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Preserving Street Art: India's Unwritten History on Walls with respect to Tiruvannamalai District

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ABSTRACT

Street art in India represents a unique intersection of creativity, social commentary, and historical documentation. This study analyses the multifaceted role of street art in the Tiruvannamalai District, encompassing its urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Far from being acts of vandalism, it serves as a collective voice reflecting the nation's cultural transitions and social consciousness. This study explores street art as a medium of education, expression, and historical preservation. Using a non-doctrinal qualitative methodology and a questionnaire-based survey of 61 respondents, the research examines public perceptions of legality, heritage, and freedom of expression. Findings reveal that murals and graffiti act as social educators, fostering civic awareness and recording community experiences. Respondents widely view street art as a cultural and historical asset, comparable to temple murals and stone inscriptions. Recommendations include establishing national digital archives, creating heritage walls, and encouraging community participation. By recognizing street art as a form of living history, the research positions it as a bridge between India's traditional heritage and the evolving imagination of its youth. Street art thus stands as both a mirror and a memory of society, preserving the spirit of its time.

Keywords: Street Art, Graffiti, Cultural Expression, Preserving and Technology

I. INTRODUCTION

Tiruvannamalai District, located in northern Tamil Nadu, is renowned as one of India's most ancient heritage sites and a significant spiritual centre, especially for the Saiva religion. The district is home to the famous Annamalaiyar Temple and the sacred Arunachala hill, both deeply revered by local communities and pilgrims alike. Tiruvannamalai serves as the district's administrative headquarters and is characterised by a rich cultural history intertwined with religious traditions and festivals, notably the grand Karthigai Deepam. The district spans

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urban, semi-urban, and rural areas and includes several taluks such as Arni, Polur, and Chengam. Agriculture, particularly rice and silk saree weaving, constitutes the backbone of the local economy, complemented by small-scale industries and tourism driven by spiritual and historical sites. Despite traditional prominence, the district faces challenges in industrial development but boasts a vibrant cultural and educational landscape supported by numerous schools and healthcare institutions. The blend of historic temples, natural landmarks, and rural artistry makes Tiruvannamalai a unique confluence of heritage, faith, and evolving modernity. This diverse context enriches the district's contemporary expressions of art, including street art, which echoes its deep-rooted legacy and social dynamism.

Art has always been one of the most powerful mirrors of human civilization. It reflects the collective consciousness of societies, capturing their values, struggles, emotions, and aspirations. From the prehistoric cave paintings of Bhimbetka and Lascaux to the vibrant murals adorning modern urban walls, art has remained humanity's universal language of expression. It transcends barriers of language, class, and literacy, conveying ideas that touch both the heart and the intellect. Across time, art has been used not merely for decoration but as a medium to question authority, record social realities, and express dissent. Street art, in particular, has emerged as one of the most democratic and dynamic forms of public communication in the modern era. It occupies a distinct space between protest and poetry, rebellion and reflection, beauty and truth.

When societies value and protect art, they cultivate not only aesthetic appreciation but also intellectual and emotional development. Countries where art thrives tend to exhibit a more vibrant civil life because creativity encourages dialogue and tolerance. Art flourishes best in peaceful, just, and inclusive societies—where people feel free to imagine, create, and critique. In contrast, when expression is censored or criminalized, societies risk losing an essential part of their humanity. Beyond its beauty, art functions as a social instrument, recording the evolution of ideas and documenting the pulse of civilization. It often becomes the language of the voiceless, enabling marginalized communities to speak truth to power. Historically, people living under oppressive systems—whether political, cultural, or religious—have turned to public spaces as canvases of resistance. Through colors and symbols, they have expressed what words could not safely articulate.

The history of graffiti and mural art demonstrates that public expression through visual forms is as old as civilization itself. In ancient Pompeii, before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, citizens carved jokes, advertisements, poems, and political slogans onto city walls. Archaeologists later discovered over 11,000 examples of such graffiti, providing invaluable

insight into Roman social life, humor, and politics. These writings and drawings reflected the spirit of everyday people, not the elite chroniclers of history, showing that the walls of Pompeii were an ancient social media of sorts—a space for opinions, emotions, and identity. Similarly, in medieval times, Arabic poets inscribed verses on walls between regions like Tajikistan and Basra, protesting the Umayyad regime. These inscriptions remind us that walls have long been instruments of both rebellion and remembrance.

In India, too, public art has deep historical roots. The Buddhist cave paintings at Ajanta in Maharashtra and the frescoes at Sithanavasal in Tamil Nadu, dating back to the 2nd century BCE, are among the earliest surviving examples of mural art. These paintings depicted stories from the Jataka tales, religious rituals, and moral lessons, making them both educational and spiritual tools. They were meant not only to inspire devotion but also to spread Buddhist philosophy among people who could not access written texts. The walls of temples, monasteries, and palaces across India have served as storytelling surfaces for millennia.

From the intricate murals of Kerala to the Warli and Madhubani folk traditions, Indian visual culture has always been deeply rooted in public engagement. Art was never confined to galleries; it belonged to the people, evolving as society evolved.

In the twentieth century, street art took a modern form, shaped by political movements, youth culture, and technology. The rise of graffiti as we know it today began in the 1960s and 70s in cities like New York and Philadelphia, driven by young people marking their presence through “tags” stylized signatures painted or sprayed onto public spaces. Over time, graffiti transformed into large-scale murals that carried social and political messages. This movement, closely tied to hip-hop culture, represented rebellion, identity, and visibility for marginalized communities. What was once seen as vandalism gradually became recognized as an art form, and artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Banksy helped elevate street art to global prominence.

In India, this transformation began to take root in the early 2000s. The walls of Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Chennai began to change color—literally and metaphorically—as artists started to paint messages of social importance. Movements such as the St+art India Foundation brought together artists, citizens, and municipal authorities to create large-scale murals across Indian cities. The Lodhi Art District in Delhi became the country’s first open-air public art gallery, attracting both tourists and scholars. Street art festivals have since emerged as platforms for cultural exchange and urban beautification, transforming neglected walls into spaces of meaning. During the COVID-19 pandemic, murals across Indian cities paid tribute to healthcare workers, spread messages about hygiene and solidarity, and brought hope to communities.

during uncertainty. These examples reveal how street art serves not just as decoration but as a vibrant form of public education and emotional healing.

The educational potential of street art is immense. Unlike traditional classroom learning, which is limited to structured settings and formal instruction, street art reaches people in their everyday environments markets, railway stations, footpaths, and alleyways. It educates not through textbooks or lectures but through images, symbols, and colors that evoke thought and emotion. Street art invites viewers to engage critically with what they see; it provokes dialogue rather than prescribing conclusions. When citizens encounter murals addressing issues such as gender equality, corruption, environmental degradation, or communal harmony, they are not passive observers they become participants in civic learning. Through this process, art transforms public space into a classroom without walls, accessible to all sections of society regardless of age, background, or literacy.

Many civic bodies, NGOs, and educational institutions in India have recognized this potential. They collaborate with artists to spread awareness on social issues, turning walls into tools of learning. Campaigns such as “Swachh Bharat” and “Save the Girl Child” have used public murals to communicate government messages in visually appealing ways. Similarly, environmental groups have employed wall art to promote sustainability, cleanliness, and wildlife protection. The immediacy of art allows it to connect emotionally with the audience, often achieving a greater impact than written policies or speeches. This makes street art not just a creative act but a socially responsible one a method of education that inspires empathy, curiosity, and reflection.

Street art also provides a crucial platform for youth expression. In an era dominated by digital media, where virtual engagement often overshadows physical experience, public walls offer young artists a tangible and communal space for expression. Street art gives them visibility and agency; it allows them to transform frustration into creativity, protest into color. It is one of the few mediums where the young can directly address society without the mediation of institutions. Even political parties and social movements recognize its persuasive power. Murals and graffiti have been used to promote electoral campaigns, social justice causes, and reform movements. This reflects the dual nature of street art it can be both a tool of resistance and of participation, depending on who wields the brush or spray can.

However, despite its undeniable cultural, educational, and historical significance, street art continues to exist in a legal gray zone. Unauthorized graffiti or murals on public or private property are often classified as acts of vandalism under municipal laws. Artists face penalties,

erasure, or defamation for expressing themselves in spaces deemed “illegal.” This conflict arises from the tension between two equally important rights: the artist’s freedom of expression and the property owner’s right to ownership and protection. Striking a balance between these rights is essential. Banning or erasing street art entirely would silence valuable voices and erase cultural narratives, while unregulated graffiti could infringe on others’ rights or degrade urban aesthetics.

Progressive cities around the world and increasingly in India are finding creative legal solutions to bridge this gap. The establishment of designated art walls, community mural programs, and state-backed art festivals have legitimized street art while preserving accountability. Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Delhi have experimented with spaces where artists can legally paint, provided they follow ethical and aesthetic guidelines. These initiatives demonstrate that when art is integrated into urban planning, it enhances not only beauty but also social cohesion. Developing a comprehensive legal framework for street art in India could include policies for permits, artist recognition, heritage protection, and community involvement. Works that capture important historical or social events could be classified as cultural heritage and preserved under heritage laws, ensuring they are not destroyed without due process.

Preserving street art is as important as legitimizing it. Like stone inscriptions and temple murals, today’s graffiti and murals are records of social thought and emotion. They provide historians and sociologists with a window into the collective consciousness of our time. Yet, because of their exposure to the elements, street artworks are often temporary subject to fading, damage, or erasure. Preservation efforts can take both physical and digital forms. Protective coatings and community maintenance can safeguard murals in situ, while digital archiving through photography, 3D scanning, or virtual galleries can ensure long-term access. A proposed National Digital Archive of Street Art could document and preserve artworks from across the country, providing educational resources for students and researchers while celebrating India’s artistic diversity. This would also allow future generations to study the visual languages of protest, hope, and creativity that define contemporary India.

Street art is thus not just an aesthetic or political act it is a living history. Each mural tells a story about the time, place, and people who created it. It captures collective emotions anger, hope, resistance, and resilience that words often fail to convey. From the cave walls of Ajanta to the painted lanes of Delhi’s Lodhi Colony,

India’s artistic journey has been one of evolution and continuity. Street art bridges this continuum, connecting the past with the present and extending it into the future. It transforms

ordinary streets into cultural archives, enabling communities to see their values and struggles reflected in public spaces. In doing so, it democratizes history, ensuring that the stories of the people not just the rulers are remembered.

A. Statement of Problem

Street art serves as a vital medium for education, communication, and preserving social history. Unlike traditional art forms, it reflects the collective emotions and struggles of modern society while reaching diverse audiences through accessible visuals. However, its legitimacy is often questioned, and many works are lost due to legal and preservation challenges. Balancing artistic freedom with regulation is essential to protect this cultural expression. This study aims to recognize street art as a legitimate educational and historical medium of modern times.

B. Review of literature

Verma (2025) - "Street Art and Graffiti in Indian Public Spaces", This study traces the emergence of organized street art and graffiti in India, highlighting historical roots such as the Ajanta murals and traditional folk art. It notes the rise of street art festivals like St+art India Foundation, which have fostered public engagement. The paper discusses street art as a tool for beautification, social commentary, and civic dialogue within urban and semi-urban environments, emphasizing its growth from isolated tagging to organized community projects.

Akshita Ahlawat (2025) - "Street Art Bridging Cultures, Generations and Ideologies", Focusing on Delhi's art districts, this paper highlights street art's role in fostering dialogue across cultural and generational divides. It outlines how murals challenge social norms, amplify marginalized voices, and reimagine urban spaces as platforms for reflection and activism. The research underscores street art's potential to contribute to urban regeneration, social cohesion, and cultural preservation in rapidly urbanizing Indian cities.

Bhasin (2018) - "The Evolution of Street Art and Graffiti in India", Bhasin explores street art's transition from traditional and folk roots to contemporary urban expressions. The paper highlights how street art acts as a medium for social commentary, cultural preservation, and identity formation amidst India's metropolitan transformations, linking present urban realities to longstanding cultural narratives.

Shanbhag (2024) - "The Role of Street Art in Urban Aesthetics and Identity", This research analyzes street art's contribution to urban aesthetics, focusing on Bengaluru's public murals. It discusses how street art enhances neighborhood identity, promotes community pride, and challenges dominant urban narratives, positioning it as a medium for both creative expression and social empowerment.

Campos (2016) - Cultural and Social Narratives in Street Art, Campos identifies how Indian street murals serve as visual archives preserving history, folklore, and evolving cultural values. The work emphasizes street art's capacity to foster public discussion on social issues such as gender, environment, and heritage, making it a vital component of urban cultural dialogue.

Jha (2020) - Political Dimensions of Street Art in India, Jha examines how street artists use public art to critique urban policies, environmental issues, and social inequalities. The study reveals street art's role as a form of political resistance and public mobilization, demonstrating its power to raise awareness and influence community advocacy in Indian cities.

C. Research Gap

Research on street art has primarily focused on its role in urban identity, social expression, and cultural dynamics, but gaps remain. There is limited research on how street art collaborates with formal institutions for sustainable development, restricting its full potential impact. Preservation strategies for politically significant street art outside cities, especially in rural or conflict zones, are underexplored. Additionally, more empirical studies are needed on street art's educational and empowerment effects across diverse cultures and locations. Legal and policy frameworks that balance protection of artistic freedom with preservation needs also require further investigation. Addressing these gaps will enhance understanding of street art's broader societal value and improve strategies for its conservation and integration into sustainable development.

D. Objectives of the Study

1. Explore street art as a living record of India's social, cultural, and community identity.
2. Compare its moral and educational messages with temple murals and inscriptions.
3. Study legal challenges and community-driven methods to document and preserve it.

E. Research Methodology

This study uses a non-doctrinal qualitative approach to explore street art as a form of education, communication, and historical record within legal contexts. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey with 61 respondents, including demographic details to assess varying perceptions. The research examines how street art is viewed as art, protest, or education and perceptions of its legality and preservation. Secondary sources provide theoretical background connecting street art to traditional public art. The data were analyzed qualitatively to identify themes around creativity, legality, and social impact, offering insights into street art's cultural and educational roles within real-world legal frameworks.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 - Basic Variables

S.No	Category	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Age	Below 18 years	3	4.9
		18-24 years	30	49.2
		25-34 years	5	8.2
		35-44 years	7	11.5
		45-54 years	14	23
		55-64 years	2	3.3
		65 or older	0	0
		Total	61	100
2.	Occupation	Student	31	50.8
		Self- employed	2	3.3
		Private sector	4	6.6
		Public sector	21	34.4
		Others	3	4.9
		Total	61	100
3.	Locality	Rural area	13	21.3
		Semi- urban area	19	31.1
		Urban area	29	49.5
		Total	61	100

Source: Primary data

The majority of respondents (49.2%) belong to the 18-24 years age group, indicating that young adults form the largest segment of the sample. The next largest age groups are 45-54 years (23%) and 35-44 years (11.5%), suggesting a significant representation of middle-aged individuals. Very few respondents are under 18 (4.9%) or above 55 (3.3%), with no participants aged 65 or older.

Regarding occupation, half (50.8%) are students, reflecting the youthful trend in age distribution. The public sector employs 34.4%, while private sector and self-employed

participants constitute smaller proportions (6.6% and 3.3%, respectively). Other occupations make up 4.9%. This indicates a predominantly student and public-sector participant base.

In terms of locality, nearly half of respondents are from urban areas (49.5%). Semi-urban residents account for 31.1%, and rural area participants make up 21.3%, showing good geographic diversity but a slight urban bias.

Table 2 Public Opinions on the Cultural, Legal, and Economic Aspects of Street Art

S.No	Statements	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Street art is seen as either a form of expression, vandalism, or both depending on context.	Purely vandalism	1	1.6
		Both, depending on the context	35	57.4
		Purely expression	25	41
		Total	61	100
2.	Street art should be allowed in public spaces if it carries meaningful messages or cultural value.	Should be allowed	56	91.8
		Maybe	4	6.6
		Shouldn't be allowed	1	1.6
		Total	61	100
3.	A National Archive of Street Art (digital + physical) should be established.	Should be established	47	77
		Maybe	10	16.4
		Shouldn't be established	4	6.6
		Total	61	100
4.	Street art and graffiti can contribute to a city's economic growth through tourism and creative branding.	It would contribute	39	63.9
		Maybe	16	26.2
		It wouldn't contribute	6	9.8
		Total	61	100
5.	India requires a dedicated policy for street art and public murals.	Policy needed	42	68.9
		Maybe	13	21.3
		Policy not needed	6	9.8

		Total	61	100
6.	Not preserving street art from events like the Kochi Biennale creates barriers to documenting a city's identity.	Does Create a Barrier	54	85.5
		Doesn't Create a Barrier	7	11.5
		Total	61	100
7.	Local municipalities should allocate specific "Heritage Walls" for permanent preservation of important art.	Should allocate	45	73.8
		Maybe	14	23
		Shouldn't allocate	2	3.3
		Total	61	100

Source: Primary data

The data reveals that **57.4%** of respondents believe street art can be both *vandalism and expression depending on the context*, showing that the public recognizes the nuanced nature of this art form. Meanwhile, **41%** view it as *purely an expression*, while only **1.6%** see it as *vandalism*. This demonstrates a strong social acceptance of street art as a legitimate medium of communication rather than an act of defacement.

A vast majority **91.8%** believe that meaningful street art *should be allowed* in public spaces, with only **1.6%** opposing it. This indicates widespread support for integrating artistic expression into community environments. The **6.6%** who responded "maybe" suggest that while public art is appreciated, some concerns may remain regarding legality or location.

A significant **77%** of respondents support the establishment of a *National Archive of Street Art* (both digital and physical). This highlights a growing awareness of the need to preserve street art as cultural heritage. The **16.4%** who responded "maybe" indicate conditional support, possibly depending on resources or execution, while **6.6%** oppose it, reflecting minimal resistance to institutional preservation.

Most respondents **63.9%** believe that street art contributes to *economic growth and creative city development*. The **26.2%** who said "maybe" suggest uncertainty but potential recognition of indirect benefits, such as tourism and urban renewal. Only **9.8%** disagree, showing that the majority view street art as economically beneficial and not merely decorative.

About **68.9%** of participants agree that India needs a *dedicated policy* for street art and murals, reflecting the demand for official regulation and protection. **21.3%** expressed partial agreement,

and **9.8%** opposed the idea, suggesting that while support for policy is strong, a small segment may prefer artistic freedom over institutional control.

A striking **85.5%** of respondents believe that *non-preservation of street art during events like the Kochi Biennale creates a barrier* to documenting cultural identity. This underlines the public's recognition of street art as part of India's living heritage. Only **11.5%** disagreed, emphasizing the need for preservation efforts during cultural festivals and urban art events.

The majority **73.8%** support the idea that local municipalities *should allocate heritage walls* for preserving significant murals and graffiti. **23%** were uncertain but generally favorable, while only **3.3%** opposed it. This strong endorsement shows that people value street art as a historical record worthy of formal recognition and protection.

Table 3 Public Views on Street Art during Political and Social Movements in India

S.No	Statements	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Street art has been an important tool for public expression during times of political unrest such as the Emergency, Partition, or Riots.	Strongly Agree	21	34.4
		Agree	29	47.5
		Neutral	9	14.8
		Disagree	1	1.6
		Strongly Disagree	1	1.6
		Total	61	100
2.	Street art created during political or social movements should be documented as an integral part of India's history.	Strongly Agree	21	34.4
		Agree	23	37.7
		Neutral	15	24.6
		Disagree	1	1.6
		Strongly Disagree	1	1.6
		Total	61	100

Source: Primary data

The survey indicates that the majority of respondents view street art as a significant tool for expression during political unrest, with **81.9%** agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only a small minority (**3.2%**) disagreed, while **14.8%** remained neutral, showing widespread recognition of its role in conveying social and political messages.

Similarly, public opinion supports documenting street art from political and social movements as part of India's historical record, with **72.1%** in agreement. Minimal opposition (**3.2%**) and some neutral responses (**24.6%**) suggest that people value street art as a means of preserving collective experiences and societal sentiment for future generations.

Table 4 Public Opinions on Historical and Political Street Art in Modern Context

S.No	Statements	Particulars	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1.	If stone inscriptions in ancient temples were created today, they would be considered illegal vandalism under modern laws.	Yes	32	52.5
		Maybe	21	34.4
		No	8	13.1
		Total	61	100
2.	Erasing politically sensitive street art is equivalent to erasing history.	Yes	27	43.3
		Maybe	16	26.2
		No	18	29.5
		Total	61	100

Source: Primary data

A majority of respondents (**52.5%**) view street art as historically important, comparable to ancient stone inscriptions, while **34.4%** were uncertain. Only **13.1%** disagreed, showing that most people recognize street art as a meaningful record of cultural and social life.

Regarding politically sensitive street art, **43.3%** believe erasing it is equivalent to erasing history, with **26.2%** uncertain and **29.5%** disagreeing. This indicates strong public support for preserving street art as a form of historical documentation.

III. FINDINGS

- Most respondents see street art as legitimate creative expression, reflecting social values rather than vandalism.
- The majority believe meaningful street art should be allowed publicly to enhance culture and beautify spaces.
- Street art is recognized as a powerful voice during political and social movements for marginalized communities.
- Many agree that politically significant street art should be documented as part of India's historical record.

- Respondents consider street art historically important, comparable to ancient inscriptions as cultural evidence.
- Many view erasing politically significant street art as erasing a part of history, emphasizing preservation.

IV. LIMITATIONS

The study is limited by its focus on a small sample of 61 respondents and its geographic restriction to the Tiruvannamalai district, which may not represent broader national views. Street art's subjective nature means perceptions vary widely based on individual backgrounds and tastes. Additionally, street art is transient, so findings reflect opinions at a specific time and may not capture long-term trends. Challenges in documenting and archiving ephemeral artworks could result in some significant works being overlooked. The study also has limited comparison with international practices, which may narrow the scope of its recommendations.

V. SUGGESTIONS

India needs a comprehensive street art policy that recognizes its cultural and social importance while balancing creative freedom with public interest. Designating "Heritage Walls" and creating a national archive can protect and showcase important artworks. Promoting street art can boost tourism and local economies, while community involvement and educational programs should raise awareness about its value. Clear guidelines are essential to prevent vandalism and manage public spaces responsibly. Continued research on preservation and digital archiving will strengthen future policies.

VI. CONCLUSION

Street art is increasingly recognized as a legitimate form of creativity, social commentary, and cultural preservation rather than mere vandalism. It reflects contemporary societal values, captures marginalized voices, and plays a significant role during political and social movements. Public opinion favors preserving street art as an important historical and cultural record, comparable to ancient inscriptions. Economically, street art contributes to urban development by boosting tourism and enhancing city identities. To sustain its growth, supportive frameworks such as National Archives, designated Heritage Walls, and national policies are necessary. Community involvement and collaborations between artists and local authorities will foster appreciation and sustainable practices. Ultimately, street art serves as a dynamic bridge connecting India's rich cultural legacy with the vibrant imagination of its present and future generations.

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