

Role of Political Graffiti in Recreating Agency in the Public Sphere: *Dewal Likhon/ Chika Mara* in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

By

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“Dewal er o kaan achey, Dewal kotha o bolte paarey”

(Walls have ears too, And walls can talk too)

Abstract

This research looks at the growing number of political graffiti or political ‘Dewal Likhon/ Chika’- wall writings and art in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. This form of writing and art provides a relatively safer means of continuing dialogue within the public arena given that the state has a heightened capacity to impose and implement invasive surveillance tactics on other modes of communication such as the media and increasingly on online platforms, like Facebook and independent blogs. The nation and its government, proclaimed to be a democratic nation-state, is fraught with authoritarian practices, with the political reality being that of a one-party authoritarian state. In this context, *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* creates a means to reproduce the public sphere beyond physical proximity or the online space and serves as a mode of ensuring recurring social movements and resistance against docility/conformity to an authoritarian government. Here, I study how walls as the boundaries of and within a city are utilized in order to signal contentions and create a new cultural and physical urban space. This research follows the idea that a city is produced by its inhabitants through the interactions with the various institutions within it. Therefore, the socio-political factors depicted by *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* indicate the process in which the state itself develops its political, cultural and social space within a specific history of post-coloniality. Further, the class-based differences in a society stratified along multifarious intersections come forth through the discussions surrounding Dhaka’s political graffiti.

Key Words: *Dewal Likhon, Chika, Chika Mara*, Wall Writings, Wall Art, Political Graffiti, Space, Urban, City, Social Movement, Resistance, Protest

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Trigger and Content warning: Mention of Police Violence, Death, Rape

In the following section I elaborate on the language that is used in this thesis, specifically to illustrate the importance and significance of using certain terms on a contextual basis as these contribute to the way the discourse is constructed.

Explanation of Terms

I keep the terms *Dewal Likhon* (দেওয়াল লিখন: they-wall lee-khon), *Chika* (চিকা: chee-kah) or *Chika Mara* (চিকা মারা: chee-kah mah-rah), the terms by which graffiti has been described in Bangla, instead of opting to solely refer to these as graffiti, wall writings, or wall art, the english translations used for these words, since the terms emerge from a particular historical moments of transitions in Dhaka. Inclusion of terms like graffiti (গ্রাফিতি) have been adopted into the linguistic practice in Bangladesh more recently, and this is happening as more styles are adopted. I often shift amongst these terms to increase the scope of this text beyond a west-centric lens/readership, but not taking it away from the history specific to Bangladesh. Moreover, there are various connotations associated with specific terminology. For example, in discussing these terms with my interlocutors, I learnt that wall writing, and wall art is often used in a depoliticized manner by students of Charukola- The Fine Art Institute of Dhaka University. That is, it is used as a safety net to produce artworks on walls but not have it be perceived in a criminal capacity by the government. Again, it is important to note that graffiti, wall writings, and wall art are all part of the vocabulary that is used to refer to these works in Bangladesh- both in daily conversations and in the media. While talking to some of the interlocutors I learnt

that the history or understanding of the word *Chika* is not common knowledge, and when someone did know about the history, it is based on oral history and has some variations.

Additionally, there is a conscious process in how I chose to write '*dewal*' and not '*Deyal*' when writing *Dewal Likhon*, which is the literal transliteration of the Bangla translation of wall writings. *Deyal* is the more 'common' way of pronouncing it, while *dewal* is identified as a way of saying it in 'low Bangla' or unrefined Bangla- the style of Bangla variation or different languages¹, that are often interpreted as being beneath 'high Bangla'.

Now, the terms *Chika Mara* or *Chika* have two possible origins. One of these I came across in an account by Biplob Rahman in an online blog about *Chika* (Rahman, 2010), and another was recounted by one of the interlocutors of this research. Both stories emerge from interaction with the police, but they differ in meaning in the way they emerged.

First, it is important to know what *Chika* means, as one of the interlocutors had also started by wanting to explain this. I was familiar with the term because in Sylheti, we used *sika* (সিকা: see-kah) as part of our regular vocabulary. However, when I was asked this, it struck me that this terminology of *Chika*, is also not part of 'high Bangla' whereas I had taken it for granted as part of the normalized vocabulary in Dhaka. So, *Chika* literally means rat, but the 'high Bangla' term for rats is *Idur* (ইদুর: ee-doo-r). And so *Chika Mara* means killing rats.

¹ Such as in my own language, Sylheti, walls are called *dewal* and not *Deyal*. I was often told that my Bangla was weak or that I was being disrespectful to elders whereas this was the language that I had learnt at home and had used for communication. On several occasions, people had laughed at how I spoke. Besides my personal encounters, this is also something that has happened around to my peers and or children of household helpers for example, who were often taught to speak in a "better" way "for their own good".

The first account, as it stands, is that the terms *Chika* or *Chika Mara* came about from a cover up story that was unanimously agreed upon by the student-artists, to be relayed to police investigations on the grounds of the Dhaka university² campus. That is, when students would go out to paint the walls or write something on them at night, they sometimes had to face the police. As a backup, they started carrying big sticks with them, and if the police did show up and interrogate as to why students were outside their dorms/ halls or in the streets late at night, the students unanimously gave them the same response- that there was a rat infestation on the university grounds and they had come out to kill the rats as they were destroying their bedding and clothes - “*Chika maarte aisi Sir*”. Since this really did happen and still does, this story was believable and thus effective as a cover-up story for their actions. Of course, a law against graffiti and poster sticking was only formalized in 2012³ (Chittagong Is Drowning in Visual Pollution, 2018), and *Chika* has been prevalent from the 60’s, however, as it will be elaborated in this thesis, the existence of a law has very little to do with the kind of actions that actually take place.

The second account is that *Chika Mara* or *Chika* became terms to denote writings or text on walls, because the kind of ink that was used to do these was very cheap and thus poisonous in nature, to the extent that it could be used as rat-poison, and likely was used for this purpose. As this paint was used by the student artists, and the act of putting anything on a wall is known as either *lagano*

² The state public university in the capital (Dhaka) where student politics/ campus politics is often mobilized. Students here were often student migrants to the city because as a state university the fees are much lower (in comparison to private universities). As Bangladesh is highly dependent on its agriculture sector, often the students would be farmers’ children, and this was often used in a derogatory manner. In this sense, it is easy to understand why the term ‘*Chika*’ is used/mobilized instead of ‘*idur*’ that would be the influence of folks growing up in the city and learning its language.

³ According to the Graffiti Writing and Poster Sticking Control Act, 2012, unauthorized poster sticking and drawing graffiti is a penal offence.

The act allows city corporations and local government authorities to designate places where posters can be pasted or graffiti can be drawn. Individuals and organizations willing to use those spots will have to pay stipulated fees and abide by some conditions.

As per the Act, the punishment for illegal poster sticking or drawing of graffiti is a minimum fine of Tk5,000 to a maximum fine of Tk10,000 and default of such may result in simple imprisonment of 15 days

(sticking on) or *mara* (hitting), for example, poster *mara* means sticking posters, the writings on walls came to be known as *Chika Mara*.

Further, *Chika Mara* or *Chika* mainly refers to a type of graffiti that is less prevalent globally from a stylistic point of view. That is, *Chika* consists of one lined sentences or slogans, which could be similar to tags, but the *Chika* requires a bit more time and carefully calculated strength and movement of brushstrokes which also varied based on the texture of the walls' surfaces ("Bangladesh graffiti art: past, present and future", 2016).

In addition, *Chika* is also associated with the students' political wings. At first it used to be a Chatro League term, later it was reclaimed in radical leftist politics, and the socialist parties. Currently, the term is used as an umbrella term and is used to refer to any wall art and writings that may or may not consist of inherent political messages.

Nowadays, stencil-based *Chika* and artwork are becoming more popular as people have slightly more access to various resources and material, along with increased knowledge of different artistic practices. Thus, keeping these terms and alternating between them is a conscious choice in order to make space for the specific histories that are intertwined with the words. However, *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* is mobilized more often as this work presents an entry of it in the academic realm.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter, I present an account of the graffiti present in Dhaka, Bangladesh and the relations between these and the socio-political conditions that foreground it. The chapter is divided into 3 sections. The first section introduces the various styles of *Dewal Likhon* and *Chika Mara* that one comes across in Dhaka and explains the stylistic differences and significance of each. I navigate the aspects of *Dewal Likhon* that make it politically inclined and explore the relations of the urban fabric that influence the presence and use of this particular type of graffiti. In the second section, I position my own interest in studying the specific type of political graffiti and reflect on the social conditions that cause a greater presence in the city. In doing so I establish the relationship between *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* and the actors within the space. Finally, the third section emphasizes on the relations of *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* and exogenous moments. The latter are inevitable in a shifting and unsettled urban reality and takes shape in particular events- such as social movements or protests.

1.1) The Specificity of *Dewal Likhon / Chika* in Dhaka-

In 2017, a new advent of graffiti had taken Dhaka city, the capital of Bangladesh by storm. These instances of graffiti, namely the ‘Subodh’ series, comprising of images on white walls which had become popular in the local news media (Mahmud & Chaity, 2017), were accompanied by thought provoking messages and meaningful taglines. An example is given in the image below.



Figure 1

(HOBE KI?, 2017) **Image Description:** A wall painted white with stencil graffiti or *Chika*. A line is written in smaller Bangla font, and a bold bigger font is used for the name of the series. This is described in the following paragraph. Next to the written text is the image of a man looking over his shoulder, while holding on to a caged yellow sun.

The line in Figure 1 reads “*Subodh tui paliye ja. Ekhon shomoye pokkhey na. Manush bhalobashtey bhuley gechey*”, which roughly translates to “Run away Subodh. Time is not on your side. People have forgotten how to love”, while the bolder bleeding words, *HOBEKI?* written phonetically in the latin script (like the transliteration I have done above), translates to either “Will it happen?” or “What will happen?”. All of the text and artwork is left open for interpretation.

The idea of *Dewal Likhon* or *Chika Mara* (writings and art on walls), is actually not particularly new in Dhaka (Auer, 2012). These forms of illustration have been used here since before the 1971 Liberation war to express political messages and stances in a short, rapid and captivating manner. However, some of the contemporary renditions of *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* suggest relations to the broader styles of the types of graffiti found in the ‘Global North’.

So, why is the media captivated by the idea of graffiti in Dhaka in recent years? Julie Peteet (1996) describes in her paper, ‘The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada’, how walls became the medium of creating instant “fragmentary” and “fleeting” visuals in the occupied area of

Palestine, with the oppressed having little access to other modes of communication and passing messages amongst themselves, resulting in the “mobilization” of walls made of stones in this sense. The sometimes hurried and sometimes elaborate texts caught Peteet’s eye, as it caught the eyes of many people, and resulted in what the author called ‘cultural production’, referring to the Bourdieusian concept. Graffiti or the written text/ print on walls that emerged in the context of political repression contributes to a specific cultural production unlike that produced in formal artistic institutions, and accompanies other forms of political mobilization. Indeed, this very idea paves the way for this research. While Dhaka is not subject to the scale or particularity of rebellion/resistance of the first Intifada, which is the context for Peteet’s argument, there have been certain shifts in the political regime and ideology that give rhyme and reason to the growing interest and significance of “*Dewal Likhon/Chika Mara*” today. The writings on walls hold more meaning- in layers, as they are connected to specific connotations and contexts of an ongoing ‘repressive and oppressive’ regime of the government in Bangladesh since the election of the current Prime Minister for the 3rd consecutive term in 2018, and 4th term overall⁴. I am drawing on Peteet’s work to set the stage for this research as the characteristic for the political Dewal Likhon found in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which is the focus of this research, is similar to those studied by Peteet. That is, at times they are executed in a hurry, and at other times executed in an elaborate manner. The following image of a *Chika* indicates the dominant notion about how current politics is perceived in the country.

⁴ The current PM is Sheikh Hasina, and she is the leader of Awami League. In the 50 years of Bangladesh’s existence as a ‘free’ country, Awami league has served as the ruling party for 5 terms (that will be 25 years in 2022).



Figure 2

("গ্রাফিতি, কার্টুন আর দেয়াল লিখন যখন প্রতিবাদের ভাষা - BBC News বাংলা", 2019) [The title: 'When graffiti, cartoons, and wall writings become the language of protests'] **Image Description:** One block word which say 'Rajneeti', which means 'Politics', is written in wide font to depict weight, which is carried by the public. In essence it depicts the relation of the political conditions in the country and how the burden of the outcome of political relations and affiliations impacts and weighs down on the collective general public.

Along with the politicized wall art selected for this thesis, there are several other styles of wall art/writings present across the city. For example, there are elaborate wall writings and art which signal a specific kind of moral characteristic or traits to be embodied within the individuals of the population. Such writings are often found in and around schools. Often it is part of the school's structure and walled boundaries of the institution. Like in Figure 3-



Figure 3

(Collected via @dhaka_wall.writings) **Image Description:** The image shows a quote by A.P.J Abdul Kalam, an Indian scientist. The text is framed within painted decorative borders. The original Instagram post was

directed to the account with the following text: “I draw your attention to the practice of attributing false quotes to famous historical personalities”.

Such styles of wall writings around schools are common and are known as উক্তি/ বাণী/ বাণী চিরন্তনী [*ukti* (oohk-tee), *bani* (baa-ni) or *bani chironton* (baa-ni chee-row-n-ton)] in Bangla. These often depict the "political and/or religious" position that is practiced within the school- A Christian school might use quotes from the bible, whereas an Islamic school would choose a Surah/Du'a from the Qur'an, while a 'secular' school would choose such a quote as shown in the image above. To what extent these quotes are accurate, is not considered when the walls are painted, as the example above also illustrates. They are more permanent, even if the quotes are found to be inaccurate at a later stage. As long as the message portrayed is agreed to be an encouragement of good practice, it is not erased because the painting is done as part of renovations or decorative embellishments and thus is seen as long-term investments or fixed costs and not variable costs for the organizations and institutes.

Additionally, there are also elaborate murals and artwork which are commenting on the political condition or are directly in retaliation to the government's acts or policies. In mid-august in 2020 for example, the Mayor of the local government wing- Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), Barrister Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, announced a massive drive to cull stray/street dogs from Dhaka city (Ahmad, 2020). As protests erupted across the country, the People for Animal Welfare Foundation (PAW Foundation) commissioned large murals depicting the interrelations of street animals, specifically dogs, in people's daily lives in an attempt to increase awareness and encourage people to fight against the move to cull stray dogs. Here it was also stated that such an act is identified to be in contradiction to the existing legal framework for the protection of animals (Ahmad, 2020).



Figure 4

(Collected Via @dhaka_wall.writings via @ridi.tart) **Image Description:** A mural showing the multiple roles that dogs play in the daily lives of a number of city dwellers in two parallel conversations. The four speech bubbles from left to right: (1) 2 garbage collectors speaking, first one says, “*Kuttaye na khaile koto moyla je uthaite boito*”, meaning, “Can’t imagine how much garbage I’d have to pick up if the dogs didn’t eat from here” (2) In response to the first one, “*Haw, thik e koiso, onra asey boila e rasta-ghaat porishkar thaakey*”, meaning, “Yeah, You’re right, the streets stay clean because they exist” (3) 2 thieves speak amongst each other, “*Kukur er jalaye thik moton churi o kortey paari na*”, meaning, “Can’t even steal properly because of the dogs” (4) In response, “*Haw koydin por dhoira niya geley araam koira churi korum*”, meaning, “Yeah, once they catch and take them away in a few days, I can comfortably steal”.

With the wall and the writings on it as an object of ethnography, this research seeks to understand the presence of wall writings and what it brings to the public domain via records of spatio-temporal changes or shifts within Dhaka- a space that is in the ‘cusp’ of urbanization and that expresses the internalized consequences of a distinctly post-colonial formation in a globalizing world. This will also revolve around the conditions wherein, the nation-state of Bangladesh as a bounded category locates itself in the global space.

1.2) Personal interest:

My own interest in *Dewal Likhon/Chika* peaked on a humid day when my friends and I, who either lived or had part-time home tutoring jobs in the same area, were on our way back after a long day of classes at our undergraduate institute. The old airport road on Bijoy Sharani (বিজয় সরণী; be-joy shaw-raw-nee) is usually subject to heavy traffic, and it was no different on that day; we looked at the other cars and the dilapidated buses and *lagunas* (লেগুনা: lay-goo-nah) (Human Hauliers) around us. As the seven of us sat in a car meant for 4/5, with air conditioning (A/C) turned off not only because of how expensive gas is but also because we might run out depending on how long we have to be on the road (due to traffic). We considered ourselves both lucky and unlucky, the former in comparison to those using public transport, and the latter relative to those whose window-screens were closed, meaning they could afford the A/C.

Waiting for the traffic to allow us to move forward, we caught a glimpse of the dirty wall with peeling white paint and dust layered green plants shooting out from between the cracks, hidden by multifarious vehicles. Except today it was not an empty wall staring back at us, it had one of the first elaborate HOBELI? *Likhon/ Chika* on it. This elicited a discussion amongst us, about what it meant, whom the writing addressed and what were the implications of this, and we had slightly different renditions.

My notion is that *Dewal Likhon/ Chika Mara* introduce either dialogues or monologues amongst the Dhaka city dwellers. It encourages a discussion of any range of events or incidents that affect people's daily lives as citizens. It also induces a response to any particular cause or incident, such

as the 2019 Justice for Abrar movement⁵. Following the murders of bloggers ("Two sentenced to death for Bangladesh blogger murder", 2015) increased risk to life from various caveats of the society including the government, graffiti presents an alternative way of engaging with a broader population. Even more so as mainstream media picks up on it and prints interviews and interpretations of the *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* (Auer, 2012; Mahmud and Chaity, 2017; Rahman, 2017).

The *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* examined in this thesis are the expressive capacity of the artists who are politically repressed. However, as I have proposed in an unpublished text earlier in 2021, it is not limited only to them, rather it involves a multitude of actors who are actively or in passing involved in the processes of a movement which seeks reform of the world order that is currently constitutive and enacted under the reign of an authoritarian government. The drive to construct an egalitarian society, through underlining the importance of justice and freedom, is what motivates today's social movements and the actors within this scape. As it is not possible to engage in collective action without risking one's life, the medium of communication that *Dewal Likhon* gives is the only capacity to reproduce a public sphere. In this action, the public sphere also moves away from the restrictive capacity, it begins an attempt to involve a subaltern which otherwise cannot communicate on a public platform. This brings a measure of hope, and increases the opportunity for democratic participation which also seeks to have the public engage in its work. The property of *Dewal Likhon* which makes it more effective is its mobile or kinetic nature as a momentary snapshot of it is caught in people's memory. This means that in spite of its

⁵ Abrar a 2nd year student at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), died after he was brutally beaten by some Chatro League students in Sher-E-Bangla Hall of the University in the early hours of October 7, 2019

transient nature, it is recreated in people's minds, evoking the limitations of living in a society/community that render improvement outside of circles of power impossible. That *Chika* caught the international attention through stationary walls that are not directly connected to the internet goes to show the capacity and power it has to overcome repressive tactics imposed by the help of legal apparatuses. The disruptive mechanisms of *Dewal Likhon* create a process and work towards and around creating episodes of events. What remains at the end is the mode of a social movement, which is at times in a lull when there are not enough exogenous incidents motivating a visible action in the form of people assembling in unity, but there is always a relational, interactive and in fact reactionary realm which involves a discussion of the 'private' in the notably public structures.

1.3) Interconnections of Resistance in Dewal likhon/ Chika

Dhaka has been the recipient of *Dewal Likhon/ Chika Mara* in relation to protests, portraying a political message, multiple times, such as during the 2013 Shahbagh occupation, which is a fresh memory in the minds of Dhaka's residents despite the lapse in time (Anam, 2013). I claim this based on lived experience, since every time one talks about social mobilization in Bangladesh, we inevitably revisit the Shahbagh movement, due to its vast online and offline presence (Lewis, 2013)⁶. Even during the conversations with interlocutors, in most cases the Shahbagh movement has been a point of discussion, be it in the spirit of “political activism” or “artwork” or “feeling of solidarity”. It is also perhaps a testament to the repercussions felt nationwide, and thus serves as one of the entry points in understanding the relations between the elements of the city and the sentiments felt within the institutions.

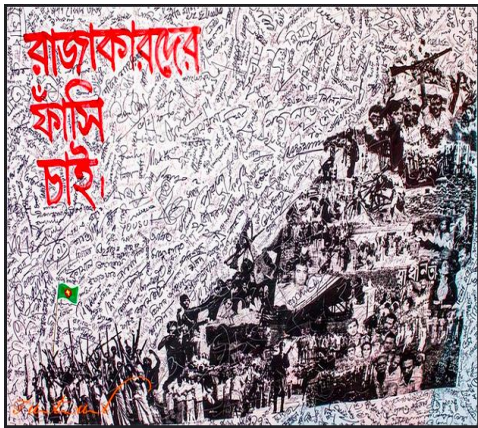


Figure 5

(চৌধুরী, 2013) **Image Description:** A wall in Shahbagh during the 2013 protest plastered with a signed poster demanding the hanging of Rajakars⁷. The bottom right corner features a collage of images from or about the 1971 liberation war. The text in bold red reads, “*Rajakarder Fashi Chai*”, meaning, “We want Rajakars to hang.”

⁶ This is elaborated in the following section (Chapter 4.1a)

⁷ The term Rajakars is used to refer to the members of the former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), who were pro-Pakistan or anti-liberation of Bangladesh and had formed a paramilitary force. They had become a violent group, committing murders and ethnic cleansing of Hindus during the 1971 Liberation war.

The writings on walls, not restricted to direct manifestation on it (i.e painting or writing on it) but also through posters that are plastered on it, become apparent and bound to exist in a time and space, with messages that are relevant to particular movements in that particular point. The message communicated remains in physical existence for a while. However, the impression that is created via interpretations can remain in the memories of people who view it for a longer time, despite having only a fleeting view at times. Thus, despite the erasures of these writings, the conversation and emotion(s) incited perseveres.

Essentially this research looks into the phenomenon of *Dewal Likhon/ Chika Mara* and the concomitant social space that is created through these visualizations. These images/ wall writings are meant to be political messages and conversations that are situated in the boundaries of the ‘urban’ Dhaka city. Questions about who determines the ownership of the flipside or exposed side of a contiguous wall or boundary- usually viewed as private property, and how it becomes appropriated as public domain are also addressed in this research. This dispute is closely followed by that of the distinction between a public and a private realm, where one can argue for an egalitarian existence, and consequently be denied it. The research follows the larger inquiry into why the age-old form of wall-writing is used as a tool of protest and critique of the state and its applications of policies to this day, or rather, given that there are several modes of resource mobilization when it comes to protesting and exercising resistance. Additionally, this thesis outlines how the phenomenon of “*Dewal Likhon/ Chika Mara*” is interpreted in the public and political discussions in Bangladesh.

Chapter 2: Methodology and considerations of position

This research is qualitative in nature and took place over a range of time from the end of 2020 to mid-2021 instead of during a fixed research period. This model and conduction of research had to be completed at a time of increased precarity given the Covid-19 pandemic. The initial plans for this research were modeled to be largely ethnographic, inserting myself into the field and utilizing a mixed methodology of participant observation, auto-ethnography, and conversations with interlocutors, namely, painters/artists performing as activists or seeking greater modes of awareness among people regarding a certain topic/cause, journalists who have written either briefly or extensively about *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* in Dhaka, as well as a particular niche of public intellectuals which is unique to Dhaka's political engagement sphere. The last category of interlocutors often write brief notes on their facebook platforms and sometimes have connected blogs where they write more extensively. I had also planned to have several walking tours with small groups of people, guided by the wall writings, and understand from there what the implications of wall writings are based on their previous memories and present encounters. This would have given me an insight into how people interact with the city and what is important for them in the space as residents for however much time they have been in the city. This would have also given me insight into the specific backgrounds and socializations or upbringing that contribute to different experiences of Dhaka, which for me has been a place of mixture of many realities. Something that is evidently unique to a particular niche in South Asia- Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, to the extent of my knowledge, is the finer distinctions in class stratification. For example, within the middle class, there are many variations, which are based on any factor that may be of economic, social or cultural forms. But something that is quite common across this class is the prevalence of 'domestic help' or household help, such as in Bangladesh, a "*chuta*

bua”- person (mostly women) who are appointed and paid on a task basis and come for 1 or 2 hours everyday or alternate days, or a “*permanent bua*”, person (also mostly women) who is always at the house and is paid on a monthly basis rather than task basis. Often, having help of this kind is understood as having a high economic standing in other west-centric countries/ economically privileged countries, however, here, this only indicates whether or not someone belongs to the middle (or beyond) classes. As such, it is difficult to determine the heterogeneity of people’s identities without having a few deeper conversations where life experiences might come through. This is also because class mobility in a “developing”⁸ country like Bangladesh is happening rapidly, and this is not necessarily an upward movement, as in mobility towards greater accumulation of wealth. These instances also contribute to the way one lives or conducts themselves in the city and would indicate distance or closeness to *Dewal Likhon/ Chika*.

However, these plans had to be adapted to the conditions of an ongoing and evolving situation of the pandemic, wherein reaching out to people to conduct research became impossible as conditions worsened in Bangladesh, and as I myself could not cope with the situation and had to stay in Budapest as flights between Hungary and Bangladesh were suspended.

Over this time, I opened an Instagram account with the handle @dhaka_wall.writings, which has been widely shared by my friends and acquaintances. Here, I received many photographs about wall writings, which I have been slowly updating and sharing to the main newsfeed. While it was not sufficient to acquire all the specific data needed to conduct a comprehensive analysis, it serves as a helpful and important archive of the different types of wall writings across Dhaka. Soon, one artist and activist reached out to me and shared specific data of where to find political and other

⁸ This segregation of nations based on development imposes a comparative scale of measurement from particular discourse that I do not agree with.

manners of graffiti in the city that had been made in the recent months. Following this, I put up a call for people interested in taking photos for me. This yielded a number of responses, and prompted more of an interest amongst people, and I received direct messages to my personal account and on Facebook as well, where I had intentionally not written about this work owing to the lack of security and high surveillance. Ultimately, I had 3 people helping me with taking the photos, 2 of whom I paid a small amount of money to cover their transport costs, and another person who volunteered because he had the resources. The areas I could cover ranged from the central space of political action in Dhaka- Dhaka University, to neighboring areas- Dhanmondi and Mohammadpur. I also did a deep-dive online, looking for photos and texts about wall writings in Dhaka, in addition to asking via the Instagram account for any resources to be shared.

In this way, I was limited in mobility, relying on others and their points of view, and interactions with the city. I could not witness the shifts and changes in the walls as it happened in these months and though in stories and images these erasures and presences are somewhat felt, since I lived in Dhaka till August 2019, the heavy tension and futile nature of time when it comes to *Chika*, is likely lost in this mode of research. To understand the conditions and surroundings of the dewal likhon, I spoke with the photographers following their visits and days spent taking and collecting images. Additionally, I had asked them to make some videos of the places where they took pictures of *Chika*. This gave me an insight into the conditions of the city that could, to an extent, make up for the lack of elemental interactions with the space. I did not feel too far removed as these are areas that I had been visiting regularly during my undergraduate studies as these are also sites of cultural production in the city. Though in this sense, I also felt that there is a limitation in interaction and range in the scope of the space, contained to “central” locations that are reachable for particular classes of people- in my understanding, easy for the middle and upper middle

classes. Of course, for Dhaka, the spaces and areas are interspersed within the classes, though the degree of maintaining a separation differs in certain areas. For example, this disparity is more visible in Gulshan and Banani and less in Mohammadpur and Adabor.

In total, I conducted 8 semi-structured interviews- (i) 3 with individuals who are artists, writers and photographers, (ii) 2 interviews with writers or public intellectuals based in Dhaka, and (iii) 3 interviews with the volunteer photographers who have photographed some walls for me, who all have jobs otherwise and do not identify as photographers. Among these 3 groups of individuals, the first group consists of people who are graffiti writers and artists in addition to their other capacities which they identify with on a general basis. They have grown up in Dhaka and can be identified as being in certain positions of privilege wing to their family's statuses or the kinds of jobs they held/hold. They were all able to maintain a network of people who had certain kinds of connections that can be used to acquire access to specific places, or that can be used for an extent of safety if they face any danger. The second group's members are both migrants to Dhaka during their 20's who have lived there for substantial periods of time: from 10 to about 20 years, however, are based outside of Dhaka at the time of writing. The third group of people are all individuals who have grown up and lived in Dhaka but identify as having roots in places outside of it, in their parents' villages, where they have regularly spent time during school vacations and other occasions.

Besides interviews, I organized 3 groups for virtual focus group discussions in lieu of the city-walk/tour where I presented a number of images, some with the location and some without and essentially discussed in a similar fashion to how we might have done in person, without the breaks at tea stalls and stopping for snacks/street food. These have often been central places to hold these discussions and have conversations in Dhaka without the prerequisite of spending large sums of

money. Some of my interlocutors have also actively scouted for walls and waited in spaces like these to keep a lookout for where and when they can make a *Chika* safely. In doing so, some of the organic knowledge or conversations that may have occurred are lost, given the fact that it would have taken much longer to do this in person, with several distractions and with many moments of interruptions. However, following the focus group discussions, a number of the participants have been in touch with me, sending me pictures at times, and at other times when they were not able to take pictures, they have written to me about what they saw, or if they felt comfortable they have sent me voice notes. This level of reflection with various kinds of *Chika* allowed me to comprehend the capacity on which citizens engage in general with this particular fabric of the city. Yet, since their preferred platform has been Facebook or Instagram which are generally unsafe and are often under surveillance by state-sanctioned authorities, i.e. the DGFI (Directorate General of Forces Intelligence which is in jurisdiction of the PM), we could only communicate in a limited fashion, feeling that the space is always policed and unsafe, that would have been a different experience in person.

In regards to access to space and mobility, since women, femmes and people who are read as ‘women’ are generally unsafe, I believe the focus group, had the walking tours taken place in person as originally planned, would not have been dominated by women as it was. Further, the artists I interviewed who did the work on the streets were also men or non-binary people who were read as masculine, thus giving them access to public urban space in a particularly gendered way. As I myself have also experienced, most places in Dhaka are inherently exclusive of femme-presenting individuals, and as such, the proposition of a city-walk or tour would be impossible for some and partially only accessible for others under specific conditions, like a guarantee of a

‘safe’ mode of transport (like a car) and a specific time schedule- that is, the tour could not have continued into the late evening for example (during the daytime).

Moreover, something that is crucial to consider is the fact that all of the members had the means and capacity to attend these virtual sessions, which indicates access to a stable enough internet connection and a device that supports this type of software. Having brought this to attention, it is also necessary to understand that I have been able to communicate and reach out to people because of my own relations and access to particular groups of people from/in Dhaka. This is also evident in the groups that were put together for the focus group discussion. Most of the people in the focus groups have primarily lived and grown up in Dhaka, attended academic institutes of similar standings which require a sum of money that can be spent on attaining the degree or certificate. While these are all homogenizing factors, there are individual differences in lifestyles, for example some had their own or parents’ private cars for transport to school, some have used shared school transport provided by schools or an externally contracted company, while many others used public transport. For 4 of the interlocutors, their extensive interaction with Dhaka started in their mid-teens or early 20’s.

Yet, we all had a familiarity with particular languages, and some of the languages we used have also emerged from academic ways of understanding and deciphering social events. All of these above factors into the way one interacts with the city and the range to which someone has access to specific spaces. For instance, for many of us, including myself, staying outside, or having the social connection and privilege to exist by a tea stall as I have mentioned before, came much later and only through having access to or borrowing what we identify as ‘male privilege’ from our friends or family. In essence, without my personal connections, it would have been quite

impossible to have access to these interviews. All the interlocutors' ages ranged between 20 to 40 years old at the time of this research project.

At many intersections, I struggled to navigate between being a researcher, a participant in ongoing demands for abolishing the digital security act (DSA) and being either a friend or a close acquaintance to the interlocutors. Especially when it came to discussing the ways that people maneuver the space in the city and take on different roles to be able to exist. With the pandemic, it has been even more difficult to have any mode of outlet, and having been implicated directly and indirectly myself, it was often difficult to channel the capacity of moderating a virtual conversation. However, after the first session, I decided not to perform this role. Instead, I opened the conversation by sharing the emotional aspects of continuing to do this research in the midst of an ongoing and evolving pandemic. This was more effective as it created the space to express vulnerability that is often not felt in the way people interact with their daily actions and opened up the possibility to share more deeply the emotional aspects of being in the city. As all the interlocutors' ages ranged anywhere between 20 to 40 during this research, it added a layer of difference in the way people felt responsibilities and dependency, that is some of them were part of a family where they depended on their parents, whereas others were dependent only to an extent (that is contributing financially or earning their own expenses but still living with their parents), or have children of their own or other family members who are dependent on them. Only in 3 cases, the interlocutors were living separately from their families and were responsible for only their own finances. These are important aspects to understand as they contribute to the way people responded to the prompts or questions that were discussed.

Besides conversations with 19 people on individual or collective formations, not counting arbitrary conversations on either Facebook or Instagram following the inception of the

@dhaka_wall.writings, another source of data has been written articles in national and international newspapers. These articles have described the phenomenon of graffiti or dewal likhon to varying degrees and provide another way to look into the juxtaposition of the socio-political climate with the prevalence of various forms of dewal likhon. Following the method of discourse analysis, the contents of the texts and the emergent trends of the interview have been closely studied.

These specific methods have been chosen in order to develop and gather data with reference to the meta questions outlined before. A collective study of these allows me to answer the pertinent research question in a nuanced manner.

Chapter 3: Presence and Resonance of Dewal Likhon/ Chika: A Narrative Approach

The Subodh series⁹ reminds people of the “Aijuddin is in pain” (কস্টে আছে আইজুদ্দিন: cosh-tay ah-chay ayj-uddin [*Aijuddin koshtey achey*]) series from the 1990’s, which showed up in the premises of Dhaka University¹⁰, precisely because of the mysterious ‘one-liner’ message left open-ended for the audience to interpret (The Wire, 2017). The anonymous artist for the Subodh series is referred to as the “Ted Banksy of Bangladesh”, owing to the similarity in style of the graffiti executed, the anonymity and the political nature of the messages (Global Voices, 2017). Subodh’s one liners include: “*Subodh tui paliye ja- Subodh Run Away*”; “*Subodh tui paliye ja, tor bhaggey kichu nei- Subodh run away, there is nothing in your destiny*”; “*Subodh ekhon jail-e, podobodh nishchintey korchey baash manusher ridoye- Subodh is in jail, guilt resides without any worry within people’s hearts*” (Mujib, 2017). A haggardly looking shirtless silhouette of a man accompanies these messages, sometimes with a look of fear, sometimes with a red or yellow sun trapped in a cage held in his hand as he looks back over his shoulder (HOBE KI?, 2017). People have deciphered the messages in many ways. So much so that what is read as a name and referred to in first-person- ‘Subodh’, is also interpreted as synonymous to “Good Conscience” (Mujib, 2017; Ahasan, 2017).

More of these appeared around different locations in the city-

⁹ Sometimes, though less popular, this series has been called the HOBEKI? Series. While the silhouette of a person has been more popular with people, there are some walls which have no accompanying lines and only a stencil outline of the caged sun.

¹⁰ Established in the 1920’s and boasts being ‘a central premise for free thought and democratic practices that would lead the nation to its march towards progress’. The university and its students have time and again played integral role in the way the nation state was established (“University of Dhaka || the highest echelon of academic excellence”, n.d.).



Figure 6

(Khan, 2017) **Image Description:** Two images which show people on a footpath looking at HOBELI? Graffiti on the walls. The first Wall Writing is the same as the image this research opens with, except it is on a broken wall. The second writing urges the following “*Tobuo Subodh rakhish Shurjo dhore*”, meaning- “Still hold on to the sun Subodh” in red paint, followed by the “HOBELI?”. There is a silhouette of a man holding to the caged sun and either floating away or falling (having lost footing or balance).



Figure 7

(DAILY PROTHOM ALO, 2017) **Image Description:** A little girl kneeling and looking up at Subodh/ man holding to the cage, asking “*Kobe hobe bhor?*”, meaning, “When will it be dawn?” and a “HOBELI?” stamp on the wall.

The first of the above 3 images says the same line as the one described before and is captured whilst passersby stop and take a look at it. The third one shows the same man, holding his caged sun, being questioned by a girl. The question reads- “*Subodh, kobe hobe bhor?*”, meaning- “When will the dawn-break arrive?” In the second image, the passerby looks at another image with the prompt - “...*Tobuo Subodh rakhish Shurjo dhorey*”, which translates to- “... and yet Subodh keeps

holding on to the sun”. These quick flowing and captivating one-liners resonate the ones that came before it, with a note of urgency in the message that is portrayed. These are somewhat poetic in nature, portraying a sense of melancholy, frustration, but also hope. In conversation and discussion, *Shubodh* was a familiar work for all, and for some it brought out difficult memories of how it had started out, and later how it had to stop because of an increased risk to security. “It was very difficult to hold on to the sun, it still is”, said one person. If anything, *Subodh* and the caged sun was a symbol of hope, of a revolution to come, a sense of latent rebellion, much like the sentiments of the 2018 student protests. However, both of these events ended in violence and/or increased policing that was rendered as a signal of the silencing that is practiced in the nation’s society, from schools and universities, i.e. in academia, to within media and now within one’s own dialogue and mind/headspace.

The contemporary emergence of these messages is inspirational, yet indefinite in what they tend to indicate. In that way these writings on walls, however fleeting and momentary in existence, tend to have the capacity to address the ongoing and continuous crisis that plagues the socio-economic and political facets of contemporary Dhaka. They resist government ambitions to present society as a neatly progressing society, moving towards the Western ideal of development. *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* voice the ongoing and growing concerns of an increasingly repressed people in the intersection of regional, international and global influx of trade and dependency chains of supply. Therefore, *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* is a more accurate representation of a social movement. They not only appear with events or ruptures as they occur, but they also stay on, in memory, photographs, and in the form of oral reproduction-slogans.

In the Language movement in 1952, the walls read: “*Rashtro bhasha Bangla chai*”- ‘we demand Bangla to be the state language’, in ‘69-’71, they read “*Jail-er tala bhangbo, Sheikh Mujib ke Anbo*”- ‘We’ll break the locks to the jail, we’ll bring back Sheikh Mujib’ (Ferdous, 2018), and in the ‘90’s they read “*Koshthey Achi- Aijuddin*”- ‘I am in pain- Aijuddin’ (The Wire, 2017). The first two were at a time of specific ruptures which led to outward change in the structure of the government- which would entail that these *Dewal Likhon(s)* / *Chika*’s were a tool of ‘the strong publics’ in an evolving public sphere (Fraser, 1990); the latter came forward at a time where the government structure also shifted as a coup followed the establishment of a chief of martial law, Ershad, who came to power, and this disrupted the economic conditions of the country further (Kim, 2012). At this time, the general public faced trouble to ensure even one meal per day for themselves and their families, however, they had no mode of communicating or establishing these interests to the state- these were deemed private issues, in spite of these being quite specifically of the public interest, and so one individual-Aijuddin, who identifies as a commercial artist, who started work at the age of 16, began tagging the walls with a statement, in order to communicate these emotions and reality of the members of the society to those in power holding positions (Sorboshes Documentary, 2017). The one liner resonated the conditions of the publics in the weaker positions- those constituents of the subaltern counterculture and became relatable for the masses who shared the sentiment of despair and disappointment in the system. Tilly (1993), describes this characteristic of unrest and interjection as the ‘cycles of social movement’, that is, a social movement continues and is everlasting, and as long as we do not achieve the ideal utopia, these constant shifts are just that- constantly evolving and building on each other, replacing each other, and at times revisiting each other, for example, Aijuddin and Subodh evoke similar

sentiments, almost 2 decades apart, owing to similar ‘exogenous conditions’ (Fligstein, & McAdam, 2011).

Chapter 4: Historical Significance:

4.1) Status Quo

In Dhaka, one of the most densely populated urban areas in the world, (“Demographia World Urban Areas”, 2020), there is shockingly limited access to the public sphere for the majority of people, effected by grave regulations on the freedom of expression and thoughts. The increased use of *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* to traverse the public space and exercise agency is logical. In the subsequent sections, I outline the political atmosphere of Dhaka, following the split factions within the population and the rising tensions with the state. With the backdrop outlined below, where the conditions of the state limits the scope of freedom of speech and production of knowledge, the manner in which graffiti in Dhaka is subject to interpretation, stimulating conversations, and actively re-paving a space for debating the status quo, is one that demands attention

a) The tectonic splits in the political atmosphere

In 2013 Bangladesh experienced a nationwide movement that emerged from one of the centers of cultural production of Dhaka -Shahbagh *Chottor* (square). What became a 2 month-long occupation of a physical space, had started out as protests following a court-ruling of war criminals from the 1971 Liberation war of Bangladesh. People claimed that the lifelong imprisonment judgement that the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT)passed for Abdul Quader Mollah¹¹, was too lenient. The protests were largely patriotic in sentiment and garnered support from all walks of life, with the ruling party- Awami League (which is in power at the time of writing this) also expressing

¹¹ The assistant Secretary-general of one of the opposition parties: Jamat-i-islam, which evidently consisted of many members in the higher ranks who were part of an anti-liberation stance in the late 1960’s-early 1970’s

their support. The movement eventually became a platform for the party, which has absorbed the movement's approach into its own political ideology and agenda.

Over the same years: 2012-13, there had been several simultaneous events: Firstly, the work of several secular, atheist, nationalist bloggers gained national prominence, which attracted the attention of various Islamist groups, who declared the bloggers as 'sinners', and demanded they be tried under blasphemy law (Powell, 2018). One such group, 'Ansarullah Bangla Team' released a list of 84 bloggers and called for violence against them. 9 people from the list were murdered, and many others received death threats¹². Not only did this embolden groups and individuals inciting violence¹³, but it drew protest's which criticized the government's incapacity to ensure the safety of its citizens. At the same time, protests against secular bloggers continued, and began to be met with brutal resistance from the police and other law enforcement institutions, as did the counter-protests. As it is apparent from this summary of events, the political parties present in Bangladesh, have all had some form of extreme notions and political stances in their actions. This is also an indication that the gap of control in the state and constant struggle to hegemonize one party over

¹² One of the most well-known 'cases', that of Rajib Haider, who identified as an "atheist blogger" writing under the pseudonym *Thaba Baba*, was brutally murdered in a public space. The following years more such cases of deaths of dissident writers, usually bloggers, became common. This gave way to further protests which criticized the government's incapacity to ensure safety and security for its citizens.

¹³ A particular group calling themselves "Hefajot-e-Islam" emerged and organized a large-scale protest against the bloggers writing against Islam in blogs and portraying Prophet Muhammed in pornographic content, in Dhaka. On the night of the protest, they were met with brutal resistance from police and other law enforcement agencies. The electricity supply of the staging area for the night was shut down. The number of injured and dead in this incident is unconfirmed as the government (or Awami League) and Hefajot-e-islam has claimed different numbers#, where initially the number of dead was claimed to be as many as 431 by various sources (Boss, n.d.). During that time, opposition protests, that is, supporters of the Jamat-i-Islam, faced police brutality which resulted in at least 3 deaths including that of a high-school youth who was allegedly part of the student wing (of the aforementioned political party)- which is known as Shibir. This group is now banned in the country for inciting extremist notions amongst followers (Anam, 2013; "Two sentenced to death for Bangladesh blogger murder", 2015; "Secular publisher hacked to death in latest Bangladesh attacks", 2015; Karim, 2019).

another and establishing authority is the lack of a capacity for discussion and dialogue, and in this back and forth, those in less privileged economic positions are ignored.

b) Political Power in the legal framework:

Based on secondary research, the point of departure for the interest in graffiti and wall art in Dhaka, at least within the written world of academia (only one account found here) and journalism, came about with the Subodh series (Mowtushi, 2018). Draconian laws, as it is referred to in The Daily Star ("Digital Security Act: Rise in use of the law alarming Says Amnesty", 2020) are now in place in Bangladesh, such as the Digital Security Act (heretofore DSA) of 2018 ("Act No 46 of the Year 2018", 2018), which replaced the Information and Communications Technology Act (ICT act) that was established in 2006 during the rule of the BNP¹⁴ (Bangladesh Nationalist Party)-Jamaat party government, and amended in 2013 under the Awami League rule to allow authority to the police to make arrests without a warrant. This places all internet speech within the realm of policing and enables the ruling party to have free will to determine 'sufficient grounds' for treason or defaming of the nation. This can be seen as grounds for imprisonment for up to 10 years or a heavy fine up to or beyond 1 crore Bangladeshi taka (around 100 thousand euros). The use of a legal framework is significant here because of the way the political authority is established as per the constitution.

The oath taken by the Prime Minister, though it mainly serves the purpose of spectacle, provides a backdrop to the constructs of the political structure. It serves to indicate that the PM's actions and responsibilities are directly in accordance with the law and must fall within the legal framework

¹⁴ BNP had been one of the leading opposition parties for Awami League. In recent years, their hold on authority and power to oppose Awami League(AL) has decreased to being almost insignificant. After AL came to power in 2008, they strategically posted their party supporting people in higher political and tactical positions, especially in the armed forces. Using these forces, they abducted, jailed, unlawfully killed a lot of opposition leaders from BNP. the chairperson of BNP and the opposition leader, Khaleda Zia was arrested and still in police custody. Any kind of movement or protest was met with police brutality from the AL side and this is still ongoing.

which they put in place themselves. As such, while the DSA outlines a law, it is ambiguous enough in nature that it allows those in positions of authority to exercise the capacity to interpret it and apply it as it fits their personal agenda, while remaining within the legal framework. Actions under this blanket of the DSA are thus in accordance with the law and thus the party in power is safely in accordance with the constitution.

This route of imposing the governments or political parties' rule and authority is seen in multiple cases. For example, the student protests for road safety in 2018 was followed by a crackdown from the government, where public figures like photojournalist Shahidul Alam, were detained and subjected to police brutality on the basis of a claim that he had violated the legal framework by inciting violence and causing unrest (Ahmed, 2018; Mamun, 2018; "Bangladesh: New Digital Security Act imposes dangerous restrictions on freedom of expression", 2018; ("Bangladesh: Stop Attacks on Student Protesters, Critics", 2018)). The student's protests started when 2 college students lost their lives in a car accident near the airport in Uttara area. Their foremost demands were to seek justice for the lives of their fellow students and ensure that there are better road safety measures taken, so that unlicensed driving or driving outmoded vehicles would be stopped. The government's response to the protests was first to diminish the gravity of the situation and dismiss the protests. However, as the students numbers grew in solidarity, with thousands on the streets, and with non-students and job-holders of various sects joining in support, the government started using their usual tactics of sending out their 'goons' to threaten the students, with beating and intimidation. This time they had sent members of their student wing '*Chatro League*' (ছাত্র লীগ: chhat-rOh league), trying to reason with the media journalists and protestors using the ruse that since they are students, they would ensure that the murderers will be brought to justice. Since the

students had already learnt not to believe the promises made by the ruling party or any party to this extent, they did not back down, and this act brought about the crackdown and tactics of heavy policing and surveillance where many were put on house arrest, such as a professors, who were thought to be giving voices to the students. The forced disappearance of Shahidul Alam was following his interview with Al Jazeera where he spoke up about the ruling party's actions during their regime and during the student protests (Ahmed, 2018). As a public persona and a member of the 'elite'¹⁵ as identified in the media such as by Mehdi Hasan on Al-Jazeera (Shahidul Alam, 2020), who is critical of the practices of the state, he had a higher credibility and commanded a sort of charisma with a part of the larger public which threatened the government's capacity to hold on to its power or authority. This incident or movement also emerged just before the elections, which is likely why there was a fear of losing their position in the nation. However, such acts of silencing through violence had foreshadowed the ways in which the election had been carried out- amidst high alert and breach of protocol. The following *Chika* illustrates this sense of distrust amongst the public:

¹⁵ This is a term used in media to identify Alams' identity or position of class privilege

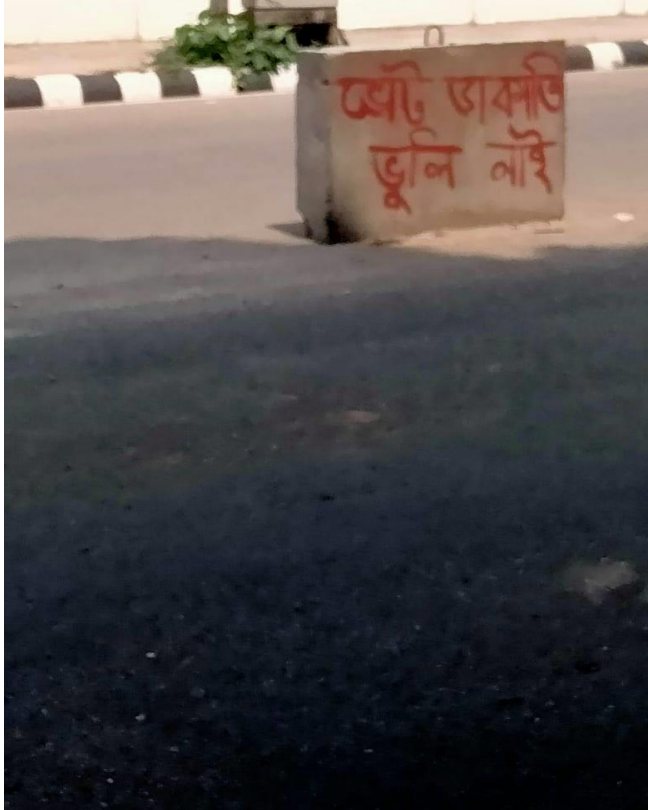


Figure 8

Photo by Suriya Methela, 2021, Dhaka University Area. **Image Description:** The writing reads, “Bhot dakati bhuli nai”, meaning, “Did not forget vote-robbing”.

More recently, in 2020, photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol, was arrested under various charges of breaching a number of laws, such as trespassing at the India-Bangladesh borders. This was following the fact that he went missing for 53 days after a report was filed against him by local members of the ruling party who reported that he had spread misinformation in order to tarnish their reputation. After he was claimed to have been found at the border, three cases were filed against him under the DSA which were used to keep him in jail for a longer period of time as these required bail and this was constantly being denied. To this date he has to attend court hearings and manage the costs of this procedure which has had a heavy impact on his family as expressed by his

son's posts on the Facebook page 'Where is Kajol?' ("Photojournalist Kajol walks out Jail", 2020; "Where Is Kajol?", n.d.).

I mention these two cases as they garnered some of the visible ways of protesting and mobilization on the ground level, but such uses of the legal framework have been done multiple times, and recently this occurrence has increased, either by transferring the cases made under the ICT act to be executed under the DSA or directly through the DSA. The sentiments of injustice felt due to the crackdown on freedom of information and expression also come through within the national and international coverage, such as in Al-Jazeera which reported in 2021- "Hundreds of people have been charged since 2018 over alleged crimes that include smearing the image of the prime minister and other senior political figures", in The Guardian in 2020: "There have been 1,000 cases filed under the digital security act since it was introduced in 2018 and, according to Bangladeshi human rights monitor Odhikar, it has been used largely by politicians and businessmen", and in The Daily Star in 2020- "two camera persons of Independent TV and XTV were assaulted when attempting to take footage of a fight that had broken out between two sections of Awami League over distributing relief", and earlier in 2017- "The Daily Star has found that 11 cases have been filed against 21 journalists since March 1 this year under section 57, and most of the cases are related to news reports" (Adhikary, 2017; Ahmed, 2020; "Bangladesh teen held for 'offensive video' mocking Hasina, Modi", 2020; "Missing Journo Kajol: Found after 53 days, sent to jail", 2020). The use of active words of action here indicate the frustration with the current conditions and the distance from the objective stance that is often practiced or held up in journalism.

Thus, any form of information or claims made can be displayed or understood as an attempt at defamation, propaganda or provocation against any person or organization, limiting the reach and

capacity for action in the public realm. During the movement for road safety, one of the ways that the government stopped the mobilization was through an increased surveillance and imposition of the DSA on any number of people who shared news or went on a livestream from the grounds of the protest locations¹⁶, claiming or rather imposing . In this context, the sometimes “socially ambivalent and politically ambiguous” form of wall writings and art is arguably one of the only ways to express criticism with ‘fewer consequences and risks’ to the safety of any particular individual (Mowtushi, 2018).



Figure 9

Photos by Suriya Methela, 2021, Dhaka University Area. **Image Description:** 4 blocks of walls in a row with a *Chika* by the Socialist Student Front (S.S.F). The text reads, “Mot prokasher shadhinota nishchit koro, Digital nirapotta ayn baatil koro”. This is a demand for securing the right to freedom of expression and dissolution of the Digital Security Act.

¹⁶ During the student protests for road safety in 2018, there were reports of unusual activity on people’s social media platforms, especially Facebook. Personally, I was sharing verified information or news about the situation and was in conversation with friends who were on the ground, which is possibly why nothing happened to me, because I remember checking my recent activity as advised by peers. Shockingly for me at that time, an unknown login to my account had been made. I had taken a picture on my phone about this activity, which was fortunate because later that day this notification had disappeared, and it seemed to be a glitch. Except, it had happened to a number of people so it was unlikely to be such a scenario. Fearing online surveillance, we shifted communication to better encrypted communication platforms such as Telegram, etc. On some days there were brief internet blackouts as well in order to disrupt communication and mobilization.

The year 2017 marked significant occurrences in Bangladesh's history with the influx of the Rohingya refugee into Bangladesh; the draft of the aforementioned Digital Security Act; the movement by Islamist leaders to remove the statue of "Lady Justice" on the basis that it promotes idolatry; the ironic green signal from the government for the Rampal Coal Power Plant which poses major threats to the ecosystem of the UNESCO World Heritage site of the Sundarbans mangrove forest in spite of the 'Save Sundarban' movement; a crackdown on RMG workers for demanding an already promised higher minimum wage; all during the second term of the now (2021) 3 term long reign (14th year running) of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina leader of the party Awami League ("Is refugee crisis 'textbook ethnic cleansing'?", 2018; "World Report 2018 - Bangladesh: Events of 2017 - Bangladesh", 2018; Khokon, 2019). Hence the frustrations kept building up as the repressive forces not only grew in magnitude, but also in frequency.



Figure 10

(Hoek, 2013) **Image Description:** A stencil *Chika* which says “*Bachao Sundarban*”/ “Save Sundarban”, with the words Sundarban in Bangla taking the shape of the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger which inhabits the forest.

This image shows graffiti that was used during the movement to protest the construction of the Rampal Power plant which destroyed or heavily impacted the ecosystem of the largest mangrove forest in the world, which is home to the endangered species of the Royal Bengal Tiger.



Figure 11

Photo by Sakeb Tahsin Subhan, 2021, Dhaka University area. **Image Description:** A series of 3 white walls, on the first is written, “*shob shashon guriye dao*”, meaning, “crush all regimes/rules”. On the second is written, “*Bullet biddho gaan, Ekdin kerey nibey shoirachr er praan*”, meaning “One day the song pierced by bullets will take away the life of the authoritarian regime/ autocracy”. And on the third wall a stencil-based *Chika*, with a face on the left and text on the right, which reads “*Kayda Kore bechey thaako*”, meaning, “Survive by devising certain plans or finding loopholes”

These images show the criticisms against the current rule of government, where one has to find ways to survive in a regime that is authoritarian and identified by many as an autocracy rather than a democracy which is more of a facade than anything else.

4.2) Contemporary Trends in Dewal Likhon/*Chika Mara*

Historically, significant shifts in the structure of the nation-state and government policies have been preceded by movements and protests. The liberation of the country itself is mired in these circumstances, where inequalities between the previously West and East Pakistan (together known as Pakistan before the war), formed during the 1947 Partition of British India, led to demands for reformation in the government-state structure in order to overcome the socio-economic limitations which were implicated on what is now Bangladesh (previously the East Wing of Pakistan) (Ranjan, 2016). The demand for liberation can be traced as far back as 1952, with the language movement, when the state attempted to impose Urdu as the national language of instruction, which would indicate a political erasure of the Bangla language- spoken widely in Bangladesh (East-wing) (Alam, 1991, pg-475). While these two historical events are major markers of political unrest and counter-hegemonic acts of the larger public- for example in Bangladesh's case the scope of activism often arose from the student body or universities- within the Language movement and Liberation war, students from the public university, Dhaka University, were at the forefront (Alam, 1991). Something that has been a significant tool of representation in this "historical temporality", is the use of Dewal Likhon or *Chika*, which have accompanied these 'ruptures' and transformative events, in Bangladesh. Thus, this phenomenon precedes that of the US identifier of political discourse of graffiti, as discussed by Jeff Ferrell in the foreword of the 2016 book *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*. Bangladeshi blogger and journalist, Biplob Rahman wrote about this history in 2010, transcribed from memory and his own practice. Rahman's father risked his life while doing *Chika* with white lime on the black streets in the 1970s for the Communist Party of East Bengal at night. However, it started during the mass uprising of '69 at Dhaka University. At that time students used to make a brush by smashing one of the branches of the *Jiga*

tree. Various pro-independence slogans were written on the walls with tar. These activities were all done in the light of a torch at night to avoid arrests. During 1970 and 71 many *Chika* were written for the freedom movement. He also talks about how during the Ershad regime, a military dictator in Bangladesh, various *Chika* like “বন্যেরা বনে সুন্দর, সৈন্যরা ব্যারাকে”, (*Bonnera bone sundor, sonora barrack a*), meaning “wild is best in their nature and soldiers in their barrack,” in opposing military dictatorship. Also there were many *Chika* about people who were murdered by the military during this regime such as “ট্রাক চাপা দিয়েছে, আন্দোলন থামেনি। ট্যাঙ্ক চাপা দিলেও আন্দোলন থামবে না”, (*Truck chapa diyecho, andolon thameni, tank chapa dileo andolon thambe na*) meaning “you have killed us under trucks, and the protest continued. Even when you kill us using a tank, the protest will go on”. Fighting against oppressive regimes has been the significant history of Bangladesh, and this tool of protest has been used time and again.

The practice of writing on walls, or drawing, or a complement of both, can be traced at least to 1969, when the mass uprising, with calls for self-governance and federated states were being pursued in the east wing Pakistan (Bangladesh), and student bodies at Dhaka University united (Mahmud, 2020; Rahman, 2010). Since ‘69, the following years saw multiple strikes, protests and clashes with the state-sanctioned police force and throughout these events, accompanying writings on walls, and even on roads, sprouted, with words which roughly translate to the following: in 1970 - “I want rice before voting! Kick the ballot box, establish socialism!” and in the following year, 1971, when the war for independence was underway - “People take up arms! Defeat imperialism and all its foot soldiers who are dogs!” (Rahman, 2010). Thus, *Dewal Likhon/ Chika Mara* became a mode of communication between people, engaging the state government, and an important tool as well as part of the repertoire of the contentious nature of politics in Bangladesh (Tarrow, 1998).

As Fraser (1990) explains, in rethinking the public sphere from the conception of Habermas' concept of a bourgeois public sphere, the public sphere should be constituent of a space where a distinction of the private and public interests is not predetermined. Rather the public is a representation beyond bourgeois and includes the 'subaltern' as counterpublics, which stand outside of the government or sovereign state. As *Dewal Likhon/ Chika Mara* happens in the literal public arena, it becomes a part of the city's structure. Since it generally crops up around spaces with a symbolic value- private owned property or state/government owned property, it is, simply through its presence, a transgression. This can either be in comparison to (i) the norms and values that are expected by the society/public to be held up- which includes basic human rights and freedom of subjective being or (ii) from the rules and trends imposed by a government. In Dhaka, the political Dewal Likhon that are identified here belong to the former capacity. These markers on the walls also establish the interactive nature of the city, especially one where the people experience and undergo tremendous limitations to their freedom of thought and expression. Even within these walls, as one interlocutor points out, there are specific areas, such as Dhaka University area where entire walls are designated or captured by the student wing of the ruling party- Chatro League, or other such parties. From here, some leftover walls are marked by the more 'leftist' or 'radical' associated groups or individuals who could gather the resources to write or paint quickly following the repainting of walls in this area. This repainting happens twice every year, once before the national language day- 21st February and once before the victory day, 16th December in order to paint the walls with the patriotic or nationalist slogans or lyrics or poems. The following images illustrate this:



Figure 12

Photo by Suriya Methela, 2021, Dhaka University Area. **Image Description:** A wall painted white with black borders. A quote by the father of the nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is painted on it in red ink. The quote reads, “ami Bangali, Bangla amar desh, Bangla amar Bhasha.”. This translates to, “I am a Bangali, Bangla is my country, Bangla is my language”.



Figure 13

Photos by Suriya Methela, 2021, Dhaka University Area. **Image Description:** The lower end of a wall that has become dirty, indicating that it has not been painted recently. On the center the colors of the Bangladesh Flag

are splattered on it, with a yellow map at the center, and a raised fist. 3 words are written above it- “Joy Banglar Joy”. This translates to “Victory, Bangla’s Victory”.

In the first image here, these words indicate the homogenizing nature and tendency that the nation has taken on, where the indigenous cultures and languages have been systematically erased and disallowed to be taught at schools, for example, Chakma, Marma, Verendri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Hajong, and Tanchangya languages. However, most of the interlocutors did not have this interpretation of this image. Rather, they felt that this was a commemoration of a victory of right to a language in 1952 which was the one that a large number of people in Bangladesh (at that time known as east Pakistan) spoke, that was tried to be taken out of the curriculum and constitution, where Urdu would be the recognized official language. This historical event has been referred to as a foreshadowing event for the freedom of Bangladesh later on and so this image evoked patriotic emotions for most. That it implies the ongoing hegemonic violence with Bangali occupation on the indigenous lands had come up only at a later stage with two interlocutors.

In the second image here, the words are the second part of a slogan that is associated with the Victory of Bangladesh’s independence. However, as it emerged from the Awami League, of which Sheikh Mujibur was the leader at the time, it became an associated slogan of the party.

Following this strand, we can visualize the scenario that the creation of a ‘public sphere’ is underway where individuals or participants contribute to the public opinion. In this discussion, Dewal Likhon and the artists who paint the walls, become the scope of access for the subaltern counterpublics into the public domain, however, they remain as the weak public. Their acts of transgression remain as intersections of dialogue prompting change and conversation, yet, hold

little capacity to actualize the change in a system which is incumbent and holds the space of the public discourse with exclusionary practices.

Since this research was conducted by looking at these walls as a mode of delivering certain messages to the larger conversation, this above discussion highlights the limitations of the *Dewal Likhon*. It stands as a testament to the walls' impact within these concerns of the state's acts based on their visibility in and access to certain sections of the population. Within these concerns is also one of whose opinions or voices are actually heard. Given that these writings on walls are sometimes contested, as in the above discussion, the capacity of interpretation imposes certain limitations. As fear or tensions are inherent in the political space of Bangladesh, this is an indication that even *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* have a limited capacity to engage with individuals. As such it is important to identify who these individuals are who can interpret and internalize this mode of wall writing as an alternative to speech and texts that can be expressed through other mediums such as via social media.

This limitation is felt by the artists who aspire to engage with the public through this medium. For example, while the *HOBKI/ Shubodh* series did not present any direct links to a critique of the government, its interpretations in media and the general popularity of it, caused alarm and fear within the government. This fear extended to the point where they did trace the art back to the artist and utilized their intelligence personnel in the police force to do so. While the artworks were relatable to the ongoing and current atmosphere of a lack of freedom to the capacity of expression, it had not illustrated or named any group, yet the artist came under threat and their life was in danger. When discussing this, the following *Chika* came up in the conversation:

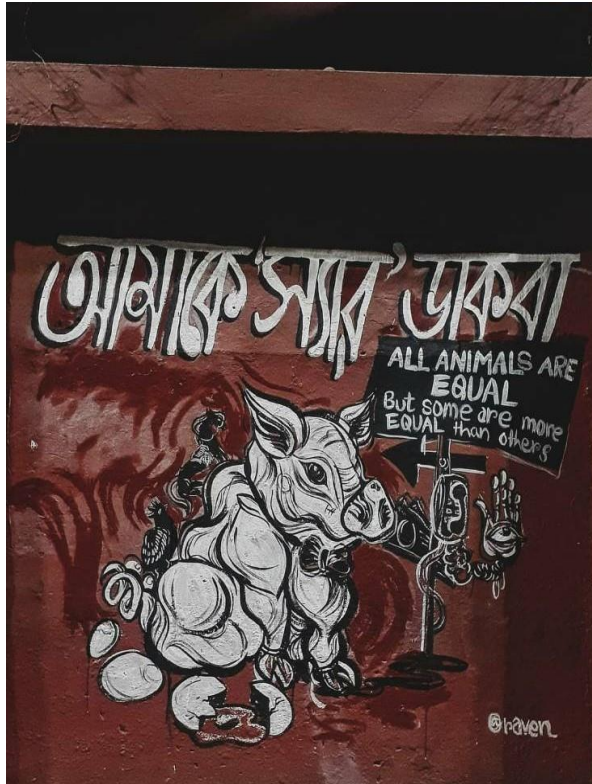


Figure 14

Collected via @shibun_is_raven **Image Description:** A wall painted in red with an artwork of a pig with the heading “Amake ‘Sir’ dakba”, meaning “Call me Sir”. There is a calling booth flagpole next to the pig and it says, in a mixture of all caps and small font “ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL, But SOME are more EQUAL than others”

I asked if this could result in harm to the artist as it was information that is publicly available, and the work could be interpreted to indicate the kind of hierarchy that is felt within the government offices and sectors, as interlocutors have also interpreted. The interlocutor said that it was more of an art interpretation than necessarily a politically critical graffiti or *Chika*. It is considered as simple artwork, or an artist's interpretation, which creates somewhat of a safety net, and so the text within it can be understood or interpreted as the less politically associated inclination of the term ‘wall writing’ as explained before. This also signals the arbitrary modes of criminalisation and ways of interpreting art as being outside of politics.

Chapter 5: Theoretical Framework

5.1) Re-imagining the capacity of Walls and their links with people

In order to bring clarity to the research area and the contestations within it, there is a need to tie together the interpretations of the concepts of creation of space in an ‘urban’ context, the idea of a public domain or sphere, and, graffiti as a successful language/tool to establish rights or claims and generate a form of consensus amongst a certain sector of the population in this urban public space. The popularity itself of wall writings in Dhaka is a renewed trend and is relevant to the present-day conditions. With the widespread capacity to take images of the walls, the *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* are reproduced into forms other than the tactile capacity and reach people beyond the area or physical space that it is present in. However, this also changes the mode or capacity in which it is perceived, understood and interpreted. For Dhaka, political graffiti re-gained relevance and popularity, which is different from globally recognized political graffiti such as the ones that emerged in the US in the 60’s and 70’s (“A History of Graffiti - The 60's and 70's", 2018). The political *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* that are the focus of this research falls into the ‘illegal/unsanctioned/unauthorized’ category of public art (Ross, 2016), that are placed on stationary walls which act as boundaries between private and public space. The wall itself is identified as private property so the *Chika* is of a rule-breaking capacity, appropriating a space from the private into the public by catching people’s attention/ eye and causing it to linger on the wall. As people are more frequently drawn to these separations, the city's conditions of growing inequality between the population living on or below the line of poverty and those who live much further above it, that are immediately available in its geography and infrastructure, are brought to the forefront. Within this, the processes of urbanization and global exposure act as catalysts in perpetuating this division.

The explosive characteristics of the contemporary *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* extend themselves to the creation of the city. As these take place, particular physical aspects of the city are exported through them, in images and recreations. In addition, these affect the urban process and urge a manner of interaction with the city that contributes towards the construction of it. AbdouMalik Simone (2008), wrote about this when discussing urbanity in Africa, wherein, “people themselves are infrastructure”, and in Dhaka, the people seeing the walls and the people making sense of the artworks and texts of the wall writings- all 3 components come together to produce an urban space. These *Chika* attempt to engender a sense of community- “imagined” through actual boundaries. They represent the voices that are not heard in any other capacity and that are silenced in daily lives. *Dewal Likhon* allows a space for multiplicity of voices to be heard, or rather, read and seen when the public space is increasingly censored and restrictive. There is no stage for debate and no space for rebuttal because people are not even allowed to enter. In a place where there is next to no access for a public sphere, there cannot be a counterpublic, and this is precisely the capability of *Chika*, at least potentially. One of the interlocutors expresses that, “There is nothing left in this country. I am working, but it is only for the future of my children. Perhaps they can have the opportunity to study abroad, like you, and build a future that is not limited like mine”, who felt that their aspirations and spirits are not valued in Dhaka. The structures of society that are mirrored in the political factions have made it difficult to prioritize anything beyond a survival for the people who are (a) not owners of accumulated wealth or (b) in the process of accumulating wealth. As evident, my position as a student in Vienna was a long-felt aspiration, which is true for my past self as well. This is no surprise, but in this context, the city fails the socio-economic needs of the majority of the people, and no amount of repetition is useful to change this. In the current atmosphere, there is no outlet for this frustration. One artist shares that

the pandemic has caused a lot of anger and pent up energy. In this context, Dewal Likhon became the only mode of expressing and sharing these sentiments in a space where dialogue is restricted and people needed a way to establish solidarity, and a sense of community.

This points to the consolidation of people who make use of the city's inherent capacities- its walls, to communicate in a space where other modes are regulated and perceived as dangerous in their capacity to influence a larger population. This would of course be specific to the class privilege and marginalisation that one can experience and their capacity to garner national and international attention. Simone (2008) writes about this as the “push and pull of two kinds of urbanisms”, one that is neglected, in this context- less regulated, and the other that belongs to the driving force of the “new social conditions in the era of globalization”, here, the mass media outlets, social media platforms and blogs. Though a necessary distinction lies in the way Simone imagines these uses of the available tools as “heretical uses” which emerge in a contemporary context. Because, in Bangladesh, it is a continued mode of interaction, which has gained a new sense of importance which had not been a contributing factor before. That is, the manner in which walls, and in many cases roads, are used for *Chika*, is not a utilization that has emerged in the global scape, as these are not leftovers of an older time. However, the mode itself, the act of *Dewal Likhon* is the infrastructure that had been forgotten to an extent, which is now re-entering the city. In this sense, Dhaka's *dewal likhon* puts in conversation the ways of collectively being or existing in the city, without necessarily imposing an immediate sense of urgency or action but working towards aligning the ideologies insidiously. Thus, the city produces itself, as this interaction between, with, and by people happens via the physical extensions of the city, beyond a fixed time. Consequently, the public sphere can and does continue to exist because the city itself becomes

part of the repertoire of mobilization in the practice of *Chika*. To an extent, the city provides the resources needed to model and shape it and generate a collective effervescence.

5.2) Visibility -of and in- the Public

As Caldeira (2012) posits, the differences in the development of a public space are often contested and ‘paradoxical’ in nature, as an increase in access to technology and information, simultaneously occurs with a deprivation and limited access to these for certain sections of the population. As in Sao Paulo enclaves are built, the urban space is again split, generating an ‘other’ beyond the walls, who are not privy to the lifestyle of those who are ‘able’ to ensure such a distance and separation. In this sense, an infrastructural capacity is created and those on the outside, put under suspicion because of their exclusion, are left to organize within these leftovers or neglected spaces, and the separating walls often provide the stage used to realize the multiplicity of the urban space. The flipside of ‘security’ is the provision of a capacity through which one can realize an existence, in turn embracing the fact of inequality, without necessarily questioning it. Dhaka’s setting or skeleton is also similar in this sense that within the processes of finding itself with global connections, the class-based stratifications become stronger and visible. Graffiti in this sense allows for a new configuration of creating the city from a position of this unequal footing. This is achieved by marking and bringing to the fore particular discussions and making these visible in an otherwise political and public space which tends to overlook and gradually fade these realities and concerns from people’s minds. The *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* in Dhaka offer multiple stances however, to have a democratic public space, adhering to the forms that are available, i.e. through ideological stances such as those offered by the political ideologies present, together with urging an alternative manner of producing or being in the city which prompts an intricate understanding and involvement of the subaltern, although it may come from specifically marginalized members in the society who also have certain privileges owing to their identities and position in society. Moreover, Caldeira talks about the capacity to move around in

the city, and this mobility is what ‘makes’ or ‘produces’ the city as we know it. With *Dewal Likhon*, such a mobility may not be seen in the walls as so apparently, rather, the city is constructed as onlookers from various points and class backgrounds look upon it and carry it in their memories as they move about their routes of going to study and work¹⁷. The city is then produced and established through a collective of transmission and connections within the wall writings that may not be otherwise relevant.

Such a point of view brings into focus the way one looks upon these walls and the images plus text spread on it. The stylistic choice of *dewal likhon* and *Chika* pays attention to this sense of how one looks upon the walls. Brighenti (2010) writes about what graffiti on walls transpires them into. Walls are used and transformed from the sense of “perpendicular to the longitudinal” or horizontal and put into speech- in a continuous manner, as the gaze follows the text along it. This is especially applicable in the case of *dewal likhon* because of the style. The way the text and, nowadays accompanying artwork is placed on the walls, one does not simply look from the bottom to the top, which indicates a brief view of it- this is the perpendicularity of walls. Instead, the magnitude and presence of walls, which symbolize separation of the private and public as discussed before, is felt in this longitudinalisation, which also has a grounding effect (in its ability to invert a position from the top-down). In the way that walls are present in one’s environment, specifically belonging to the creation of boundaries in an urban space as opposed to uses of fences, wires etc, in other spaces, they contribute to the way people interact with a given space. Wall writings then are also placed “strategically and tactically”, so that members of the city are drawn to it during their movements. When text appears in big bold lettering on a wall that is meant to

¹⁷ Work here not necessarily refers to those who have recognized jobs in the legal market, but also those that employ people without a fixed payment or an official category of employment. In this sense, homemakers and beggars fall into this category.

keep you away or restricts you from a space, it subverts the intention by holding the gaze where it does not belong. Already in doing this there is a bodily shift that confronts those who look upon it. If there is a deeper reflection, one might even consider the act and time in which it appeared. *Dewal likhon* appears often in such a flow of words that engages or disengages with onlookers, which has the capacity to draw attention but not always when the body in motion is faced with fragmented texts.



Figure 15

Photo by Suriya Methela, 2021, Dhaka University Area. **Image Description:** The writing reads, “*Moulik obokatham dhongshe kore kono sthapona chai na*”, meaning “Do not want any establishment by destroying basic infrastructure”. These walls are also tagged with “S.S.F”, which is the Socialist Student Front aka. Shomajtantrik Chatro Front¹⁸.

Figure 15 shows a long sentence for example, that is only visible if one stands far from it and frames the walls together to fit the picture. In physical interaction though, the writing depends on the fact that people will be moving along it and thus read the text in that mobility, which can then

¹⁸ The Socialist Students' Front is a revolutionary organization of the Socialist Party of Bengal. Its slogan is "Socialist Students' Front" and its commitment to the revolution. SSF was established in 1984. Its goal is to build a revolutionary movement that will promote educational reforms that will make education cheap, universal, and scientific i.e. accessible.

make sense or not. There is also therefore an aspect of reproduction by repetition that needs to be studied when we talk about *Chika* and the writings. This type of presence is deemed as tactical, and it is used to create a territory, here for the S.S.F. Significantly, this interaction with the wall writings in an urban site is the making of the public across time, emerging in fixed spatial distinction.

5.3) Intersections of the Public sphere and space

This idea of the production of space, comes to a full circle with Lefebvre's discussion of the Production of Space (1972), where he extends that space is 'perceived', 'conceived' and 'lived'- that is as he writes "(Social) Space is a (social) product". Conceptually, graffiti/wall writings in Dhaka extends the lived aspect of space (representational spaces) into the perceived space (spatial practice), using the conceived space (representations of space) (Lefebvre, 2014). Essentially, this 'triadic conception of lived-perceived-conceived space' is indicative of the interstitial capacity of walls and graffiti on it as Brighenti posited; in that the lived space consists of the physical and symbolic presence of works in the layout of the city, that is the conceived, which are elements of the perceived in how the city is then established. Within this intersection is where actors- graffiti artists and writers, and the public viewers, find their interactions and contributions (which are elements of the public sphere) to the making of a place/space that occurs in the public space.

The public sphere itself, in this research, denotes those voices which cannot express their opinions in the greater established hegemonic power structure of the state. It is part of the city, but it also contributes to the process of making the city or the urban space of Dhaka. It contributes significantly to the *oeuvre* of the urban space as Lefebvre denotes. That is, the Bangladesh state functions from the far order, which is "regulated by large and powerful institutions" in shaping the *oeuvre* of Dhaka by attempting to exclude anything that suggests or even hints conflicts of interest and non-consensus with their narrative (Lefebvre, 1996). But the *oeuvre* is not exempt from the public sphere in the near order, which is made up of the "relations of individuals in groups of variable size, more or less organized and structured and the relations of these groups among themselves" (Lefebvre, 1996). Given that class structures in Bangladesh are the basis of individual and collective identity, based on any form of capital- symbolic, economic, social or

cultural, as Bourdieu explores in the 1986 “Forms of Capital”, this near order is subject to diverse interventions in the creation of the city (Bourdieu, 2018). As such, the public sphere could be perceived as utopian, which Habermas posits, but I argue that the public sphere is a contested and ever evolving physical and conceptual entity, as Nancy Fraser explores in her 1990 essay. This lends more of a comprehensive analytic capacity in understanding the processes that in turn make the place of Dhaka city. It is understood that the social conditions from which these wall writings emerge are only just particular representations of the greater population. The subversive attitude brought forth is accessible and created by the middle and lower middle class, who have the time and resource to protest war crimes (ShahBagh movement; who are directly affected by a VAT on education ("No vat on education", 2018), who can recreate images and have access to the tools and technology to do so. That such an intervention, through *dewal likhon* has the possibility to create a space where people without such capacities can exist and partake in the process, is an argument that comes forth and is explored here. A creation of the counter-public notion or narrative through these wall writings emerges, often invoking reflection on the state of affairs in the political sphere. Concerns of the effect of industrial development do not only belong to those directly effected by it, as in the case of the Rampal Power Plant, mentioned before, but opens up a conversation about who has the right to city, or space, as Harvey (2018) proposes. Within the globalizing space, the boundaries between the urban and rural are porous, maybe not geographically but in the shift of the balance of populations migrating for work within the city, with political refugees and with climate refugees, these shifts create large schisms in the structure and stability of the economy.

Considering that the phenomenon of graffiti has been used to express the ‘rights to the city’, and the construction of a public sphere for decades, the usage of it in a political context in Dhaka is

captivating especially since wall writings or *Dewal Likhon/Chika* have been a tool of mobilization throughout various movements. As mentioned before, the independence war itself saw much usage, and following that more recent movements such as the Shahbagh occupation in 2013 (mentioned earlier), the “No VAT on education” movement in 2015 (Chowdhury, Shams & Housna, 2016), the protests demanding better safety measures within institutions and regulation/deregulation of student politics in Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) and justice for the murder of Abrar in early October, 2019 (“Hasina questions protests after BUET accepts demands”, 2019), and more recently in the movement to alleviate rape culture in the country. *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* signal and prompt a shift in the disposition of the urban space of Dhaka, wherein the city functions because the burden of it falls on the marginalized.



Figure 16

Photo by Sakeb Tahsin Subhan, 2021, Dhaka University area. **Image Description:** On a series of white walls, in black and red ink the following is written, “Rajneeti apnar jibon niyontron kore, apni apnar rajneeti nirdharon korun, Bangladesh Chatro Federation”, meaning, “Politics controls your life, You determine your own politics, Bangladesh Student Federation”

Additionally, the idea of *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* has implications in the negotiations of the public space, through an idea of the Imaginal Politics, as discussed in Chiara Bottici’s book. The author posits that the manner in which images are recreated in particular imaginaries engages in varied

meanings for different people- that is, it is respective to the socialization as well as the individual faculty. In this sense, *Dewal likhon* and wall art allows for a distinct imagination and recreation of speech and ideas which escape the ‘oppressive social imaginary’ (Bottici, 2014). Yet, as this imaginal identification is dependent on the ‘social-historical’ as well as the individual faculty, which are not mutually exclusive, it is a point of inquisition as to who engages with this art and in what manner (Bottici, 2014). Bottici argues that the public can exist only through the unification of images or the imaginal capacity and this is also what politics depends upon. The attempt of the images created via *Chika* is essentially to do this, i.e. bring in the limited sense of politics that is emphasized as the whole of politics in Bangladesh to the broader capacity of it. This is thought to be achieved by invoking the sense of belonging and right to the space within the city through extending marks on the physical entities of the city. However, since there is a tradition or ritual of separating this aspect as being outside of politics, *dewal likhon* and *Chika* have a limited capacity to achieve this unison of the imaginal faculty.

Chapter 6: Weaving the city with interventions

The important and significant feature of this particular authoritarian regime is the insidious manner of imposition of control that is dissipated across the national and international realities centered within this urban space. So much so that in spite of all that has happened, people tend to believe or think that there must be some level of exaggeration coming from the oppressed or marginalized members of the society. This is effective in regulating and checking oneself because the knowledge that something bad and dangerous can happen to anyone critical of any aspect of the government or nation is dismissed on local and global scales. This can be a normalization through the mere frequency, for example, that of forced disappearances (Bangladesh: End Enforced Disappearances, 2020). Acts of microaggression or gaslighting from global actors, like when Mehedi Hasan asked Shahidul Alam to explain why Gowhar Rizvee, a close advisor to the PM had called Alam a friend and said that he was lying about being tortured and basically kidnapped, by police in plainclothes, immediately after he, Alam, described the traumatic process (Shahidul Alam, 2020). Such a discourse casts a light of suspicion and disbelief in the accounts of those who have been affected by this regime, which is still called, as Hasan quotes, “a democracy that some claim is authoritarian”, when it quite clearly demonstrates and clarifies that it is not, as per the conditions of lives (Shahidul Alam, 2020). One interlocutor said, “It feels like I am stuck in quicksand, the more I attempt to get out, the more I am pulled back, that’s how this country is”, indicating that the loopholes, bureaucracy and red tape all cause heavy burdens on the individuals. This is just the sense I have understood from talking to people from the middle and upper middle classes when asking them to share interpretations of the *Dewal Likhon* images I showed them, some of which they had encountered in person.

While discussing the nature of *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* in general, there emerged a split in the interlocutors- those who had interpreted these as political marks and significant rifts in the political scenario and those to whom it was not something that they were paying attention to in such detail. In fact when I was organizing the focus groups, some of the members had mentioned that they do not understand ‘politics’ and feel that they are not aware of the situation in Bangladesh to the extent that they might comment on it. People who said this had to be reassured that they could still be part of the discussion and that the only prerequisite is that they are connected to the Bangladeshi state as residents or have lived there for some part of their lives and can read the text in the images. This goes to show the silences that come from within and the silences that are imposed, even in the process of *Dewal Likhon*- those who cannot read with ease, for example those who did not learn to read or have reading disabilities, will not be able to connect to the texts on the walls. One artist said the image or picture alongside the text which was the style they chose to work with would overcome this to an effect, “it will move a person from within”, and while this is true for the interlocutors in this research, there are limitations in their range as explained before. So, this cannot be taken for granted that *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* with artwork can overcome the exclusion of the marginalized.

In regard to access to the city and space- the capacity to do *Dewal Likhon* or *Chika*, another artist shared that it is very easy to be able to do this if one has the resources. They share that in their network, most everyone has the capacity to buy their own materials- spray paint or other forms of ink and learn the ways to make stencils, and simply be able to invest the time to do this. The interlocutors conferred on this aspect of *Dewal Likhon/ Chika*, that as much as it emerged as a revolutionary and/or politically inclined mode of practice, it has certain limitations, especially in the current atmosphere. “It’s very easy to carry your stencils, materials, and your team/group to a

particular location when you have a car”, said one artist describing a few others who do *Chika*, “it is much easier to do it with these capacities. When I’m doing it, I have to consider at least 20 other factors- am I able to run away, will they recognize my hair and my bag- I know I look a certain way...”. This type of look that the artist referred to here is often referred to as “*Kobi Kobi Bhaab*”- poet vibe. Working with specific visible identity markers with these connotations is quite risky. Especially now with a sense of hyper security in Dhaka, where almost every other building has CCTV cameras pointed to any and all directions. One artist refers to a *Chika* when illustrating the political condition in the country (that I unfortunately could not find an image of), which basically referred to two movements ongoing in Dhaka - one protesting and seeking justice for Aurna who was murdered and raped, and another for the imprisonment of artist Kishore who had made a drawing depicting the PM in a critical manner, which read “*artists jail e jaye, dhorshok ghurey beraye*” which means “artist goes to jail, rapist roams around”, (আলোক, 2021; ধর্ষণ ও হত্যার প্রতিবাদে দেয়াল লিখন, 2021).

Additionally, when I talked to the graffiti artists, there was already an understanding between us that despite the fact that we tried to ensure as much safety as possible in the digital space, we still were not safe. At one point one of the interlocutors had lit up a cigarette and gone to the *Veranda/Barinda* (balcony) that was attached to the room that they were in, but immediately had stopped talking about the incident for the fear that someone might overhear them. We laughed in sorrow, reminded once again, that we are not safe within our own homes. The interlocutor shared that they knew about this since their childhood when a politician had once commented after two journalists were brutally murdered, that the government could not take liability of safety inside one’s own home. In a sarcastic joking manner, (which I found most of used, likely as a coping mechanism), they said, “they can only ascertain the unsafety of our lives, anywhere and

everywhere, at any moment, this is the job description of the police and government in Bangladesh”.

In such conditions, doing *Dewal Likhon*, where anonymity can be more easily maintained, still meant high stakes and risk to one’s own life. One artist mentions that they received a call from the police headquarters, and were simply asked to come into their office because they wanted to have a “casual conversation”. After several days of feeling unsafe and have sought the help and connections they had at hand (i.e. they were closely connected to someone within the police force), they managed to be let off easily with a warning, especially because the *Chika* itself was not directly criticising the government and it was the interpretations of various people and the media that had connected these to the general situation. It turned out that they were able to trace their identity because a journalist they had spoken with had ‘flexed’ that they knew the mysterious artist who was behind the *Dewal Likhon* that everyone was talking and writing about. So when the police started the search, it was easy for them to threaten the journalist and extract the information. These forms of silencing restricts the discourse outside of a safe space and that is itself arbitrary and quite difficult to establish.

Another limitation of *Dewal Likhon* is that it is quite site-specific at times, and also directed towards particular people. One artist said that they have done some *Chika* on the water tank walls on a rooftop, which is not accessible to the greater public. It was also directed towards a particular section of the public- the teachers at Dhaka University, who often keep their jobs and use their status and power in particular ways- like securing grants or doing projects internationally. The hierarchy between them and students is “excess!”, exclaimed the artist, who is also a student at the institute. There is no space to communicate with the teachers, much less debate. The students are much too familiar with direct silencing, as teachers often loudly and threateningly say-

“*Ekdōm Chup*” (absolutely silent! / Shut up!). As a lot of the teachers are aligned with Awami league, they have absolute power over the students.

As this mode of communication gains frequency and speed in the city, the artists mention how there is a move from the government to reduce the walls, especially in the premises of Dhaka university. One of the interlocutors says that some of the walls have been covered with ceramic tiles so it is more difficult to paint while some walls have been removed and replaced entirely with metal spokes or grills, where this form of graffiti is not possible.

6.1) Further Research openings-

Ultimately, this thesis opens up the scope for further research about *Dewal Likhon/ Chika Mara*, and its functions in the space of a city that suffers from generational trauma from its history of colonization, partition, and attempts to establish itself as an independent state. This lens can be used to study the creation of particular urban sensibility and analyse the larger discursive trajectory. Beyond a sociological and anthropological view, *Dewal Likhon/ Chika* can be analysed from an artistic point of view as well, which has not been elaborated in this thesis. Additionally, while there are some references to the gendered space, roles, and capacities, there is much left to be explored here. Moreover, the spatial focus of this thesis has been quite narrow, in the sense that it does not include the spaces beyond Dhaka city. However, as evident from secondary research and conversations with interlocutors, even outside the city, there are many realms that are in protest or against the authoritarian regime, where *Chika* has been one of the tools, and has been used in an interactive and performative capacity. Besides these, this specific style of wall writings has also been used in neighbouring countries in South Asia, for example in India and Pakistan, and so, a further comparative analysis is also possible in expanding on this discourse and building on the existing knowledge and histories of the regions.

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%E0%A6%AA%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%A6/](https://Banglabarta.news/%E0%A6%A7%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B7%E0%A6%A3-%E0%A6%B9%E0%A6%A4%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AF%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%AA%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A6%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%A6/)

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