be censored in his ideal Republic as they have the power to change characters of people (Maguire, 1964). According to Aristotle, feeling tragedies through art can be a solution to the unreasonable passions of humans and make them more balanced (Marshall, 1953). Friedrich Schiller saw art as the means to make one fully human and witnessing a tragedy in an art equips us to respond with emotions in reality (Schiller, 2017). The intervention of art and social change has forged a new conception of identity, community, and social relations. It has known to be engaging people to reimagine and visualize the challenges to gender, sexuality, class, and race (McCaughan, 2012).

To feel untouched by the problems of others is one of the biggest challenges to social change today. When one sees the statistics and data on social problems, it can make them feel overwhelmed or disconnected from the problem. It is not very easy to connect and feel the larger issues of our collective living. Art has the power to change this exactly (Dunphy, 2013).

Maxine Greene, while theorizing the concept of experiencing art, introduced a concept of openings where art shows us new ways of seeing the world. Greene as a philosopher saw aesthetic education as a means to break free from social barriers (Greene, 1995).

Art, in any form, visual or audio, plays an important role in stimulating the conscience of a person and this awakened conscience paves the way to social change. It moves you to think analytically and provides space for fostering ideas and opinions (Pelowski, Markey, Luring & Lede, 2016). This is because art does not exist in a vacuum. While one part of any art gives us a reflection of the artist, the other part shows us a reflection of ourselves and the society we live in. This happens as an individual's interpretation of an art piece is swayed by their personal experiences and outlook. The thought-provoking characteristic of an artwork further educates people about economic, social, and communal problems and can even be the center of mass mobilization towards a common cause. This power of art is because of the aesthetic value attached to it (Feibleman, 1941).

Another reason for the art to be able to influence the minds is because of its approachability in a comfortable environment. One may look at a bold piece of art in a gallery or a powerful message on the walls in their street. These encounters give time to properly think and digest what the art wants to depict and be captivated by it.

From the perspective of an artist, art gives them a way to communicate and express (Davies, 2008). Art is an easy way to convey complex ideas, be it in a form of a fancy poem expressing pain, a painting that outlines struggles, a play that tells hard facts or a song urging for peace and order.

Art is also a way to remember and commemorate. Statues, sculptures, and architecture are some of the many ways in which the society has continued to honor the brave soldiers of the land, celebrate victories in war or pay homage to the sorrows of loss. Then this art stands as a reminder to the people to come together and never lets the state forget the power in the hands of the people.

While art brings us together as “we” it also tells us that every individual can change the world as even the tiniest of actions have rippling effects on the consequences, especially in these digital times when sharing ideas is just a click away.

5. The Impact of Art on Civil Society Around the World

As discussed in previous sections, art can be a central point of change as it stirs up the collective conscience of the society. Art has been used as a medium to challenge stereotypes. The Feminist art movement around the 1960s is a perfect example of influencing the attitude of people through art. Feminist artists explored femininity through imagery to bring it forward to the otherwise male-dominated society. These focused on sex, gender equality, gender stereotypes, and sexist social practices (Sandell, 1997).

The fight for equality has also been splashed with the shades of art. The Civil Rights movement is often remembered with the iconic “I have a dream” speech and great anthems like ‘We Shall Overcome’ but many artists created some works of art that unnerved many whites and depicted the struggle of equality and acceptance for Blacks. The most famous works include the ‘The Problem We All Live With’ by Norman Rockwell, which was hung by the former President of the United States, Barack Obama, in his office for a while. It is believed that Martin Luther King Jr. fiercely understood the power of imagery and its role in altering public perception or opinion.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, The Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2014 hosted an exhibit called the Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties. The statement on the website of the Brooklyn Museum beautifully summarises the essence of art in the struggle for racial equality.

“The 1960s was a period of dramatic social and cultural upheaval when artists aligned themselves with the massive campaign to end discrimination and bridged racial borders through creative work and acts of protest. Bringing activism to bear in gestural and geometric abstraction, assemblage, Minimalism, Pop imagery, and photography, these artists produced powerful works informed by the experience of inequality, conflict, and empowerment. In the process, they tested the political viability of their art, and originated subjects that spoke to resistance, self-definition, and blackness.”

In 2020, the people of the United States once again turned to art to express their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter agitation after the unlawful killing of George Floyd.

Revolution art has become an important part of globalizing revolts. While guns and stones have been used to express anger from the sides of both the citizens and the state, the citizens have also relied on expressing their dissent through various art forms which also sensitize the public on the ideas (Adler, 1976).

An instance of the same is the role of Arts in the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring marks the beginning of a global stage for zero tolerance against the oppressive state. The revolutionaries could make their voice heard to millions sitting thousands of miles away because of the advent of the internet age. The Arab Spring saw the walls of streets getting filled with anti-authoritarian posters and making statements of unity. Collectively, these arts raised public awareness against a tyrannical and oppressive state (Sarabia, 2017).

For the artists, the medium is not as important as the message to be delivered through their artwork. Art relays both the suffering of people and the eventual triumph against repression.

Pablo Picasso, a Spanish artist, showcased fierce condemnation through his ‘Guernica’ which damned the casual bombing of the village by the same name in Spain. In the wake of the Mexican Revolution artists like Diego Rivera and David Alfaro painted vivid images of the lives of Spanish peasants. American artists used art to further their interpretations of the Vietnam War. Britain’s unnamed street artist referred to as ‘Banksy’ has painted murals that influence the people on the ills of capitalism and the refugee crisis in Syria.

“Art is one of the best societal mediators of difficult messages — it has always created a bridge between the comprehension and the expression of critical problems in society.” With this message by the International Anti-Corruption Conference, the Anti-Corruption Organization of Thailand organized a temporary exhibition or a ‘museum of corruption’ to raise public awareness about the extent and cost of corruption. Such museums exist in many other countries like the US, Ukraine, and Paraguay that stand as an artistic symbol for education against the ills of corruption.

A report published by the Arts Council of England has provided evidence on the power of visual arts in learning and education (Burgess, Good, Pasquier, Rose & Woodfield, 2006). A research conducted in 2019 (Sommer & Klöckner, 2019) has concluded that art can change people’s opinions on art as long as the message is given is hopeful and gives some ideas to bring about change. Another research has identified the role of arts in making scientific data more accessible, for example, interactive use of warming stripes which people are using in their online profiles (Galafassi, Kagan, Milkoreit, Heras, Bilodeau, Bourke, Merrie, Guerrero, Petursdottir & Tabara2018).

Artists are not free from the oppressive ways of government. Throughout the world, artists have been shunned, imprisoned, attacked, or exiled for having depicted the uncensored content. Artists have little to no protection against this wrath.

When there is a discussion on the oppressive governments who are trying to silence such protest by arresting and punishing the artists, without a reference to Ai Weiwei, a Chinese dissident, the discussion is incomplete. Ai Weiwei is a symbol of Human Rights in China and has been challenging the totalitarian regime of China for some time now. Ai Weiwei’s politically charged art is often provocative and has triggered the repressive Chinese authorities.

While art is often used as a creative way to protest, it has also been used by authoritarian regimes to further their power. Mass propaganda is widely considered to have emerged in the French Revolution (Dowd, 1951). Even before 1776, the French throne relied heavily on arts to influence public opinion in favor of the national government. The philosophies of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire have laid great emphasis on the political and social significance of arts for both the state and the citizens. Therefore at the inception of the French Revolution, the revolutionary leaders were

already aware of the effects of art as propaganda. Revolutionaries used art that appealed to the masses and inspired love for liberty and the fatherland.

The gravest example of visual arts impacting the mind-sets of the people in the propaganda art used by the Nazis in Germany to promote their ideologies. The Nazi Government relied on posters, photos, caricatures, and advertisements to further their interests to the people in the society. The Nazis used poster imagery to idolize the authoritarian regime and used spectacular pictures of mass rallies to influence the citizens. Research has established that the Nazis attempted to exert psychological influences through visual arts. Listening and Watching attracts people and the message can be associated and pondered upon in relaxation (Bie, 2015).

Even political campaigns have benefitted from the beauty of the arts. Graphically striking portrait names “Hope” which supported Barack Obama’s presidential campaign is one of the many examples by which political parties have benefitted from the visual impact of striking arts. In political posters, the people look at the candidates to run the country and project their dreams upon the chosen representative.

6. India’s Ever-Expanding Palette of Dissent and Expressionist Art

The intersection of art and activism can be seen in the Indian struggle for freedom to present-day revolts and protest for better laws and governance. The people of India, the youth, and other non-state actors have been unequivocally using art, graffiti, posters, cartoons, and music as demonstrations against the government policies.

India standing today as a free and sovereign nation is a result of mass struggle which happened over many years. One of the major moves to inspire Indians to fight against the rule of British was to in still feelings of Nationalism. This had led to the Swadeshi Movement. The Swadeshi movement aimed at crippling the colonial administration by weakening them economically. This meant production of indigenous industries and enterprises and thus, in this era of Swadeshi movement, Indian art and music flourished and became a symbol of patriotism and national pride. The most famous artwork to understand the mutual influence of art and independence struggle on each other is the Bharat Mata painting by Abanindranath Tagore. Abanindranath Tagore who led the Bengal School of Art was also the leader of the Swadeshi movement in art. In his painting, previously called Banga Mata, he painted a Bengali woman who is attributed as the mother of the nation with her four arms referring to the nationalistic goals of food, learning, cloth, and spiritual learning. The painting was made in opposition to the British move to partition Bengal in 1905 (Cohen, 2012).

The artists in this time also depicted the erstwhile glory of India before it succumbed to the harsh rule of the East India Company. The paintings are intrinsically focused on what Indians could relate to and understand them. Thus, the paintings acted as a source of inspiration for the distraught citizens.

Another significant name on nationalistic paintings was Raja Ravi Verma who encompassed the Indian Heritage and culture without referring to any particular religion, region, caste, creed, or race. His paintings contained common and universal features of Indians which made Indians relate to the paintings. This was combined with the power of printing press and thus Raja Ravi Varma's paintings found their way into common Indian households, inspiring nationalism in the people.

Along with the above mentions, many other artists continued to shun foreign goods and glorified Indian heritage and culture. Not only this, but art was also used to depict the horrifying conditions of the people living in rural India and the gruesome effects of the famine of 1943. Such war depiction of the living conditions broke the British supremacy and inspired a sense of a collective sense of identity and pride in the masses (Kumar, 2018).

Alongside the revolution in paintings, the writers and authors of the country were using their stories and poetry as a tool to spread awareness against the British brutalities. Some of the most famous names were Rabindranath Tagore, Muhammad Iqbal, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Kazri Nazrul Islam. At the same time, women leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Begum Rokeya influenced and motivated Indian women to make their contribution to the struggle for independence and participate in politics, which they rightfully should.

When art intersects with politics, it becomes a medium of representation of dissent from the masses and gives a visual voice to their demands and anger. As for performance artist, Marina Abramovic so eloquently put it, "*the function of the artist in a disturbed society is to give awareness of the universe, to ask the right questions, and to elevate the mind*" (Abramovic, 2010).

Posters as a form of art to influence and protest have been used by civil society groups for decades. The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust and Committee (SAFDAR) have been challenging the dominating government and have particularly been combining contemporary art with poetry to spread messages of communal harmony. The Mumbai based artists collective named Posters Unite by the 2020 group has been releasing posters on social media that highlight the contemporary concerns in India from curbs on freedom of speech to mob lynching and discrimination.

Arts have also helped in sensitizing the public on the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. It has given a chance of expression and be a part of the mainstream society. Artists who have showcased queer sexuality or love between same-sex couples have often faced brutality from society.

They have been trolled on the internet and one of the famous artists Balbir Kishan had to leave the country after being attacked by the extremists. Nevertheless, queer art captures the naked truth of society and puts it on a show for everyone. Efforts to censor pride art never stop, but neither does the spirit of the artists to voice their rights.

Another common form of art to spread awareness and call attention to sensitive issues is the use of cartoons (Hart, 2007). Kashmir has been a burning issue for India since the inception of the sovereign state, and Suhail Naqshbandi, a cartoonist hailing from Kashmir has been using cartoons as a means of reflecting the melancholy of the so-called “Paradise on Earth”. Suhail Naqshbandi’s cartoons come with greater influence as they stem from personal trauma of living amid the crisis-ridden state. Today the works of Suhail Naqshbandi and other cartoonists like him find a prominent presence on online platforms, however; their works have often been questioned by the authorities and censored on frivolous grounds.

India saw a never seen before a nation-wide protest against the draconian Citizenship Amendment Act and the implementation of the National Register for Citizens. The protest was especially a landmark for use of arts by the society to express and educate the masses about how CAA/NRC violated the constitutional principles of equality for all. Various art forms allowed the people to peacefully protest against the amendment. The streets of the famous Shaheen Bagh, which became the center of sit-in protesters, were splashed with the colors of dissent and objection. And while the walls were painted, the protestors resorted to singing the tunes of *desh bhakti* and bhajans by Bapu. Amid anger and frustration over the attack on the secular fabric of the country, the arts played an important role in bringing the people together and strengthening their spirits (Sengupta, 2020).

7. The Future of Art’s Influence on the People

To creatively protest is what the youth of today has taken into their hands. It has become difficult to imagine a protest or a demonstration without crafty slogans, posters, songs, and paintings.

Influencing through art has taken another turn in the digital age. Within hours of something happening, social media is flooded with protest imagery. This work of digital art serves multi-fold purposes: 1. for expression and 2. To inspire and educate 3. To seek attention to the problems.

The digital age has provided a stage for convergence of technology with social media and has paved the way for captivating ways to produce and consume protest art. The most enthralling aspect of the same is the almost cloaked manner in which it silently and distinctly spreads across. The digital

medium of demonstrations can be said to have democratized the struggles as the reach and access to information has increased.

Another characteristic of digital art is a dramatic reduction in time required to produce any form of art, be it imagery, cartoon, or music. In addition to this, the sharing of this digital art is almost instantaneous. Things don't take minutes to become 'viral' and be shared over multiple social media platforms. Instead of publishing art in newspapers, it is now shared on Instagram and Facebook.

The revolution in digital art has also created more opportunities for artists to protest with their creativity. Nobody has to buy expensive equipment to create art anymore. Art is being created on computers and smartphones now. And publicity of the same is also for free. Social media platforms do not charge any money for creating accounts and uploading your creative works. The protesters now have a level playing field to demonstrate their dissent. Along with this, artists do not have to fear the authorities while sharing the art of dissent as the internet allows you to be anonymous easily.

Shutterstock, a popular platform for searching and representing arts, in January 2020 released data that showed a rise in search for inequality icons by 465 percent and a 70 percent increase in environmentalism. Come June 2020 in the middle of the pandemic, the demand for social justice has increased (Fussell, 2020). Access to blogs and social media has given the potential to this art to create an impact.

While most of the time, art has been isolated, different art forms such as music and paintings and poems are now being merged into one piece and are being used by civil society organizations to raise public awareness and morale. We, the people of India, a video released by Karwan-e-Mohabbat in collaboration with actor Naseeruddin Shah and musician T M Krishna, was a powerful piece of work with an intertwining of words from the Indian Constitution and The Indian National Anthem. The lyrics of this video were juxtaposed on a collection of powerful images. The video was to protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act passed by the Indian parliament in December 2019.

The global has now become local. The artists in various countries are taking inspiration from native works of different countries and regions and creating their versions in lines with their motives and message. The best example of this is the adaption of the Italian anti-fascist song *Bella Ciao* which has now become a song of protest against the atrocious state all across the world. Other songs sung include *Do You Hear The People Sing* from *Les Miserable*.

Pop culture has also marked the artworks with its shades. The netizens across the world do not shy away from creating 'memes' and 'jokes' using remarkable metaphors and references to cinema and music. The Joker created first in 1945 and published by DC Comics as the villain in Batman comics has now become a symbol of resistance. Much street art in India, Lebanon, and even Hong

Kong has depicted the use of The Joker and other pop culture references like Thanos from Marvel to personify resistance against government policies.

Famous artists have also used their creativity to inspire and raise awareness about issues ranging from world peace, environment, women's rights, and LGBTQ rights. Some of the most famous songs include Imagine by John Lennon, Blowin' in the Wind by Bob Dylan, Strange Fruit by Billie Holiday; A Change is Gonna Come by Sam Cooke or You Need to Calm Down by Taylor Swift. All these music tracks spread their unique messages in the form of strong lyrics and videos.

It cannot be denied that the advent of the internet has revolutionized the way we look at arts and politics. This renewed thinking is expected to continue as digital platforms and social media keeps on advancing. Who would have thought of using Facebook and Instagram as platforms for social awareness when they were released by their makers as apps that keep you connected with your loved ones and friends. Art has for centuries influenced the mind-sets of the masses and it shall continue to do this front in the coming centuries as well. We just need to expand our definition of art to include art in all forms and make it an umbrella term that covers all creative ideas and notions. As the French Artist, Edgar Degas famously said "Art is not what you see, but what you make others see". Art has the power to bring social change faster than politics. It can help us to make a tolerant and safer society to live in for each of us.

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