

Savindra Sawarkar (b: 1961, Nagpur) : Artist's statement

I am New Delhi based artist and educator. My art practice has focused significantly on the brutality and injustice of caste- and gender-based violence and subordination for the last three decades. My imagery is based on my personal experiences of the ferocious casteism, racialism and exploitation of women.

I was born in a Dalit (formerly "Untouchable" in the Hindu caste system) family in Nagpur, Maharashtra, the location of the Deeksha Bhoomi, on the spot where Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, the Dalit social activist and principal author of the Indian Constitution, led the great Diksha (Conversion), that was the beginning of the modern Buddhist movement in India, in 1956. My grandparents were among the converts. The Deeksha Bhoomi is deeply significant to my story and art.

The State of Maharashtra experienced a dramatic process of urbanization and a rise of Dalit politics amidst the various social movements in the 20th century. The experiences that shaped my aesthetic sensibilities arose in part from the ideas and activities of protest and engaging with religious sanctions based on confronting the Brahmanical binary of 'purity' and 'impurity'. Thus, my art developed into a pedagogy of the down-trodden, which is developed through my public exhibits such as 'Voice for Voiceless' of 1996, 2008 and 2010, and 'Eyes Recast' of 2008.

In the mid-1980s I joined the vibrant and experimental art school and creative milieu at the Department of Fine Arts, Baroda. Later, as a recipient of a Mexican Government Scholarship, I apprenticed in mural art with Armando Lopez Carmona and Victor Caballero Ortiz at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. This academic exchange and training inspired me with strength to draw the ordinary lives of common people, those who dwell across multiple spaces of exclusion which can be characterized as untouchables, devdasis (women married to a god, who is then forced to become the mistress of the whole village), Jogta, eunuchs, desuetude, destitute, lunatics, homeless labourers and slaves. These are women and men, situated among the 'varied marginalities' of our social world, displaying the societal vulnerability of the human condition in modern India.

Beyond the glare of the white-cubes of commercial art galleries, I have exhibited my work in the activist venues of academic conferences, theatrical sites, the World Social Forum, Triennale, Biennale and urban street's. While my work has failed to attract wealthy art collections, it has flourished in the more critical venues of social activism and scholarship appearing in academic journals, critical newspaper reports, on university walls and book covers which largely addressed the issues of caste, race, gender and the human plight of India's urban environment.