

# Art in Everyday Resistance

## A Case Study of the Pink Vigilantes of India

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### ABSTRACT

The “Gulabi Gang” (Pink Gang), a name with which everyone in the Indian context is familiar, has steadily acquired prominence and fame over the past decade. This extraordinary women’s movement has been nationally acclaimed for its initiatives and efforts to improve the lives of rural women in contemporary India. Whereas, on one hand, this movement was largely perceived in relation to “revolt” for change during its inception in the popular Indian context, this paper, on the other, aims at re-centering the role of art through the color “pink” by the gang members in feminist subversions. It identifies the movement with a novel perspective by exploring how the movement has made dual impacts – firstly, resisting oppression against women and secondly, the utilization of “pink” as an art which remained an inadvertent yet crucial offshoot of their movement in subversion. This paper offers an alternative way of viewing this movement where the role of art in redefining the color “pink” by the rural women in the “Gulabi Gang” remains widely unaddressed. Furthermore, it explores how art acts as a crucial medium to exert one’s agency and is simultaneously utilized as a means of securing livelihood and self-sufficiency for many rural women in contemporary India.

### KEYWORDS

Gulabi Gang, feminist movement, art, justice, resistance.

### INTRODUCTION

Women’s movements and activism have often occupied a special position within feminist literature and contemporary feminist debates. Women’s history observed the emergence of feminism and feminist struggle in multiple forms through women’s movements, marches, campaigns and activism, which will be discussed in the subsequent sections of this paper. “Writing” was considered a very powerful medium of voicing one’s opinion and was used by many women to resist the patriarchal hold.



Gradually, contemporary feminist discourses saw an upsurge of radical movements in the form of activism and political campaigns for social change. While this remained a constant process within the global arena, my attention has lately shifted toward a radical movement led by a group of feminists in India, which emerged in 2006 and has still been active in recent years. It has remained immensely significant in the Indian context as it originated at grassroots level, within the rural Indian patriarchy. The movement started out as an initiative of a strong-willed woman who survived sexual and domestic violence during the initial years of her marriage. Sampat Pal, the woman of steel (as people refer to her), initiated this movement a decade ago and it has now been transformed into a full-fledged organization which seeks to empower rural women. Hitherto, the majority of similar movements (or social campaigns) within India and even globally were either strategic outcomes of attempts undertaken by various organizations, or led by educated/political women activists. Moreover, such campaigns were specifically addressed to the literate, privileged, middle-class women who strive to bring about a change in society. Through previous encounters and experiences, I speak for the case of India where it was viewed that the outcome (if any) of these ongoing movements addressed the needs of independent, educated women who are in a more advantageous position within the society as compared to the *rest* (and where “rest” almost signifies the majority).

Building upon Rosemarie Buikema (2014), Viviane Saleh-Hanna (2008) and Julia Kristeva’s (2002) work on the role of arts in the implementation of social justice, this paper attempts to situate the notion of “art” in the process of achieving social justice. It aims to refocus the “sense” of art in feminist subversions within the Indian context, thereby offering a novel perspective of “doing art” in everyday life by the members of the *Gulabi* Gang. Herein “doing art” signifies the utilization of art (in the form of embodiment, actions and source of livelihood) in itself as a powerful tool of resistance. Instead of the more typically defined art forms, such as paintings and performances, it is an alternative form whereby art can also be redefined as a way of leading one’s life through powerful symbolizations and tackling oppression valiantly. Up to this point, the focus in the previous scholarship located the *Gulabi* Gang under a limited scope and outlook whereby it was solely observed as a driving force of social change. This paper argues that the movement also contributed to a broader understanding of art through the way of life and acts of *Gulabi* women as a part of their ongoing struggle. It views *art* as an embodiment and enactment of one’s everyday rituals and actions. Further, it delineates the immediate role of *art* as a medium to exert women’s agency and independence. Together, I will explore the interconnectedness of the above dimensions in utilizing the notion of art as an effective form of resistance and subversion of the hegemonic patriarchal order within contemporary India.

It is crucial to consider the background and context of this particular movement, which sets it apart from various contemporary movements in the global or national arena. Following a description of the movement, as well as Sampat Pal's initial livelihood which continues to be one of the significant underpinnings of the *Gulabi* Gang, I will discuss how *art* intersects with Pal's movement in her battle against oppression.

Even though a considerable amount of research and work has been conducted on Pal's movement in contemporary India, the notion of art and artwork as enacted through actions and embodiment of women in the process of voicing one's freedom as part of this movement remains an unexplored subject of discussion. Within current discourses, the significant idea of "art" and its complex interrelation with justice seems to be absent or rather less actively explored within the Indian context. The movement under discussion not only seeks justice and freedom through voicing one's opinion out loud, but at the same time, this form of resistance is viewed as a process of art and expression which calls for the empowerment and independence of many oppressed women in rural India.

### THE 'GULABI' GANG

This extraordinary women's movement in India is known by the name *Gulabi* Gang, in which *Gulabi* refers to the color "pink." Originally, the name stood for a group of rural women gathered under the leadership of Sampat Pal, who fought against oppression and injustice (Fig. 1). However, the movement has expanded and presently comprises thousands of activist women all over India. Headquartered in Atarra (Uttar Pradesh, North India), the gang currently has several other stations or branches set up across the state of Uttar Pradesh. According to Pal, "we are not a gang in the usual sense of the term, we are a gang for justice" (Biswas 2017). Moreover, the *Gulabi* Gang has a distinctive approach when it comes to addressing violence and oppression. All gang members wear *gulabi* (bright pink) *saris* (traditional Indian outfit) and wield bamboo sticks, in case they



Fig. 1 – Sampat Pal with her "Gulabi" gang

encounter any kind of violence. Pal and her gang believe in an alternative form of justice through which they combat domestic abuse and repression with violence. The Banda district, where the movement officially

originated, has been one of the poorest regions within the state of Uttar Pradesh. Further, it is traditionally known for its low female literacy rate, strong patriarchal and conservative hold, domestic violence, child marriage and high dowry demands during marriage (Gulabi Gang Official, website).

Sampat Pal's story has been an inspiration for many young women across the world. As a young girl, her struggle to break free from the shackles of patriarchy and fight misogyny began at a very early age. At the age of nine, she was married to a 20-year-old man (her present husband) from a different village, whom she had never seen or met before. The subject of sex and sexual intimacy remains a taboo in contemporary rural India. Pal, being formerly unexposed to the idea of sexual intercourse, suffered from a severe vaginal tearing during the first intercourse with her husband. She recalls her first sexual encounter more as an "assault" than a consensual act (Berthod 2012). Followed by her first menstrual cycle, she became pregnant with her first girl child by the time she was 15. She expressed a strong desire for sterilization after the birth of her second daughter, which was denied by her mother-in-law. Due to intense pressure for a son from her family in-laws, Pal continued bearing children despite her will (Miller 2013). Pal did not attend any formal schooling as it was common for girls in her village to remain at home and engage in household chores, whereas boys attended school and were encouraged to finish a formal education. The habitual societal conception revolves around the fact that men are the sole bread winners of the family whereas women are merely a part of the domestic arena as well as an *instrument* for ensuring a healthy progeny and thereby sustaining the family lineage. Thus, Pal remained uneducated for the most part; however, she expressed a keen interest in school and education. Instead of tending to the field and cattle, she was often spotted following local village boys on their way to school, sitting on the sidelines and following the lessons from afar. She would later teach alphabets and numbers to herself (Berthod, 2012). Pal's uncle discovered this secret interest and enrolled her in a nearby school, where she performed brilliantly in her studies for the short period she attended school. However, she was soon withdrawn by her family members in order to get married. Pal forthrightly believes in the education of girls, thereby emerging as a strong motivation and support for many mothers and daughters.

Furthermore, the caste hierarchy is quite predominant within the area where Pal resides. Thus, it is crucial to explore the intersections of caste and gender here, as Pal explains how most lower caste women undergo double oppression on a daily basis in a rural setting (Miller 2013). As one of the gang members, Chanda Devi, puts it: "not only is it a curse to be a Dalit, but it is just as difficult being a woman" (Sen 2012, 3). The lower caste groups are commonly referred to as "Dalits" or "untouchables" and face widespread discrimination, especially in rural India. Presently, the *Gulabi Gang* comprises more than 20,000 women members belonging to lower caste groups (Miller 2013).

This group, along with other gang members, subverts oppression and other social obstacles in male-dominated society dauntlessly through their actions. The movement aims to convene the majority of women victims of domestic violence and abuse, either at the hands of their respective husbands or of other invidious societal practices. Lately, the gang has captured attention from the media through their activities and protests which has had colossal effects in terms of rural women's empowerment, and has subsequently managed to stir positive impacts and debates within contemporary India.

This particular movement remains distinct as it accounts for the voices of the "oppressed" through the *oppressed* themselves. It has been successful in voicing multiple accounts and cases of women who might have otherwise gone completely unheard. The movement has, in its literal sense, risen up from grassroots-level, which is a rare phenomenon in the Indian context. In a place where female mobility is restricted beyond the household, stepping out to contest the traditional belief system and oppression is creditable. The massive strength acquired by the women to step up for themselves has been exemplary and this could only be made possible through the efforts of Pal and the *Gulabi Gang* (Desai 2014). The movement strongly believes in women's power and embraces the color "pink" in its entirety. A gang member named Maya Davy states: "I get a lot of respect and dignity when I wear the pink sari" (Walters, 2015:25). The color *pink* acquired a new definition and meaning through the pink movement, where it is perceived as a symbol of power, strength and hope.

In the subsequent sections, I will argue that the color *pink* and its embodiment within the movement can also be observed as a form of *art*. "Art" as a subject matter is highly complex and extremely hard to capture; this paper by no means attempts to define art or indulge in its complexities. It is a pure work of identifying the movement created by the *Gulabi Gang* with a distinct perspective where art as a form of symbolization has played a crucial role but remains unaddressed to date in India. The paper argues that the members of the gang perform artwork as a form of resistance without the prior knowledge that their actions have invariably tended to serve dual outcomes alongside their struggle.

### **LIVING LIFE: LIVING ART**

In this section, I will base my arguments in the work of Buikema, Kristeva and Saleh-Hanna, who explain how artwork has served as an important driver in feminist subversions across the global world in contemporary times. Building upon their work, I attempt to look at how "art" invariably remained a latent yet invincible part of Pal's movement and throughout her journey as a feminist (through the embodiment of color "pink").

Buikema highlights how art can serve as a powerful medium to do justice to trauma in various ways where even truth commissions or trials might fail to produce the desired result (Buikema 2014). She derives her thoughts and ideas from the work of Kristeva, who not only introduced the interconnection between trauma and justice but placed a greater emphasis on both art and trauma (Kristeva 2002).

Buikema presents a case study from the South African context where she explores how justice, arts and trauma have evolved post their initial encounter. She considers various art performances in detail and ascribes special attention to a series of performances by Philip Miller on *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape and Testimony* as a composer and author. This artwork by Miller is of primary significance since the materials originate from the audiovisual recordings of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (a court-like restorative justice body within South Africa after the abolition of Apartheid in 1994). Such depictions of art performance were a crucial way of dealing with the gruesome memories of human rights violations in South Africa (Buikema 2014). She further delineates how artwork and performances remained immensely influential, leaving a deep impact among the audience. Likewise, Saleh-Hanna (2008) discusses the importance of music as a fundamental tool for political resistance and a subversion of the political regime at the same time. She emphasizes how Fela Kuti's work, which coined the term "Afrobeat," created a distinct music and sound defining its significance. The music was created as a means of expressing one's dissatisfaction from High Life (a form of music that once dominated the African recordings) and served as an avenue for a sense of empowerment for Black people. Music served as an essential medium of communication and resistance against the violent oppression of Black people during apartheid in South Africa. In voicing one's resistance and signifying unity, various artists and revolutionaries gathered collectively through the medium of music to challenge oppression globally (Saleh-Hanna 2008).

Buikema (2012), in the chapter "Monumental Dresses," draws from several narratives whereby museum exhibitions play a significant role in expressing truth and justice in South Africa. Through Phila Ndwandwe's story, Buikema describes how the installation of two dresses made of "blue plastic bags" and "cowhide" by artists Judith Mason and Nandipha Mntambo respectively served as extremely powerful symbolizations of the resistance and struggle which Ndwandwe underwent during her captivity (Buikema 2012). She argues that such symbolizations played an important role in attaining truth or reclaiming justice through transitional justice mechanisms. Moreover, her arguments are based on a view of the role of art as opposed to revolt in the process of change, transformation and freedom. Utilizing her work, this paper attempts to showcase the subtle manifestation of *artwork* and forms in the *Gulabi* Gang movement whereby they embodied the

color “pink” strikingly and redefined a statement of liberation through their embodiment of pink and bamboo sticks in hand.

The above instances and case studies are clear examples of the performativity of art through “*art*” itself. Various mediums, such as music (the popular art form within the contemporary global world), dresses, materials, installations, paintings, performance artists, et cetera offer us a powerful story through their enactment. Meanwhile, it is crucial to understand the significance of one’s (or a community’s) background that enables and grants access to art forms in order to send across global messages. Likewise, for those women and spirited members of the *Gulabi* gang who assembled together from various life pathways to subvert the strong, burdened shackles of patriarchy, how did art enact itself subtly within their lives to fight oppression?

Building upon the earlier section, gang members belonged to socially and economically backward conditions where women did not typically possess any freedom of expression within their families, let alone partaking in other essential family decisions and matters. Because violence is habitually coupled with caste-based gender marginalization and discrimination in rural villages of India, this progressive stepping of women to pick up bamboo sticks and redefine the color “pink” through their actions lead to an extraordinarily nuanced form of *art* which has gone entirely unnoticed. It is the *art* in our everyday lives, the art that is defined through our mere performance which sustains the ability within itself to leave stronger impacts and transform various lives. The women perform *art* in embodying the color pink, voicing their resistance and converting it further into a massive movement for an entire nation. Additionally, art form and expression among the *Gulabi* women continues to be an essential source of income and livelihood within their respective households. Whereas earlier, the women were solely dependent on their husbands for food and money, now they are able to earn their daily wages through the medium of art.

Hitherto, the movement has been critically analyzed within the media and the public discourse in terms of how it managed to bring forth an exemplary revolution among rural women through protests, independent activisms and initiatives. However, its crucial relationship with *art*, which remained implicit yet fundamental, was unable to gain much space and recognition within the existing literature or media work. Art invariably remains a crucial offshoot of the gang’s movement which calls for recognition. Apart from using various platforms to raise their voices against oppression, one cannot overlook the role of *art* and *embodiment* throughout their movement, which called for an inclusive understanding of *art* in attaining justice. Their performativity as a “pink gang” along with a distinctive approach to raising their voices for freedom has remained unique in its own sense throughout the course of Indian history. The creation of artwork (mats, carpets, handicrafts) with disposed plastics and waste materials forms a significant component of their project-cum-movement. This particular movement further unlocked the doors of possibilities and

opportunities for more such movements and campaigns in forthcoming times whereby the “*oppressed*” will not necessarily have to rely on other social institutions or NGOs for their help and support. The *Gulabi Gang* granted such women access to freedom whereby they were voices in themselves and took immense pride in being a *woman*.

The subsequent section will delineate the projects undertaken by the *Gulabi Gang* and the significance of the color pink in their movement, which is an essential part of the gang members and womanhood in particular.

### THE *GULABI* AND MORE...

Pal and her gang have been involved in several projects since the inception of the *Gulabi Gang*. One of the prominent goals which Pal stands for is the self-sufficiency of rural women in the less developed states of India. The gang actively supports and engages in initiatives which serve as a means to earn a livelihood for the women themselves and subsequently contributes to the household income. The projects undertaken by the gang are primarily related to various handicrafts and ethnic products as well as other home-made handicrafts prepared by the women (Fig. 2). These crafts are transported to nearby markets and fairs where they are sold at a profit which is distributed among the women. Here, art work is utilized as an essential medium to generate income, thereby granting social agency to the women.



Fig. 2 – Handmade embroidered fan prepared from rags by *Gulabi gang* members

Various household items such as mats, carpets, clothes, rugs, et cetera are prepared with waste materials (plastic, broken cans, rags) (*Gulabi Gang*: official website). The above idea and the effort which the gang has devoted to utilizing waste materials in the process of producing new and sustainable products is laudable. They are also driven by sustainability and consciousness toward the environment in the process.

Furthermore, they take up mini businesses related to various events and gatherings, especially local or community weddings within their vicinity. The services are provided by the female members of the gang through which they provide various cost-effective marriage-related solutions, for instance: arranging wedding events, ceremonies, tailoring bridal trousseau, flower arrangements, catering for the guests, application of *Mehndi* (Henna) on hands (which is an important ritual of Indian weddings), make-up and bride’s wedding attire, et cetera (*Gulabi Gang*: Official website). Apart

from that, various gang members are either engaged in agricultural activities and land farming or vegetables and fruit sales and act as mini vendors. They also take up jobs in sewing, knitting and trading other commodities (Sen 2012).

The color “pink” has a special significance within this movement which Pal and her gang members boldly acknowledge. According to Sampat, “*pink*” is the very essence of womanhood which symbolizes happiness; it is feminine and amounts to strength and unity (Berthod 2012). Pal envisioned herself and her followers to stand out in the crowds and thus designated the pink sari as a uniform to be worn by the women. It would further foster a collective identity and strengthen a sense of belonging among the members (Miller 2013). Pal states:

The sari is not obligatory. But often it's the women themselves who insist on getting one as soon as possible. The uniform is reassuring; it gives the women a sense of belonging to a community. When we arrive somewhere in a big pink bunch with these pieces of wood in our hands, we're taken seriously and we're heard (Berthod 2012, 136).

Here, the symbolization as well as meaning given to the color pink by the gang members is exemplary. They have redefined themselves and their image within contemporary India as warriors through the color pink. After this movement, several other feminists and activists came forward and extended their support to Pal and her gang. In the year 2014, a famous Bollywood movie titled *The Gulaab Gang* made its way into the theatres of India, which was chiefly based on Pal’s life and the *Gulabi* Gang. For Pal, the *lathi* (stick) has a lot of power to fight oppression. In a country which has been increasingly in the news for those gruesome, infamous rapes in the past couple of years, women taking up sticks remain the sole probable solution. “Yes, we fight rapists with *lathis* (sticks). If we find the culprit, we thrash him black and blue so he dares not attempt to do wrong to any girl or woman again,” Pal boasts (Desai, 2014). This has indeed presented desired results, forcing many torturous and abusive men to mend their ways toward their wives due to the fear of “*lathis*” and thwacking by the gang members.

## CONCLUSION

The practices of *Gulabi* women have improved many lives across India; they have empowered women, taught them to fight injustice such as dowry and domestic abuse, trained them in the art of self-defense and much more. With more women coming forward against domestic abuse in rural India, there lies ahead a brighter hope and future for the rest. Concurrently, art positions itself beautifully within the movement in various forms, granting more power and grace to the women of the *Gulabi* Gang. An attempt to underline the embodiment of art and expressions in the *Gulabi* Gang movement delineates the vitality of art within feminist subversions nationally as well as globally. This paper has thus sought to establish the subtlety of nuances that comes into play with

a movement that should be paid specific attention to. In this case study, the nuances of art expression alongside the strategic actions of gang women to end oppression served as a vital step toward emancipation. Although the scope of this paper did not allow me to delve into the vast complexities of defining art, it offers a new perspective on art in relation to the movement created by *Gulabi* women and how art continues to give out an important message of strength and hope to the society and fellow women of contemporary India.

Like many other women, this movement has had a great influence on me since its inception. I hope Pal continues to inspire more women across the globe with her great work in the forthcoming times as well.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

Gulabi Gang Official website, <http://gulabigangofficial.in/gulabi-products/>