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# Painting Resistance: A Study of the Political Graffiti in Jawaharlal Nehru University

*Somrita Ganguly*

*Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi*

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“Walls are a marvel, don’t you think? I have always paid a great deal of attention to what happens on walls. When I was young, I often even copied graffiti.”  
Pablo Picasso<sup>1</sup>

For years now the canvas of the artist has been expanding. One no longer has to limit oneself to the boundaries of paper or cloth. The walls of the cityscape with their ever-widening horizons have turned into the media on which several artists choose to project their creativity. Street art is a form of visual (sub)culture that needs to be taken seriously today. At the very onset of this paper I would like to clarify that though discourse revolves around the difference in meaning of the terms ‘graffiti’ and ‘street art’. I will use these interchangeably, as the larger part of the community of graffiti artists does. Usually, for those who insist on a difference between ‘graffiti’ and ‘street art’, graffiti stands for any mark left on the wall, callously, or not, by a person: a name, a logo, a casual design, a signature. Street art, such people insist, is more serious and organized than graffiti and the artist is aware of the political implications of the imprint that he leaves behind on the wall. However it must be noted that today most street artists leave their markers or signatures behind.



**Bam Bam”, on one of the closed shutters of New York City. Photo by author, 2015**

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Brassai’s *Conversations with Picasso* (1999), p. 254



“Bam Bam among others – leaving behind signatures”, on one of the wooden doors of New York City. Photo by author, 2015



“Signature/ Graffiti”, on the walls of a mobile restroom, Whitney Point, New York State. Photo by author, 2015.



“Street art”, on one of the walls of an underpass, Los Angeles, California. Photo by author, 2015

This paper explores how street art, historically, has been a form of expression that one needs to take note of while simultaneously looking at the graffiti on the walls of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) campus, New Delhi, and commenting on how these spaces echo the dreams and desires, ambitions and aspirations of the student community living on this residential campus; how these walls become a projection of their collective and individual voice of resistance and protest.

The first time that I stepped into the JNU campus - a location that seems to be so culturally removed from the ethos of the capital city of the Indian Republic that one would find it hard to imagine that, temporally and spatially, it is indeed located in the heart of South Delhi - what greeted me were massive paintings on the walls of Kamal Complex<sup>2</sup>. The academic block only increased my wonder. Every imaginable wall was painted red - literally and metaphorically. Red-brick walls are a hallmark of JNU; and JNU also happens to be one of the last remaining bastions of the dying Left in this country. The administrative buildings, the schools - starting from the older ones like the School of Social Sciences and School of Languages to the newer ones like the School of Arts and Aesthetics - the canteens, the hostels had been marked: paintings and posters adorned these walls. Some of the paintings were overwhelmingly beautiful, some disappointing. This relentless, unrelieved expression of party ideology, social demands and political messages introduced me for the first time to the world of street art and the massive potential that it holds.

Street art is considered to have developed in New York around the 1960s, before the form peaked and spread to other nations worldwide. India, however, was slightly slow in catching up. Street art is associated with movements in music such as Rap and Hip-Hop: in short, with movements that were associated with the street; that had participants

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<sup>2</sup> Kamal Complex is also known as KC Market and is the main shopping centre in JNU.

occupying the streets largely. That indeed was a part of the process called urbanization as Henri Lefebvre suggests in *The Urban Revolution* –

“Revolutionary events generally take place in the street. ... The urban space of the street is a space for talk, ... exchange ... A place where speech becomes writing. A place where speech can become ‘savage’ ... and inscribe itself on walls.” (19)

While there is no formal definition of street art, one can introduce this practice as one where artists leave behind their impressions on walls. Using paint brushes, cans of spray-paint, stencils, fingers, hands, and the like, as instruments, they mark the walls, either casually, or with political intentions; and sometimes the walls simply become an outlet for their creativity. One could associate it with a child doodling on her first blank sheet of paper. However, if one did indeed define street art thus, then the obvious question would be this – why should we take street art seriously, suddenly? Have not walls been painted (both inner walls and outer walls) since times immemorial now? Have not patrons commissioned murals to be painted on walls? Have not artists painted intricate designs on the walls of their homes? Questions such as the above drive home to us the mistake of defining street art a little too casually. Street art is not merely about the fancy chalk inscriptions left behind on walls by an unsuspecting child; it is not simply about painting stories or designs on walls. Street art is different from such domestic expressions, in my opinion, in the following ways – a) street art is about making a statement, and more often than not, this statement is political; b) street art is about intentionally creating something on the walls that will be visible to the public. It is not, as Tristan Manco suggests, about painting old legends on walls, but about creating a modern “urban mythology”<sup>3</sup>.



“Creating an Urban Myth”, on one of the walls in Queens, New York. Photo by author, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> As suggested in Manco’s 2004 work.

Therefore, one has to go back to the movement that started with painting the walls of the subways in 1960s New York<sup>4</sup> that was often pejoratively called ‘spray-can vandalism’, and locate in that practice the priority of the practitioners. It would not be wrong to surmise thence that the purpose of street art is not only creativity, though that also, but self-expression, as well, and the message is very often aggressively political.

The idea of street art emerged with the need to reclaim the streets. Painting on walls can provide a sense of anonymity along with visibility. Simultaneously, such a practice is often illegal<sup>5</sup>, and always ephemeral<sup>6</sup>. Brassai notes in *Conversations with Picasso* that he had asked Picasso whether the master ever painted on walls. Picasso, in the interview, mentioned those figures that he had painted on the walls of an old studio, before summing up his reason behind not imprinting on walls thus –

“How many times have I been tempted to pause in front of a nice wall and carve something on it. What held me back was ... the fact that you have to leave it there, abandon it to its fate.” (254)

Yet, street art today has certain internal contradictions. For example, the idea behind street art was to look for easy visibility; yet this visibility was always already known to be impermanent, momentary, brief. To further complicate this notion of temporary visibility, Daku, often hailed in the Indian media as the Indian Banksy, revealed in an interview that he never fears the erasure of his graffiti from the walls. His opinion, if taken seriously, requires some deliberation –

“Why would anyone [remove my graffiti tags]? Do you think anyone gives a f---?”<sup>7</sup>

If that indeed is true – if no one is bothered about the graffiti or the graffiti artist – then the very purpose of street art seems to be lost. Also, if no one cares to remove this graffiti – either because people have not seen it, or worse still, could not be bothered about it – then again the sort of urgency, the sort of validity that street art derives from being transitory, becomes questionable.

The paintings that one sees on the walls of JNU are interesting because of several reasons. They are, of course, the voice of dissent on campus. While they do not have individual tags, signatures or markers, they are commissioned by different political parties and their students’-wings and they therefore necessarily have the name of the political party highlighted. While the individual artists remains anonymous, their political affiliation is only too visible. The following poster clearly evinces the tag of the All India Students Association (AISA), the students’ wing of the CPIML. While one has no sense of the artist, one is made only too aware of the party’s ideology.

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<sup>4</sup> One only needs to recall a song by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel released in 1966 where they talk of how “the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls”. The song, of course, is ‘The Sound of Silence’.

<sup>5</sup> Illegal, because many consider street art as defilement of property; and, of course, when the painted message is anti-establishment, anti-authority, anti-government policies, the State takes further offence to it.

<sup>6</sup> Ephemeral, because street art is not eternal; it is short-lived and always under the threat of being erased.

<sup>7</sup> As told to Isha Singh for an article in *The Wall Street Journal India*, published on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013.



“Nation Wants to Know Whose Voice is Media Anyway Now – AISA”, on one of the walls of KC Market, JNU.  
Photo by the author, 2015.

The paintings on the walls of JNU are in the truest sense, ephemeral, because every year there is a fresh set of graffiti obliterating the older set. Yet, this annual change paradoxically gives a fixed lease of life to something that by definition is supposed to be transient, living in uncertainties, because one knows for sure that the painting will dress the walls for at least one entire academic year. The following posters portray how the same wall undergoes a transformation in different years.



“Marx and Lenin”, on one of the walls of the Central Library, JNU. Photo by author, 2012.



“Workers Can Be Owners Too”, on the same wall of the Central Library, JNU. Photo by author. 2015.

Street art arguably mushrooms on walls that are abandoned, unused, or vacant because obviously the artist requires space to express his creativity. In JNU, too, the walls must once have been barren, but not anymore. Year after year, graffiti and posters are put up on these walls, which resultantly means that there is no empty wall space. The curious thing that one gets to see in JNU at the end of each academic session is a number of student-activists scrambling for wall-space. Sramana Chatterjee, a Research Scholar at the Zakir Hussain Centre for Education, JNU, and an active participant in this process, describes it to us, in further detail:

“We sit around the schools and the library from the afternoon till about midnight on a pre-decided day. Members from every party gather around these walls and as soon as midnight strikes we put up stickers – which have the name or emblem of the Party – on the walls. The unwritten understanding is that there will be no breach of code of conduct: no party is going to occupy a wall that has the sticker of another party. From then to the final product that you see on the wall, usually two or three months elapse.”<sup>8</sup>

In the following picture we see the remnants of a previous poster that might have been put up by National Students’ Union of India (NSUI). The Students’ Federation of India (SFI) must have occupied the same wall in the following year when activists rushed to own wall space. The new SFI poster has replaced the old one.

<sup>8</sup> Personal Interview.



“Old replaces new”, on one of the walls of the Central Library, JNU. Photo by author. 2015.

In the following picture, it is evident that students on campus indeed follow this unwritten law of democratically respecting each other’s wall space, strictly. The picture shows an old sticker of the SFI on a wall, indicating that the wall space has been occupied by this particular party. The sticker has undergone wear and tear and is almost on its last leg clearly evincing that there has been a considerable time lapse since the sticker must have been put up on that wall. For reasons that we can only guess and cannot be certain of, the party did not put up any poster or graffiti on this wall after marking it as its own. What is impressive is that the wall lies bare even now, with no other party usurping that space for itself, despite the apparent neglect of this space by the party that had originally claimed it.



“Claiming Walls”, on one of the walls of Tapti Hostel, JNU. Photo by author. 2015.

The other most notable thing about the graffiti in JNU is that the walls are not directly painted on. Yes, one can always argue therefore that what we see on the walls of JNU are not graffiti in the honest sense of the term or the practice. And the argument is a valid one. What we see on the walls are giant posters on which the paintings are actually done, before being glued to the wall. There are very few instances of the wall having been literally painted on. This is understandable because the activists tend to work through the night in their party offices, after pursuing their scholarly activities by the day. Siddhartha Chakraborti, Research Scholar, Centre for English Studies, JNU, tells us of the poster-painting workshops that go on for weeks:

“Workshops are conducted by almost every Left party on campus which are attended by activists and sympathizers and thus begins the process of painting the posters. They are usually held in Teflas<sup>9</sup> or in some large hostel-mess such as Narmada<sup>10</sup>”<sup>11</sup>

The following pictures show an actual graffiti in JNU. These, however, are fewer in number than the posters which are put up on the walls.



“Graffiti”, on one of the walls of the Administrative Building, JNU. Photo by author. 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Teflas is a sort of Community Hall in JNU which houses a dhaba; in the same building is located the JNU Students’ Union (JNUSU) Office and the International Students’ Association Room among others.

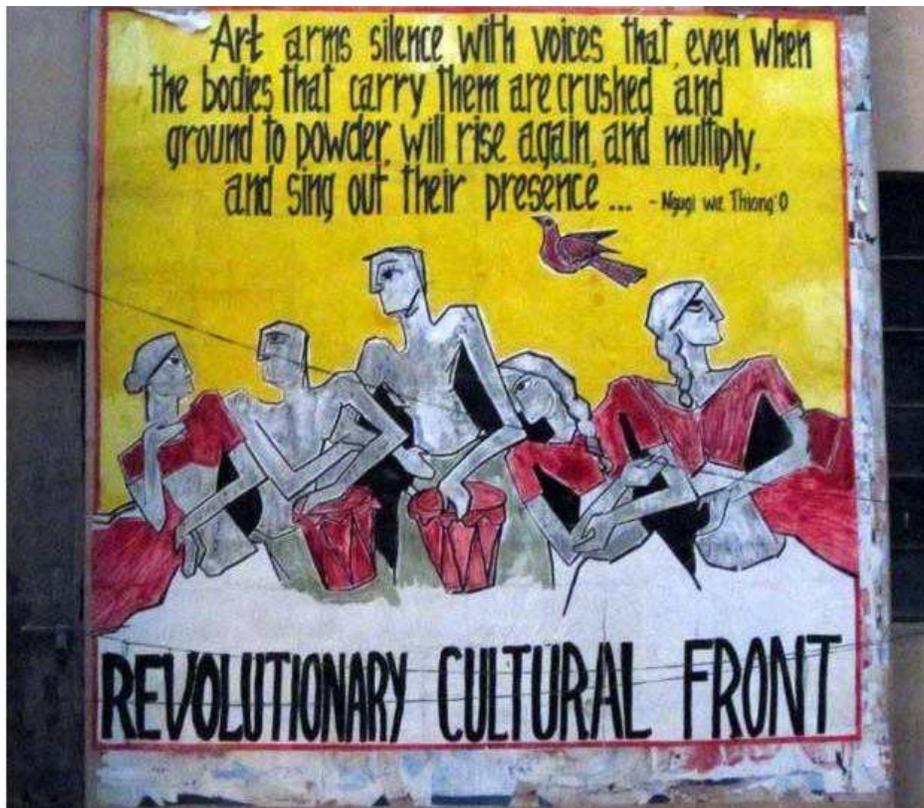
<sup>10</sup> Narmada Hostel, JNU

<sup>11</sup> Personal Interview



“Graffiti”, on another side of the same wall of the Administrative Building, JNU. Photo by author. 2015.

What are more common on the walls of JNU than the graffiti are graffiti-like posters, some of which can be seen in the following pictures.



“Fraying poster on the wall”, JNU. Photo by author. 2015.



“Fraying Poster”, on the wall of the 24 hour Reading Hall - Dholpur House, JNU. Photo by author. 2015.

Sudhanshu Lal, activist of the All India Students’ Federation (AISF) and who had contested elections for the post of General Secretary of JNUSU in 2013, explains to us that the theme of the posters are decided “collectively, by the activists of the party who form a team”<sup>12</sup>. Once the themes are finalized the painting begins, which is usually done, as he informs us, at Teflas or “sometimes even in our hostel rooms”<sup>13</sup>. The posters are usually painted by students from campus, who are activists of different political parties, though at times, as Shubin Xavier, Councilor, School of International Studies (SIS) and an SFI activist, points out, “artists come from outside to help us paint these posters if there aren’t enough people on campus”<sup>14</sup>. These artists are usually sympathizers or activists of the party.

To my mind the posters and graffiti on the walls of JNU are a repository of progressive thoughts and ideas that need to be archived. While the Supreme Court still

<sup>12</sup> Personal Interview

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

stands by Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalizes homosexuality, for instance, the walls of JNU scream loud against the breach of such basic human rights: the right to one's body, the right to love, the right to choice.



“Rainbow Love”, on one of the walls of the Central Library, JNU. Photo by author. 2015.



“Love Is Love In Every Form”, on one of the walls of JNU. Photo by author. 2015.

Some of the paintings on the walls of JNU stand out because of their sheer artistic brilliance and though they are not literally graffiti, they share the same fate and the philosophy as street art. They are voices of anti-establishment. They occupy the walls in a quest for public visibility. And, they are relegated to oblivion within the span of a year. But the genius returns annually, to make a mark.



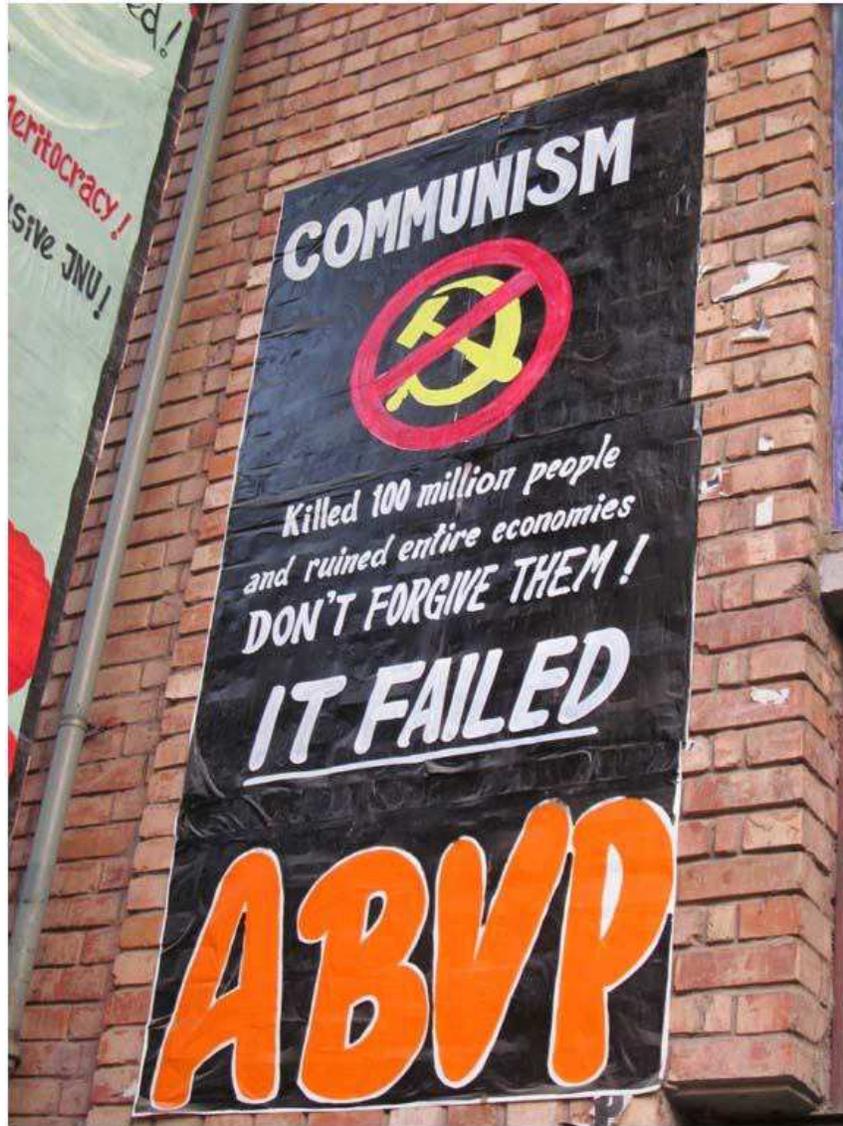
“Voices of resistance”, on the one of the walls of SIS, JNU. Photo by author. 2015.

The posters and the graffiti in JNU stand out because of their unique combination of artistic genius, ready wit, and relevance to our contemporary social ethos. The following poster is proof of how minimalism works in terms of painting; a picture can indeed narrate several stories, without the aid of too many ‘bombastic’ words.



“The Time-Bomb That We Live On”, on one of the walls of the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, JNU. Photo by author. 2015.

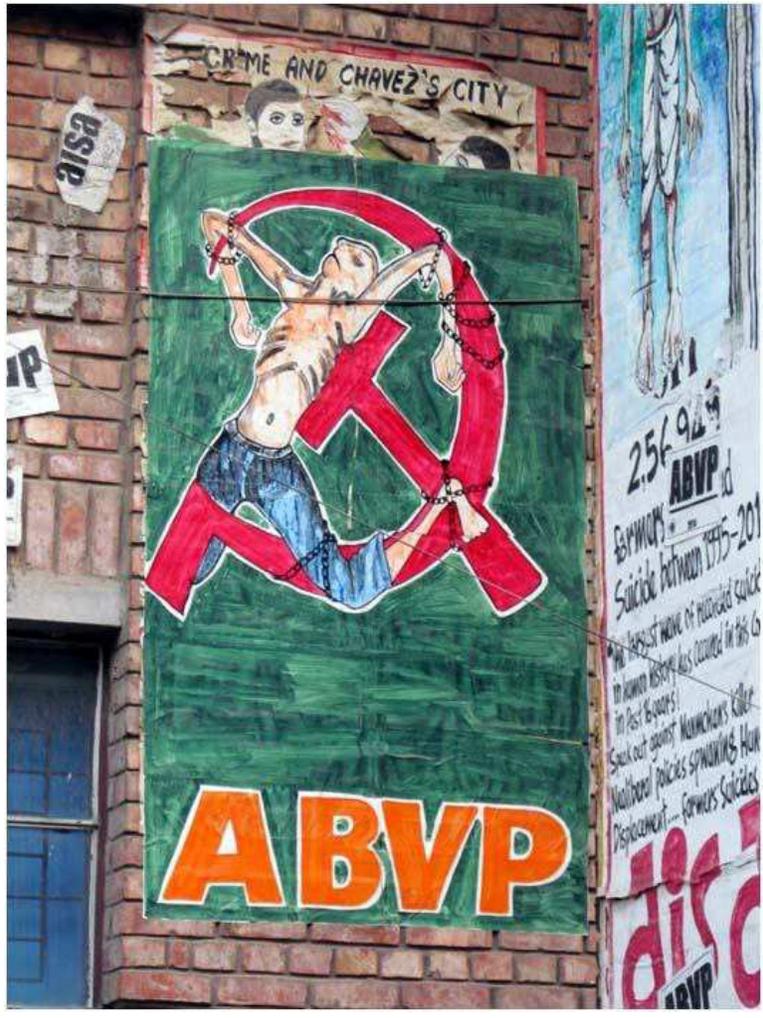
What I find most remarkable about the walls of JNU is that they reflect truly the ethos of the campus: its readiness to protest against the evils that different States, governments and systems propagate; the undying spirit of revolution that the *inquilaabi*<sup>15</sup> students still remain true to; their need to debate, discuss and deliberate; and their egalitarian ideology. Dissent is good. Dissent needs to exist in a democracy. And therefore even in this staunchly Left campus, there exists a non-Leftist Opposition. The walls are a testimony to all that and more.



“Commie-Bashing”, on one of the walls of JNU. Photo by author. 2015.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Revolutionary. The call for “Inquilaab Zindabaad” or “Long Live the Revolution” was raised during the Indian Independence Struggle by the ‘extremists’.

<sup>16</sup> ‘ABVP’ Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad



“ABVP on AISA”, on one of the walls of JNU. Photo by author. 2015.



“SFI’s Marxism vs AVBP’s Nationalism”, on one of the walls of JNU. Photo by author. 2015.

Street art is essentially about expression – and about using an alternative channel or medium for this expression. Graffiti artists consider the walls to be their true canvas. Their projects are conscious and they are aware of projecting their voice on the cityscape. Street art started out by being spontaneous. With several artists, however, including those in JNU, it has evolved to become a deliberate, well thought-out process. These turn out to be brilliantly conceived and masterfully executed works of art. The impulsive ones often appear disjointed, fragmented or angry. Modernism, paradoxically<sup>17</sup>, was the aesthetic movement that came up with the difference between high art and low art. What *jatra*<sup>18</sup> is to the elite theatre goer or what pop music is to the listener of Western classics, street art, arguably, is to the connoisseur of ‘fine art’. The politics of aesthetics that define certain things as ‘high culture’ or ‘high art’ and others as ‘popular culture’, ‘low culture’, ‘mass culture’ or ‘low art’ is skewed. One must remember Toni Morrison’s warning that “definitions belong to the definers, not the defined.”<sup>19</sup> One must be wary of all such totalizing definitions. Street art as Picasso puts it, “belongs to everyone and no one” (Brassai, 254). Be it organized or instinctive, political or puerile, original or inspired, casual or serious, street art is always necessarily personal and deeply-felt, as far as the artist is concerned. And high or not, it is definitely art because, as Lefebvre suggests in *Writings on Cities*:

“The future of art is not artistic but urban.” (173)

In JNU the graffiti and posters are so woven into the very fabric of student-life that one cannot picture the visual space of this 1000 acre campus without this art. The graffiti here has inserted, imposed and inflicted itself on the visual culture of the campus, undercutting authoritarian attempts, if any, to establish a sort of homogeneity or normativity in the architectural landscape of JNU. One can borrow an idea from Erasmus – “the city is a huge monastery”<sup>20</sup> – and extend it to the campus. The vows taken here are scholastic and intellectual, not religious. The walls become a mirror to the assertions of the inhabitants – their fears, their needs, their competitions, their foci, their achievements.

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<sup>17</sup> Paradoxical given the context in which modernism flourished – during and post World War I; given that the First World War should necessarily have erased all differences with the scale of destruction it brought about. On the one hand the Modernists recognized the lack of language – how language is arbitrary, relational and cannot help in finding the Truth; yet they employed this very language to create high art for a niche audience, relegating other productions which could be consumed by a larger mass as low art, as popular culture.

<sup>18</sup> Popular, rudimentary folk-theatre spread throughout all Bengali speaking places of the Indian sub-continent, such as West Bengal, Assam and Bangladesh among other places.

<sup>19</sup> From *Beloved*.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in De Certeau, p. 93

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**Somrita Ganguly** is a PhD Research Scholar, Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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