

WHITE BINDIS OF PROTEST

A young trio are using 39,000 white bindis as a powerful idiom against child marriage, reports **Manisha Pande**

No other Indian accessory has perhaps lent itself as beautifully to varied style statements as the humble *bindi*. You could be a glamorous socialite, an 'adarsh Bharatiya nari', a bleeding-heart liberal or a punk star and wear the *bindi* with equal panache.

In its latest and profoundly evocative interpretation, a trio of young artists based in Delhi are using the great Indian forehead art to mix fashion and art for a cause. Launching what they call the White Bindi Project, Prakhar Jain, Sumit Sond and Nikhil Guha recently unveiled a massive 5ft by 7ft artwork that uses 39,000 white bindis. The figure represents the number of girls across the world forced into child marriage every day.

Traditionally, the decorative dot in the middle of the forehead was sported mostly by married Hindu women. The red *bindi* came to symbolise prosperity and status for a bride about to be a proud homemaker. But in a country where about 24 million girls are forced to marry before the age of 18, the red *bindi* can often become a mark of oppression and helplessness. "India accounts for about 45 per cent of child brides globally and we thought it would be great to use the white *bindi* as a peaceful sign of protest against child marriages and highlight government apathy towards the issue," says Prakhar.

The three artist-activists, all of whom work for European ad agency Havas Worldwide, started the White Bindi Project on their own initiative in collaboration with NGO Child Survival India. To start with, the initiative made the white *bindi* ubiquitous at the Lakme Fashion Week in Mumbai where Tarun Tahiliani agreed to have his models sport the white *bindi* on the ramp to generate a buzz around the issue. "We then went to the Kala Ghoda

complete was painstakingly made over five months with both of them putting at least six hours of work on it every day. It is a luminous face of a young girl, probably in her adolescence, made with 39,000 white *bindis*, some of them coloured in five different shades of grey.

Interestingly no manufacturer makes white *bindis* since it's not exactly a popular colour with the ladies. The trio had to go to Lady Care, a *bindi* brand, to order 42,000 *bindis* for their project. "We were left with only three when we were finished," says Prakhar.

The face is of a young girl the three met while researching the topic. "The girl is from Jharkhand and she knew she was going to be married soon and had no choice in the matter,"

The artwork uses 39,000 white bindis for a reason. The figure represents the number of girls across the world forced into child marriage every day

says Prakhar. It was her cheerfulness and the fact that she had resigned to her fate that made her face alluring to the artists.

The three plan to take the artwork to other metros like Kolkata, Mumbai and Bangalore. "We want to raise awareness and funds for the cause," says Sumit.

Since their day jobs in the ad world pay the bills, Prakhar, Sumit and Nikhil don't care much about making money from the White Bindi Project. "We are doing this purely because we are passionate about using our art and communication skills for a greater cause," says Sumit.

Child Survival India conducts four-day long workshops for young girls across India that teaches them to be assertive about their rights.



The bindi trail

The three artist-activist smade the white *bindi* ubiquitous at the Lakme Fashion Week in Mumbai where Tarun Tahiliani agreed to have his models sport the white *bindi* on the ramp to generate a buzz around the issue.

Then they went to the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival and got people to buy white *bindis* and wear them.

Prakhar and Sumit then decided to use their talent as artists and make an art piece with white *bindis*. The artwork that is now complete was painstakingly made over five months with both of them putting at least six hours of work on it every day.





Prakhar Jain and Nikhil Guha give the finishing touch to their 5ft by 7ft artwork

The grand opening of the calligraphy has been upset by a public argument with a renowned trio of experts who derided the work as a fake

Scroll row puts art ambitions of China's rich on display

With two museums already in his empire, tycoon Liu Yiqian is a would-be Chinese Getty or Guggenheim, but a row over the authenticity of a scroll that cost him millions of dollars threatens his artistic legacy.

The work, with nine Chinese characters in black ink reading "Su Shi respectfully bids farewell to Gong Fu, Gentleman Court Consultant", is the star exhibit at Liu's newly-opened Long Museum West Bund in Shanghai.

The calligraphy is a mere 28 centimetres long by 10 centimetres wide (11 by 4 inches), but Liu paid \$8.2 million to se-

cure it at a Sotheby's auction in New York in September.

A taxi driver turned financier who is now one of the country's wealthiest people, he is among the new Chinese super-rich scouring the globe for artwork, snapping up objects and driving up prices, some even building their own museums to house their collections.

"Like the Gettys and the Guggenheims and the Whitneys... there's a long history of museums in the West and maybe now in China of collectors wanting to make a name for themselves and make a mark on history," said Clare Jacobson, author of "New Museums in China".

But the grand opening has been upset by a public argument with a renowned trio of experts from the state-backed Shanghai Museum who derided the work as a fake.

In the shadowy world of money and art, there are suggestions China's established official museums resent competition from private ones. There are also rumours, denied in the media, that the scroll once passed through the hands of the Shanghai Museum.

Attributed to poet Su Shi, one of the recognised four great calligraphers of the Song Dynasty of 960 to 1279, the scroll is known as the "Gong Fu Tie"

after the official named in it.

But the Shanghai Museum researchers, Shan Guolin, Zhong Yinlan and Ling Lizhong, launched an unusual attack after the purchase, saying it was a much later copy.

"Traditional visual identification is already enough to make the judgement that Sotheby's 'Gong Fu Tie' is a counterfeit version," they said in one article. Some brushstrokes appeared "awkward" and unlike the writer's style, they have argued.

They declined to comment. Liu stands behind the scroll's authenticity as does Sotheby's, which along with rival Christie's has been courting Asian

buyers, with China now among the largest art markets in the world.

"This is a good thing, debate on the authenticity of 'Gong Fu Tie' helps restore historical truth," Liu told state media, though he added the controversy had left him physically and mentally exhausted.

Liu declined an interview, citing unhappiness with a *New York Times* series last year on China's art market, which described it as riddled with fakes and inflated prices and called him a "new collector".

Liu, 50, made his first fortune speculating in Shanghai's newly established stock market in the 1990s, but now runs a huge conglomerate active in several industries, and his wealth is estimated at \$1.6 billion.

He is one of a number of Chinese collectors who have made headlines in global art sales circles.

But some have faced a domestic backlash with accusations of lavish spending and showing off, even as they claim to be returning cultural relics to China.

Critics have openly challenged the motives of real estate developer Huang Nubo, who paid \$1.6 million for seven white marble columns from Beijing's Old Summer Palace which will be displayed at his alma mater, Peking University.

"The recovery of relics should be a state action, which ought to be achieved by justice without paying for them," Yao Le, researcher at Jiangsu province's Academy of Social Sciences, said

in the *Global Times* newspaper.

Another tycoon, Wang Jianlin, came under fire after his company spent \$28 million on a Picasso, with people saying the money would be better spent helping China's poor.

The scroll at the centre of the latest controversy is housed in a glass case in its own room in the basement of the new museum, a vast building in a government-backed art district.

A taxi driver turned financier, Liu is among the new Chinese super-rich scouring the globe for artwork and driving up prices, some even building their own museums to house their collections

A small sign headed "Su Shi" reads: "His brushwork is round, rich and full of changes, yet with a touch of innocence and brilliance."

On opening day, a visitor struggled to read the scroll, written in classical Chinese and the complex characters which gave way to a simplified version after the founding of the People's Republic of China by the Communist Party in 1949.

"We can't understand it," said the middle-aged woman, declining to give her name. "For us, it's too troublesome to appreciate." —AFL

