

Artistic Manifestations of B.R. Ambedkar's Ideals: A Study of Works of Savindra Sawarkar and J. Nandkumar



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Abstract

B.R. Ambedkar, a trailblazing visionary, who worked for social justice and equality, dalit empowerment, education, and legal reforms, campaigned for temple entry, played an important role in the annihilation of caste in India, and also stood as a pioneering feminist leader. One of the most significant testaments to Ambedkar's feminism was the Hindu Code Bill which paved the way for transformative changes in the legal rights and condition of women in India. The profound ideology of B.R. Ambedkar has been an inspiration for various forms of art in India. The goal of the present study is to explore the works of contemporary Ambedkarite artists Savindra Sawarkar and J. Nandkumar who have challenged the hegemony of the upper caste. Through their works, the artists have challenged the notion of caste. They are a follower of B.R. Ambedkar and their work is deeply influenced by his ideology. The artists have painted on the issues of how the untouchables had to undergo the unimaginable pain of denial of basic human rights, discrimination, violence, and economic exploitation. The paper will discuss how they are influenced by B.R. Ambedkar and how they have successfully painted it in their works using highly political symbols.

Keywords: Dalit Artist, B.R. Ambedkar, Contemporary art, Untouchables, Discrimination.

Research Paper

The ideology of B.R. Ambedkar has significantly inspired various forms of art in India and his ideas continue to influence many contemporary artists providing a comprehensive discourse on pressing social issues and human rights. The untouchables in India had to go through various historical injustices, physical violence, denial of basic human rights and opportunities and economic and social exploitation. These artists have tried their best to depict this pain that one can even imagine or comprehend.

One of the contemporary artists who have worked on his ideology is Savi Sawarkar, a dalit artist, born in 1961 at Nagpur into a family of Mahar caste. He was brought up in Ambedkarite environment and also had an influence of Ambedkarite movements on his artistic and intellectual development. His family was converted to Buddhism in 1956. All the inspiration in his art

comes directly from dalit community. He believed that untouchability is mainly associated with gender issues and the interrelationship between the two cannot be ignored. In his early series of drawings and paintings; his central theme was Hindu devadasi tradition where he recounted the historical narrative of devadasis, where girls were forced into temple prostitution by the Brahminical system. These girls were historically from the community of untouchables. He spent time in numerous villages where he witnessed the practice of a distressing Hindu ritual. This profound engagement deeply affected him which inspired him in creating the series of artworks centered on devadasis. After he got his Garhi Grant, a scholarship from Lalit Kala Akademy, he visited Soundati, situated at the borders of Karnataka and Maharashtra where he saw devadasi tradition being practiced. He called it a religious prostitution. When

a fourteen year old girl used to get her first menstrual cycle, she was forced to become a devadasi which is a distressing practice of marrying an adolescent girl from a lower caste or dalit to a temple and after that she was raped by the Brahmins of the temples under the guise of religious customs.

He also encountered Narayan Surve in Mumbai before, where he learnt about many devadasis in the red-light district in Grant Road, Mumbai, most of who came there from Soundati. He was mentally anguished by the experiences he had while staying there in disguise having a long beard. He listened to their ritualistic songs. He also saw one of the devadasi struggling to walk properly because of inflammation around her genitals which he later discovered. He initially stayed at the open tea stall and after that rented a house near the temple. He frequently visited the temple and witnessed the initiation ceremony and exploitation devadasis faced (Alone, Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected ignorance 140-169). 'Untouchable women with Brahmin' [Fig 1] is one of his oil painting in which an untouchable women is shown standing alongside a Brahmin figure. Woman shown is depicted in shades of blue which he often uses to signify an untouchable. The figure also embodies the traits of devadasi.



Figure 1 Savi Sawarkar, Untouchable women with Brahmin, Oil on canvas,
<https://www.thebeacon.in/2019/01/30/unsettling-art-caste-gender-dalit-expression/>

The Brahmin man is shown in a light color. The complexion and the exposed genitals symbolize the hierarchal nature of skin color and his sexually predatory behavior. The man is shown holding a lantern with a burnt-out flame, which appears dark and lifeless. Devadasi is shown raising her right hand towards the throat of the Brahmin-in order to show the idea of challenging the upper caste authority in the matters

related to religion and untouchability within the caste system(Dube, Unsettling art: caste, gender, and dalit expression).

Another similar work on this theme is 'Freedom to Devadasi' [Fig 2], in which, the devadasi is shown freeing herself from the confines of a Brahmin man's body.

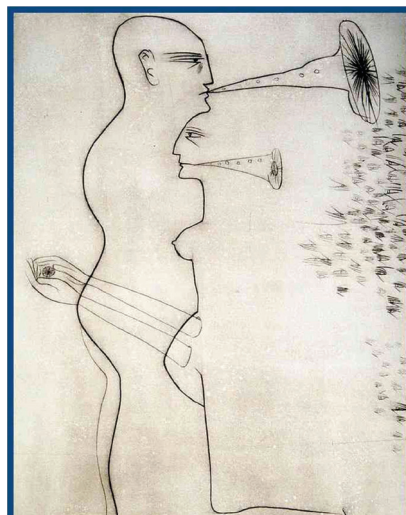


Figure 2 Savi Sawarkar, Freedom to Devadasi, dry point, dry point, 54.5 cm x 37 cm, 2001

<https://scroll.in/magazine/1033348/in-all-my-years-no-gallery-has-represented-me-savindra-sawarkar>



Figure 3. Savi Sawarkar, Devadasi with Crow, Etching, 40 cm x 28 cm, 1987

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Savi-Sawarkar-Devadasi-with-Crow-etching-40-cm-x-28-cm-1987-C-Copyright-and_fig7_340000136

She is also shown extending her hand beyond the man's body in order to reach out to dhannachakra (wheel of law) symbolizing her potential for liberation. Also his etching from 1987 titled 'Devadasi with Crow' [Fig 3] portrays the life and trauma of a devadasi. This work shows the experiences of multiple abortions that a devadasi undergoes. The female figure is shown having a cut on her stomach indicating a visible surgery scar.

Another important theme that he portrayed in his paintings is the depiction of untouchable community or dalit life and the harsh realities of caste system in India. In his work 'Foundation of India' [Fig. 4] he depicts four-fold varna system through a traditionally conceptualized male figure as prescribed in the purushutta of the Rigveda.

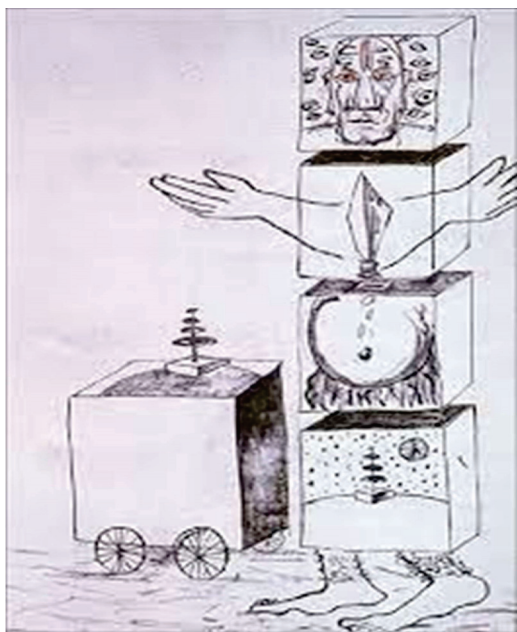


Figure 4. Savi Sawarkar, Foundation of India, Oil on Canvas, 5ft x 6ft, 1986

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Savi-Sawarkar-Foundation-of-India-oil-on-canvas-5-feet-x-6-feet-1986-C-Copyright-and_fig5_340000136

Each of the element symbolize a varna; the head signifies the Brahman, the arms represent the Kshatriyas with weapons, whereas, the potbelly symbolizes wealth connected to trading. The feet represent the Shudras. But the artist has also tried to go beyond these conventional representations. On the left side is shown another block having wheels and is moving towards Buddhism and this block signifies ati-shudra, a term which was advocated by Mahatma Phule an alternative to "untouchable". (Alone, Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected ignorance 149-169) In his

oil painting 'Dalit Couple with Om and Swastika' [Fig. 5], the artist shows two untouchable figures standing with pots hanging around their necks. The reference of the painting is related to the historical era during the seventeenth and eighteenth century when the Brahman rulers forced dalits to carry clay pots for spitting so that their saliva do not touch the ground and pollute the higher caste individuals.



Figure 5. Savi Sawarkar, Dalit Couple with Om and Swastika'

<https://scroll.in/magazine/1033348/in-all-my-years-no-gallery-has-represented-me-savindra-sawarkar>

One of the figures is also shown holding a stick with bells in order to make everyone aware of their arrival prompting higher castes to move away, avoiding their shadows. The background is painted with bright yellow using quick, short and thick swirling brushstrokes. One of the pots has an Om symbol and another one has the Swastika symbol, both of which are Hindu sacred symbols. The two figures are shown in dark color and their eyes are painted with red which is directly looking and engaging the viewers as if they are pulling them towards the canvas. The red color in the painting symbolizes their pain and anguish. (Dube, A Dalit Iconography of an Expressionistic Imagination)

In his paintings 'Dalit with Dead Cow I and II, [Fig 6 & 7] the artist has portrayed the marginalized position of dalit in the hierarchy of caste. The man is shown carrying the dead cow which is representing the burden on his shoulders in the form of the caste, past, Hinduism. The painting is based on the historical context where

the dalit community is forced to handle the carcasses of deceased cattle. They were given the tasks of handling the dead cows which were menial and degrading because of their low status and it was believed that it was their duty to take these tasks which were considered impure and polluting.



Figure 6. Savi Sawarkar, Dalit with Dead Cow I
<https://scroll.in/magazine/1033348/in-all-my-years-no-gallery-has-represented-me-savindra-sawarkar-on-brahmanism-in-the-arts>



Figure 7. Savi Sawarkar, Dalit with Dead Cow II
<https://www.thebeacon.in/2019/01/30/unsettling-art-caste-gender-dalit-expression/savindra-sawakar-untouchable-with-dead-cow-ii/>

The artist also draws inspiration from Buddhist philosophy and neo-Buddhist politics which is evident from his painting series on Buddhist monks and Zen masters. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar played an important role in mass conversions of Dalits to Buddhism. Babasaheb passed away on December 6, 1956. His body was cremated in Bombay with a procession of about 500,000 followers during his funeral. It was largest procession a city had ever experienced. After the cremation, his followers took his ashes to his residence 'Rajagriha' in order to fulfill his wish to embrace Buddhism. After returning, there was an immediate conversion ceremony. After this incident, mass conversions in Buddhism takes place in Delhi, Agra, various towns and cities of Maharashtra (Sangharakshita). Savi Sawarkar's works are way of honoring the political ideology of B.R. Ambedkar and the Buddhist movements and how these movements had significant and long lasting impact on countless individual's lives. About his idea of neo-Buddhist and ambedkarite aesthetics, he himself stated in an interview, "Along with my grandmother, I used to buy the calendars sold at Deekshabhoomi. The images and symbolism in those calendars made a great impact on me-the peepal, the dhammachakra, the life of Buddha, a galaxy of leaders like Ambedkar, Savitri and Jyotiba Phule, Kabir...I grew up listening to the songs of Nagorao Patankar, which moved me deeply. So popular Dalit culture has been of great inspiration in my work." (Sharma)

Moreover, J Nandakumar, another dalit artist born in Jawalban, Maharashtra in 1963, has painted on the oppression of dalits as he himself confronted the discrimination and oppression throughout his life while he was pursuing his education. He completed his BFA in drawing and painting from the Government School of Arts, Aurangabad, Maharashtra. He is an abstract painter. He reconsidered his approach because of the discrimination he faced and eventually finds common grounds with artist Savi Sawarkar. His painting on Mahatma Gandhi faced so much controversy. He has always been in constant connection with Ambedkarite community which became the starting point of his artistic expression. His favorite medium is acrylic which he paints using knife.

One of his paintings on Gandhi was 'Gandhi after Pune Karar'[Fig 8] for which he got inspiration after reading Pune Karar. He believed Mahatma Gandhi not to be a nationalist hero but a person who has undermined the political rights of the scheduled castes. He is the first gallery artist to have painted the agreement between

Ambedkar and Gandhi. Ambedkar demanded for separate electorate for the suppressed communities and there was a disagreement regarding this demand between both Gandhi and Ambedkar. The history of Round Table conference tells us that Indian National Congress approved the communal award for Muslims and others but rejected the demand of the scheduled caste for the same. In his painting, Nandakumar has depicted Gandhi having multiple heads symbolizing Ravana. He is holding trident which is shown piercing the neck and trampling the untouchable lying on the ground. The image of Gandhi is shown very lean and thin. In the background is shown another untouchable figure in blue that is also representing the pain and oppression of untouchables. This painting allows the viewers to revisit the moment of Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar. This painting also faced a controversy in one of his exhibition held at the Nehru Centre Gallery, Mumbai, leading to its closure. At that time no critic or art historian was ready to acknowledge the significance of his work.



Figure 8. Nandakumar, Gandhi after Pune Karar, acrylic on canvas, 2010.

<https://www.researchgate.net/figure/J-Nandakumar-Gandhi-after-Pune-Karar-acrylic-on-canvas-54-inches>

There is another painting on this series titled 'Gandhi after Pune Karar II' [Fig 9] in which the artist has depicted an untouchable man standing with a begging bowl in front of Gandhi. Another untouchable man is shown under his feet. Gandhi is holding a stick in the form of a trident and is piercing the man lying under his feet (Alone, Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected ignorance 140-169).



Figure 9. Nandakumar, Gandhi after Pune Karar II, acrylic on canvas, 2011.

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/J-Nandakumar-Gandhi-after-Pune-Karar-II-acrylic-on-canvas-3-feet-x-4-feet-2011-C_fig2_340000136

In his catalogue of painting exhibition Y.S Alone states that the artist Nandakumar 'prefers to challenge the conventional notion of [the] image of Gandhi not only as the Father of the Nation, but also makes a daring attempt to deconstruct the image of Gandhi through his personal understanding that has a legacy of Dr Ambedkar.' (Alone, J.Nnadakumar, Exhibition Catalogue) His paintings stand apart from the usual approach of the leftist as they are concerned about the labors and the lower class but avoid the issues of caste discrimination. There has always been a restriction in depicting the threatening content in the paintings. The Ambedkarian framework has always helped in guiding the artist in creating art in the form of a transformative tool. Nandakumar art is deeply rooted in Ambedkarism.

Conclusion

So, it can be safely concluded that both the dalit artists Savi Sawarkar and J. Nandakumar has bravely poured their personal experiences and stories of discrimination through their art. They not only painted the ideological perspectives of B.R Ambedkar; but also captured the pain, anguish and complexities of being dalit in a society filled with caste prejudices. As art plays an important

role in mirroring the society, their artworks acts as the mirror reflecting the dreams and the struggles faced by the dalit community. Their brushstrokes speak out for equality, fairness, and aspiration of a community which is often unheard and marginalized. For both the artist, vision of Ambedkar, acts as a guiding light towards illuminating the path towards social transformation. He always craved for a society which is based on merit rather than birthright influenced their artistic endeavors. Their paintings acts as platform to convey Ambedkar's ideals and speaks volumes about his profound philosophy merging it with their own journeys. They are echoing Ambedkar's profound message and his vision of a society where everyone is treated equally, respected, empowered regardless of caste resulting in making their art with the purpose beyond aesthetics.

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