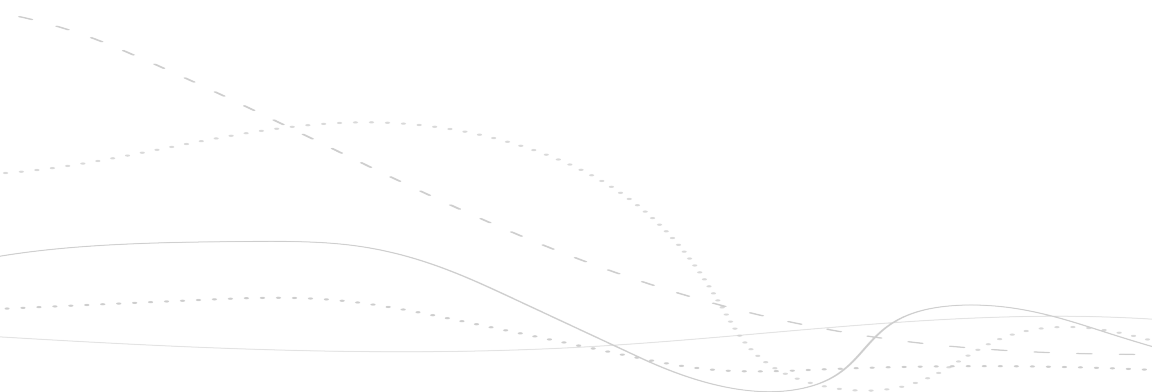


Fainting Growls of Guerrilla Gorilla(s)

By Anurag Singraur and Rahul Juneja

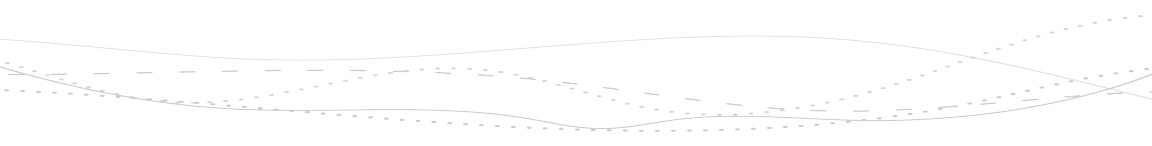
July, 2025



During the CAA-NRC protest in late 2019, the college campus seemed divided on the measures taken by the state on the authenticity of citizenship. A fragment of students from different specializations and societies came together to host a small but effective protest under the gym. An extension of the same was dissent through drawings and poster making, where the commune unanimously agreed to march around the campus and Mandi House area, sticking them on walls of offices and cultural centers. But this was not the first instance. In the last 5 years this was the second uprising, and another yet to come. Was this the space's legacy¹? Every time something changed outside the gates of the campus, it reflected in the space. Was it its location? Quite close to the "centre". Roof tops were carefully monitored by Supreme Court snipers, who would ring the principal immediately if they saw students on the terrace. Police patrolling vehicles would come for water re-fills and sometimes security checks.

1. It all started with an "introductory" session under a low roof with floor stained from the lunch break that had just ended. Thalib waiting to be sent back to the washing area, behind the canteen, while the [furry tails](#) lick the last of the remains from them. Seniors circling around newly admitted undergrads while cranking up the speaker volume just a bit louder. It's hard to remember if it was old school hip-hop or trap. Always, a couple of them from the crowd indulged in rolling a cigarette or two, while others, finding the best possible cosplay scenario as the premise for their prey's introductory act.

Gym ke neeche, as the name suggests, was directly under the gym. Standing actively on six pillars, somehow in deep resonance with the six specializations that College of Art, New Delhi, provided. It was caged on one side that foresees the basketball court, still caged on all the sides. Court not the size of an actual one and mosaic flooring with stones cemented at its parameter, very anti-sports. A viewing-staircase under the large peepal tree. The court hosted almost anything that it could, basketball, futsal, cricket (morning: leather, holidays: softball), dance party, eateries at college fate, farewells, and much more. The table-tennis arena was under the gym. A twenty by twenty feet pavement that was built on another pavement that hosted the growling gorilla. Looking back at it seems, it did symbolise the fierce activism that the students held within them. (figure 5)



Already plans were in motion to displace the college campus to Delhi NCR region in the west. Maybe a gentrification attempt to “sanitize” and “professionalize” what the administration felt was “unruly”, often with increased surveillance, policing the aesthetics. There were instances of painting and re-painting wall and floor graffitis, especially during the *last protest* in 2022². Also followed by curriculum capturing. But beyond all these theories, maybe it was the legacy that never got carried forward. Maybe it was the over romanticization of the past, gatekeeping and exclusion, crackdown on activism and collective burnout.

2. Like other alums I would see the protest through social media posts, stories and call to unite messages on chat groups. Behind security barricading were students whose canvas, beyond medium debate, was the entire college. Graffitis, performances, rallies and slogans across corridors all aiming at the merger of College of Art and Ambedkar University Delhi. Initially what seemed as more of a disinterest transformed into a ‘no-confidence’ in the administration.

Gymkeneeche writes:


21st Feb 2022: *“There’s more to the two sides of a coin. The binary language it speaks is not always the full potential it possess. Similarly, the college administration and the students’ body on each side of the coin have so much more in between which starts a much needed conversation. And it’s not always about if it’s a head or a tail when the coin touches the ground but the possibilities you may think of while it’s still mid-air.”*

“Postscript to a Burst Appendix: an invincible comet speeds on its guided arc toward the outer reaches of the galaxy in cosmic space-time. What was our cause?”

Screenplay, The French Dispatch (2021)

13th Feb 2022: *“What’s seems to be called a rumourous chaos by some, including the institution, is a fight for existence for many students protesting in and out of the gates of College of art. The highly anticipated merger is finally out in the open and is disliked by majority students who don’t want de-affiliation with the University of Delhi*

Some of many reasons for the protest revolves around

- Absence of reservation in the new university for SC & ST candidates belonging to OD status.
 - Fee hike
 - Non consensual merger (excludes the opinion of the students of college)
- 

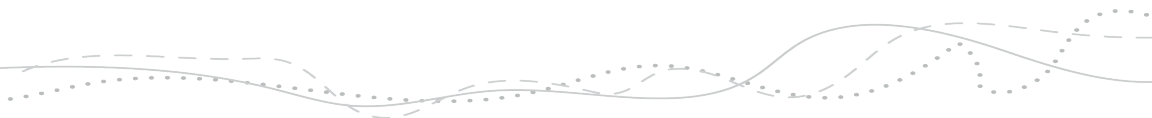
The formation of the space Gym ke Neeche, its sustenance, and its current state is rooted deeply in artists trying to ask, and continue insisting for rights which would be considered normal for any other profession. It was an echo of 2016 protest, which happened both inside, and outside the College: the streets turned into classrooms, where several artists came and taught. The stakes and asks? Good wifi. Decent toilets. Working fans. Non-leaky ceilings. A system of complaint addressal. Engaged faculties, who actually care about teaching. Things, which we would expect any decent institution to provide the students that shape the future not only of the paradigm they enter, but the institute itself. Yet, with the curbing of the protest and suspension of the students who were most visibly active, the space built outside the college was lost, and a charged residue of it remained inside.

But why was this protest, or the space such a problem?

It revolted against a deeply felt, intensely embodied and propagated idea that artists need to continue working in shitty conditions, which prepare them for the ‘real world’; How dare they ask for AC in 48 degree summers, or just decent wifi to research? This looming ‘real world’ is so deeply ingrained into the architecture of its working that students also start to normalize, and get used to it.

The second, is the constructed veil of inevitability, which the never-changing distant nature of administration in government institutes brings forth. Shielding themselves through oscillations between systems of power of the state, and the center; abusing them both while the brunt of it is borne by the students. “It’s a government institute.. This is how it works, sadly”

The third, which perhaps is the most revealing, is the audacity to intersect the realm of arts with normal, mundane life, in an institution which is supposed to churn out ‘aesthetic labourers’; Here, sleep, rest, play are all anomalies.



While the protest was witness to the heavy discrimination which a select few faced after the protests for “provoking” the others; This spark and urge for speaking out was very visible in the different parts of the Gym ke Neeche space, and how it interfaced different issues. This was not just a space to gather, but at the core, held the memory of this resistance. It knew the importance of generating a space which could accommodate each new batch coming in; help them integrate, navigate administrative procedures, and pass on the knowledge of how to maneuver painstaking wars between departments and uninterested or indifferent faculties. While it was not free from its own hierarchies (as any place isn’t), It continued to maintain a space to think of different ideologies- aesthetic, political, cultural, social; which seems unimaginable in the current climate at COA New Delhi³.

3. These were more than raggers. These were fellow comrades. They had seen an uprising within a couple of years. They were the uprising. They knew what solidarity meant to them and the comrade to their right and left. They marched together with a sense of communism that fueled their desires for a liberal space with proper facilities and equal rights. These were students who would rather illustrate on the pillars under the gym (gym ke neeche) than on the cartridges inside classrooms. At gym ke neeche, their microns became tattoo guns. Their campaigns changed from fastrack watches to low res. Che Guevara portraits. Sketchbooks, that promised a two hundred weekly live sketching quota, dead or alive! were bases for crushing dried foliage to be used in alternative practices. But there were some sketches. It is hard to say what constituted the crowd of gym ke neeche. Was it the passivity in finding a career in arts or the active nihilism that saw no hope in the systemic operation of the world. The daily champions who came to dominate the space or the ones who came in search of a sense of belonging. Gym ke neeche asked no questions.

I mean from when we go home until retirement age. That 48-year period of my life, I mean. That’s what I won’t do. I can no longer envision myself as a grown-up man in our parents’ world.

-Screenplay, The French Dispatch (2021)



The temporal pit, which Covid opened up, swallowed the bridge between continuity in peering relationships that had survived for decades in COA, which can now only be opened sadly outside the gates of the college. (College of Art, did not intake a batch after the lockdown was over. There was no batch in 2021-2022)

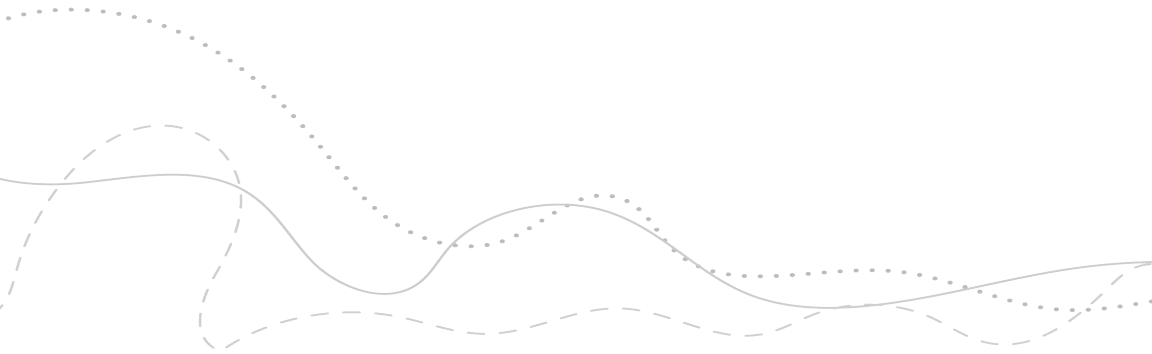
Through strategic maneuvering, the memory of possibility within an institution of order, was systematically lost.

While writing this piece, two things are constantly at the back of our mind- The overall tone this piece would take, and a definite aversion towards a romantic reading. Perhaps its important to think about why this thought haunts us. Is it that we might paint an untruthful picture, of a pure nostalgia of friendships, good time, alternative engagements? Or, would the different levels of intimacies we both have (Anurag being closer to the space, and Rahul mostly being distant) would bring crisis to the coherency of the image which we would form?

Maybe a reframing of this is in order: Why was it, that it was distance from College of Art, which allowed us to see this space for what it is, or was; and not while we lived it? One could blame proximity, or simply, non-noticing. For certain, the oiled machinery of aesthetic production plays a role, which doesn't allow for forms which are non-aesthetic. How do you express a problem which is non-visual, when the aesthetic machinery deems any attempts to write as a proof of deficit, or inability to express in Visual Media? It tricks the mental faculties, by allowing only enough freedom. We excitedly grab the sticks to draw the line around our world and segregate ourselves from it.



As this piece has progressed, it has taken the shape of a hopeful mourning; both for memory, and for leaving a whisper to gain appearance. Would we be wrong to keep this space alive in thoughts, where this *artist in progress* could experience a sense of collective vulnerability? There is a severe deficit of these models in public memory in the art milieu in India, especially those which interacted with early versions of the internet or did not maintain their archives actively. Even spaces with archives continue to not be present in memory. They are either alive in literature which has escaped fire, or is secure in private collections; or alive in the minds of the people who were present and part of these spaces. Thus, it is important to keep remembering times and modes rich with possibilities to invite the present into them, to allow them to cut across time and breathe.



Something which is thoroughly overlooked in the memory of the Gym ke Neeche space, is rest, and how radical it is to have a space of rest in an institution such as College of Art, New Delhi. In hindsight, Gym ke neechey, remains one of the most significant encounters of the possibility of generating a restful environment, in an institutional setting where you are supposed to churn out submissions every friday like a factory.

The architecture of the space invited multiple trajectories- a space to rest one's back on and openness in all fronts; which pointed to the possibility of play. To the left, a space which held the possibility of engaging with modes for the 'experimentalists' (theatre, nukkad, dance). In the front, to be able to engage with the architecture, systems, infrastructure which was constructing in real life the meaning of art and the limits through which the students would articulate themselves. To the right, an entry into intermingling of bodies, to play in the basketball court, impromptu fashion shows, and dilated conversations over food ordered from the Dhaba from the nearby Refugee market.

Surely, there were students smoking, drinking, eating in the space; which begs the question: does life really mean itself to be isolated from art? What is an artistic school, if there is no space for hanging out, let alone converse?

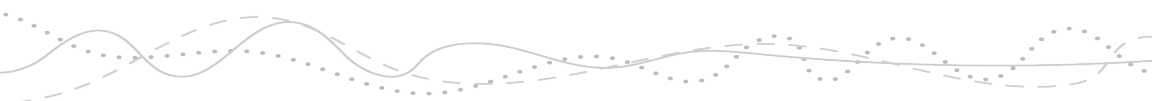


The result is that in the works, the reflection of a self is not visible, even if every student does self portraiture. The figure of the self, is what is seen in the mirror, and not in gestures, relationships, and forms of expression through which we interact with the world. A dream of the genius artist echoes, but is this genius also not interested in anything else beyond their choice of craft? Where is leisure? The fun of playing a game. A refuge for queering. A space for people to kiss. Calligraphic graffiti; Board games, table tennis; an interface for things which the college does not consider 'artistic', ironically. When do these acquire a value of nuisance? Daily life becomes a nuisance, when institutes live in imagined grandeurs' of a past, pitting its own sense of time against the morphings of time and context. The curbing of this space thus revealed an intolerance for not only any form of deviation from the set curricula, but set bodily rhythms, cultural tendencies, or any other form of being, than the status quo.

4. Why was this space disliked so much by professors and the administration was no mystery. You were seen with an active sense of hate if they found you lingering around the space while they lingered on the campus. But were they right? Mathematically, if drawn a venn diagram, it would be hard to find a circle of students who were active dwellers under the gym, and prove that it existed in isolation, amongst other circles of bright, obedient and academically excelling students. Nor was it the other way around, finding academically excelling students who didn't dwell under and around the area in question. No matter how less the intersection visibly was, there was no absolutism. But at least that's how they would like it to be presented. They saw it as a cage that misled a fraction of their finest handpicked artists from the country, sometimes internationally. Identifiers were quite evident and visual. Facial and bodily piercings and ornamentations irrespective of gender, tattooed, messy with the hairs and of course clothing.

Occasional skateboarding, fashion walks, bhangra practice, festivities, rummy, cutting poster borders for last minute submissions, the space saw everything. More importantly, sharing lecture experiences, amongst peers, over smuggled beers from thekas at ITO.

Weekly submissions, professors' remarks would lead to students bringing lecture debates under gym ke neeche.



The memory of this space, although so vibrant in the minds of our seniors, us and also subsequent batches; has one gap in recollection: Who started this space? Was it one, or several? What does it take, to not author a space, to just be- not have legacy as a media contour its shape in time and space, and in memory?

It was perhaps the form of the space, which invited the people who brought forth this (un)authorial gesture, rather than the other way around. Spaces have an inherent idea of volume; even though we may think of it mentally. We are inherently topographic beings; even in the most transcendent moments, where the person might find themselves in 'flow'; the singer is pulling notes from a horizonless voluminous space. These instincts are amplified by different architectures; In this case, the openness embodied an invitation for young adults from all walks of life to come and be, placing the institution in a limbo, without a clear singular, linear exit. A three pronged entry, each an exit.

We have witnessed the calculated onslaught on institutions in the last decade, which condones critical thinking- mostly done through villanisation of figures which engage in protest, and expression. This doesn't need to be a political resistance, but merely a defiance of the habitual, of the expected (behaviourally, academically, ideologically, canonically). More and more the japanese proverb proves itself in our unfortunate situation: 出る釘は打たれる (Deru kugi wa utareru)- The nail which sticks out the most, is hammered down.

The authorlessness of this space presents to us a glitch how power curbs, attacks and deals with interfaces of gathering, and resistance against the status quo. For how does power attack an institution, without a human interface? The curbing of architecture, almost always, strengthens the resonant memory of such a space. *This martyrdom, shifts the gorilla facing the cage, back to the institution, till the institution finds a way to dismantle it, and another gorilla takes its place.*





Pictures from a recent visit. Block G: caged, Gym ke Neeche





gymkeneche



44



3



gymkeneche So...that happened.

But in our defence, we were excited to welcome our juniors.

#firstday#inthecollegeat8#collegeofart#crancyakshay
#sleepdeprivedus

#gymkeneche#welcomejuniors#welcomeall

Yay!

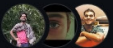
July 22, 2015



gymkeneche



22



Liked by [creativity_is_my_identity](#) and others

gymkeneche At Jantar Mantar today.

College students are sticking to the demands and growing stronger.

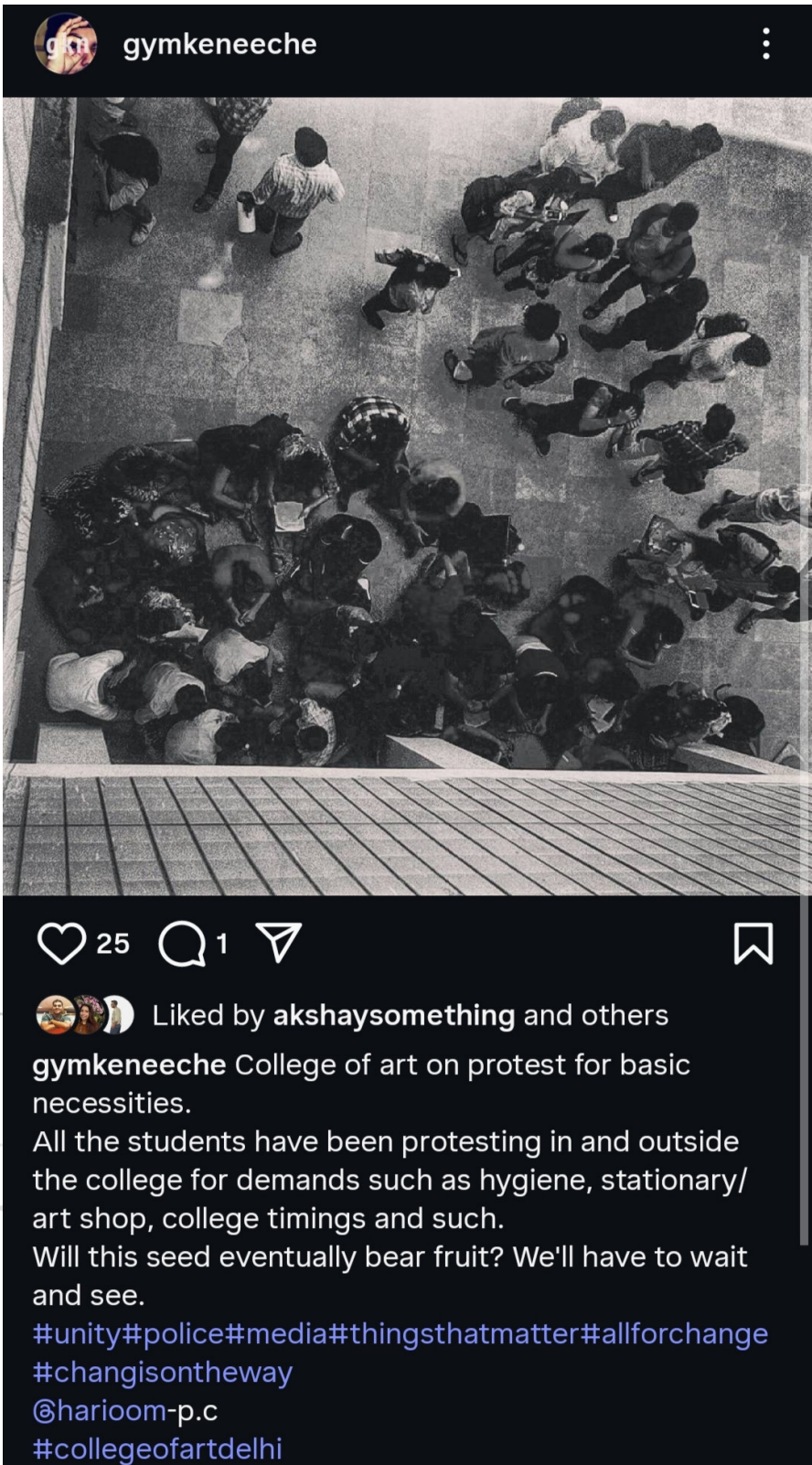
Tomorrow, they are expected to meet at 9 a.m.

[#day3#allornothing#unityandpassion#thanksseniors](#)

[#collegeofartdelhi](#)

[#gymkeneche](#)

September 3, 2015





gymkeneeche



28



Liked by **manika_0103** and others

gymkeneeche General Body Meeting that happened yesterday for the selection of Student Body :) Student representatives have been selected from Applied, Painting and Print Making departments. Visual Communication and Sculpture students are yet to select their representatives.

[#gymkeneeche](#) [#collegeofartdelhi](#)

[#chhoti_baat_nahi_hai](#) [#aftermath](#) [#protest](#) [#meeting](#)

October 31, 2015



Day 14 of the protest. September 15, 2015
From Gym ke Neeche Instagram handle





Wasted under the gym, Video. 16 min 25 seconds by Dade
[College of Art EXPOSED! | Dade](#)







Students who don't know what to do with caged walls, often climb them to fetch cricket balls on the gym terrace. Video. 17 minutes 20 seconds.

[College of Art EXPOSED! | Dade](#)



“....Here are the infamous landmarks of COA. The gorilla, the man sculpture at the academic cell, the fallen horse....”
July 3, 2020 on Gym ke Neeche instagram handle

