

# *An Untouchable Reaches Out*



*The Dalit Art  
Of Savi Savarkar*

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### **Looking from One Culture To Another**

Is it interesting that Dalits see Manu differently than do caste-Hindus? Or, differently than most foreigners, learning of Indian culture from a distance? I think so. Looking at Savi Savarkar's image of Manu brings these differences before us. It is largely for these differences that Savarkar's art is created. It is these differences that make his art so important, for Indians and for Americans too. For, despite the uniqueness of his vision—which is as idiosyncratically-personal as any modernist gallery artist's must be—Savarkar's art is most remarkable for the expression of his social situation in South Asian culture as a Dalit, and for the immediacy, depth and power with which he expresses the meaning of that situation to us.

In India Dalits—the people usually known in the United States by their Brahmanical caste title as “untouchables”—make up seventeen per cent of the population and occupy a social and economic place at the bottom of the famous caste system, comparable to the situation of African Americans in the United States. Savi Savarkar is the rare case of a gallery artist with a national and international reputation built upon the role of being a Dalit artist, and a critique of the caste system. Viewing his art, even in the United States, brings up difficult and painful questions of intercultural and international communication and understanding. While Savarkar's art reveals the sophistication and strength of contemporary India's elite gallery culture, it also dwells at length in polemic confrontation with one of the greatest problems of contemporary Indian society.

Considering Savarkar's art when looking from the United States brings us great opportunities, but serious problems as well. The opportunities include learning something about the meaning of visual imagery and some things about contemporary culture in South Asia, as well as getting to know the work of one finely-tuned artist. The problems include the difficulty for Americans of looking from their culture at another, quite unfamiliar one, while for Indians they bring up the difficulty of having one's ancestral culture looked at by foreigners, who may not be altogether sympathetic. For all of us there is the challenge of looking not only through sensitive eyes at unfamiliar objects, but of looking with nuanced minds, that allow for parsing the differences between the negative and positive aspects of a culture without imprinting it in our attitudes as essentially one or the other. However sophisticated we may be in accounting for the multi-valency of our own actions or our own societies, it is quite a good deal more difficult to account for combination of better and worse aspects of others' cultures. This is particularly true, when we know relatively little else about the other society to begin with.

As an American interpreter of South Asia's visual imagery and culture, I have spent most of my professional career sharing enjoyable, and usually enthusiastic, views of its traditional elite arts. Hindu temples and Mughal miniatures are visually rich and immediately enjoyable to most audiences and I have had little difficulty communicating either than enjoyment or the traditional

meanings of this imagery to students and popular audiences around the world. All of us likely know the Taj Mahal and most of us have seen pictures of the suavely refined images of Indian gods and goddesses, or the Buddha. It takes little effort to explain such works as art or architecture, and through them to explain aspects of the culture they come from, while the viewer basks in their visual splendor. India's contemporary gallery art is as satisfying as anything from its ancient past. The Savarkar prints and paintings in this exhibition "An Untouchable Reaches Out" will fit easily into the formal categories, such as "Expressionism", that most contemporary gallery goers in the United States bring with them. It is the content, their meaning, that demands a stretching of our understanding. Though it is a stretch that well repays us for the effort.

Though it might come as a surprise to those who know little of India, outside of the occasional view of the Taj on Television or the annual article on South Asian poverty in the New York Times, the gallery art of India's big cities is quite equivalent to what one finds in every big city throughout the modern bourgeois world. Realist portraits and tourist landscapes vie for attention with abstractions and the occasional installation or performance piece. If one were to wake up in New Delhi's Triveni or Mumbai's Jehangir Art Gallery they could hardly tell that they weren't in London or Chicago. So to talk of Savarkar's art is to talk of works in a modernist artworld little different than our own, whoever we are. Artists in India mostly sign their works in the same Latin script used by artists in Buenos Aires, Iowa City and Paris. Even those artists in India who read their morning newspaper in Hindi or Bengali are likely to subscribe to the *Art News* or *Art in America*. They are as much a part of the burgeoning global culture as cell phone buyers and internet users. It is their social world that is distinctly, though not entirely, different. But then Savarkar's art is as deeply social as it is personal, and that is where his major importance lies. Savarkar is the rare case of a full time political artist and the even rarer case of an identified Dalit artist. There are other Dalit artists, but none whose identity is so prominently a part of their work.

Savarkar's work is peculiarly personal at the same time as it is political. This also sets him off from most contemporary artists, whose work is meant to deal with political themes. Though we like to feature politically and socially redolent imagery in our history courses, for their connections with the zeitgeist of the cultural moments they express, there are relatively few such works produced in the fine arts. "No," you might object, quickly. "What about *Guernica*? What about Goya's *Disasters of War*?" Well, what can we mention next? How much else do we have besides these two great works in the modern canon? Very little, I venture. That is one of the reasons these two stick out so prominently in our minds. Modern art has tended to shy away from social statement with great consistency. Until quite recently, most modern visual artists have looked at politically or socially engaged imagery as akin to propaganda. And so may Savarkar, though he really doesn't seem to care. He is so committed to telling his story, he has taken little effort to worry about how we will categorize it.

The art market is not built upon artists who offer us things we won't enjoy in the bedroom, living room or hall. Imagery with political content is almost immediately branded "obvious" or "simplistic." Or, at least the artists who decorate our walls usually feel it will be, if they do express themselves politically. A pop singer may indulge once in a while, but seldom a visual

artist, whose work costs a good deal more, and which we will have to live with day in and day out. This is as true of artworld in Delhi and Bangalore as it is in New York and Amherst. In the case of Savarkar, this is a particular problem, since the main thrust of his work is to condemn the traditional values of the elite castes and classes, who are the only ones in a position to patronize gallery art!

The universal problem of how to interpret visual imagery that is clarified by looking cross culturally is found in Savarkar's use of the familiar swastika sign. As it turns out, once we begin to look with care, what is familiar to Americans and what is familiar to Indians is not exactly the same thing. To understand its Indian meaning we have to know about India's traditional culture. To understand the modern European and American meaning we need to know modern European and American culture. And to understand Savarkar's use of the swastika, we need to know both of these and something about Savarkar himself. In culture what is obvious is not always true and what is true is not always as accessible as it may seem. We all know what most of the pictures we look at mean, at least most of the time, or at least we think we do. And indeed our ability to get through the visual complexity and richness of the everyday world seems to indicate that we usually do. Looking between cultures is one way to recognize how convenient that view is and how limited.

### **Savarkar's Dalit Vision**

Viewing Savarkar's Manu tells us something about both Savarkar and Manu, and something about meaning in the visual arts we often forget. That is, that subjects don't have implicit meanings in themselves, but that their meaning is located in the context of their use: the perspectives of their producers and consumers, and the situation of their particular usage. One of the benefits of looking at works from an unfamiliar culture is that the abstraction of the experience allows us to think theoretically about things that are so overwhelmed by intuitive meaning in our own culture that we can't separate our from our feelings about them. Thus where it might be difficult for Americans to think abstractly about an image of George Washington or the American flag, it is easier for them to be objective about Manu or another Indian symbol.

If you were to take an introductory course in the culture of India you would get a definition of Manu more or less like the following, which I have taken from Margaret and James Stutley's *Dictionary of Hinduism*.

Manu The mythical author or compiler of the Manu-smriti (Institutes or Code of Manu) "A Collection of laws based on custom and precedent and the teachings of the Vedas" probably based on manuals written by the teachers of the Vedic schools for the guidance of their pupils" acknowledged as sources of sacred law applicable to all Aryas. Thus they represent "the sum of the conditions of social co-existence with regard to the activity of the community and the individual's in India during almost the whole of the first millennium B.C. [182]

Or for a more popular view you might Google up the following:

Golwalkar acclaims Manu as the "first and greatest lawgiver of the world" who "lays down in his code, directing all the peoples of the world to go to Hindusthan to learn their duties at the holy feet of 'eldest born' Brahmins of this land." (Golwalkar, 1939, pp. 55-56). Now what does the Manusmriti say? Having firmly established the hereditary division of society into the caste system, the Manusmriti says: "Serving Brahmins alone is recommended as the best innate [16] activity of a Shudra; for whatever he does other than this bears no fruit for him" (123, Chapter X).

Manu is thus usually seen in both Indian and conventional Anglo American texts as the great lawgiver of ancient India, still revered today by most orthodox Hindus, for many of whom the Laws of Manu are an equivalent of the "Ten Commandments" of the New Testament for Christians. It was in this vein that a ten foot bronze statue of Manu as a bearded sage with a staff was recently raised before the Supreme Court in the Indian state of Rajasthan.



Reading these quotations thoughtfully, you will already recognize the contradictions Manu carries for the modern individual, inhabiting one of the world's democracies, such as the U.S. or India. Manu's law is the most fundamental expression of India's well-known caste system. "Serving Brahmins alone is recommended as the best innate activity of a Shudra." It is Manu who says, not just that it is wrong to steal, but that it is most wrong to steal from an Arya, and

particularly a Brahmin, but on the contrary it is appropriate for a Brahmin to take anything of value away from a Shudra. Or, if one is caught stealing they shall be fined more for stealing from a royal (Ksatriya) than a common householder (Vaisha) and even more for stealing from a Brahmin. By contrast, Manu says that, if a servant (Shudra) is seen with wealth, it should be taken from him. “A servant (Shudra) should not amass wealth, even if he has the ability, for a servant (Shudra) who has amassed wealth annoys priests” [Manu VIII, 417]. The Shudras, who make up well over half of the traditional Indian community and constitute the fourth and lowest caste, are not Arya. Though they *are* higher in ranked status than the quarter of the population composed of Dalits and “tribals.” Which is where we come back to Savarkar. Savarkar is a Dalit, an “untouchable” from the viewpoint of Manu and the Brahmanical caste system, where Savarkar is ranked below even the Shudra. And so he is condemned along with a quarter of the entire population, to live a life of punishment.

The constitution of modern India outlaws the traditional Brahmanical practices of “untouchability.” As a modern, bourgeois state, India’s laws are as democratic and more or less as egalitarian as those of the United States. As the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution outlawed slavery and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth claimed equal treatment for African Americans before the law, so Article Seventeen of the Indian Constitution outlaws the imposition of “untouchability,” guaranteeing Dalits full equality under Indian law. There remains in both places, however, a continuing traditional imposition of penalties against both, where the ideals and strictures of the civil laws have yet to overcome the centuries old practices of discrimination and punishment. In both places physical segregation, cultural deprivation and economic discrimination are still largely the rule for these stigmatized classes.

Today in India there is the sort of slow-but-continual progress toward an egalitarian society we see in the United States and throughout much of the modern world. The vast majority live in ways that have come down through the generations under continual changes that slowly transform that traditional world into something more industrial and digital economically, more democratic politically and more egalitarian socially. Most Americans recognize that India is a center of the digital revolution and economic globalization, at the same time that the majority of its populations lives by a traditional agriculture still conducted more often behind a pair of bullocks than upon a tractor. When we speak of *traditional* or *caste* Hindus or the *traditional Brahmanical caste system*, we are speaking about the continuation of traditional forms that are slowly being replaced by more modern, egalitarian ones. In India today most still know where the *jati* of their birth places them in the caste system, and whether or not they will be treated as a Dalit. Those who are born into Brahmin families undoubtedly know they are Brahmins and with few exceptions are likely to marry other Brahmins of the same sub-caste or *jati*, but many do not uphold the caste system requirement that Dalits should be punished as a natural course of events. Indeed just as many whites in the United States work for an end to racism and the stigmatization of African Americans, there are upper caste Hindus who work for an end to caste inequities.

Our established social systems only indicate the opportunities available where we start out, not what we do with them. This is particularly true of those who emigrate to other lands, bringing much of their original culture with them, since they are embarked upon changing their culture

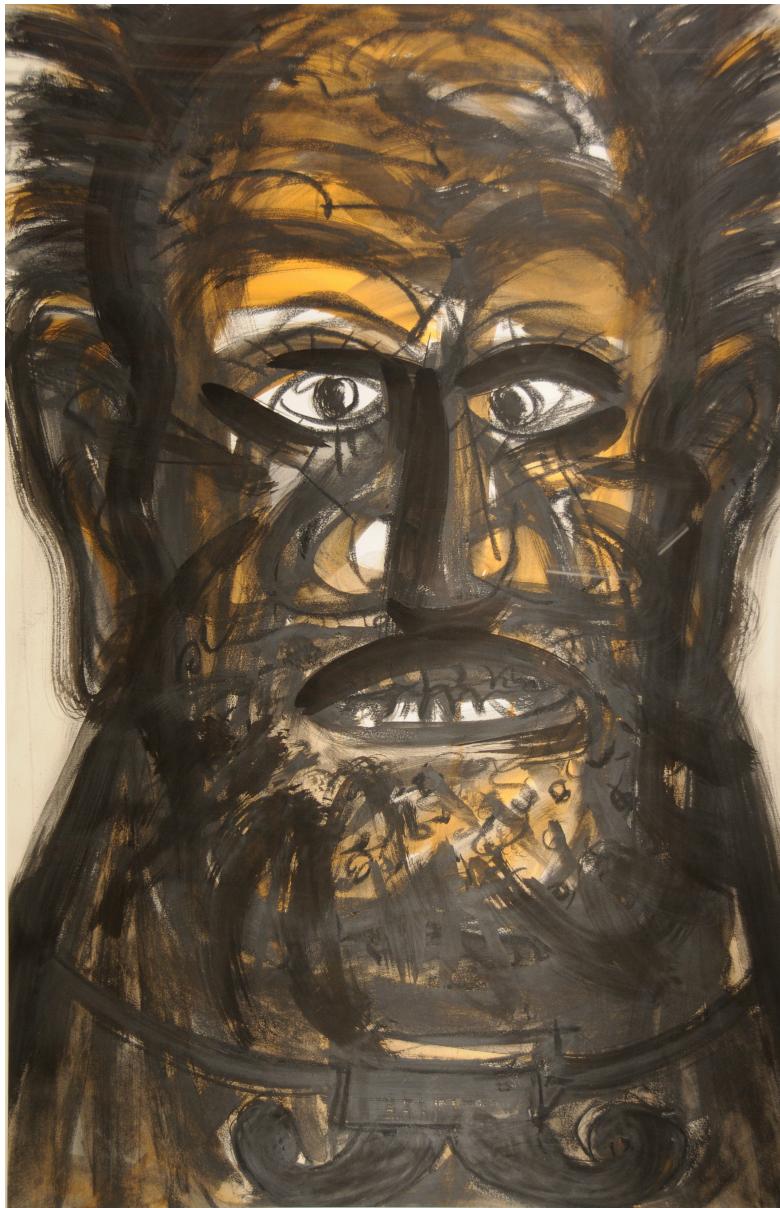
radically. Indeed it is those most involved in changing from their inherited cultures who emigrate from them —from the villages to the city and from India abroad. Thus I have intended in this discussion not to define Brahmins or Hindus as caste supporting, but to distinguish between those who are merely born into those social locations and those who would continue to use them in the caste-oriented ways of the past. It is “traditional Brahmins,” “caste Hindus, and “followers of the Brahmanical system” I have called responsible for the imposition of caste and untouchability. What caste a person is recognized as being born into today is no indication of their actions. Being born in a Brahmin household today is not the same as following the traditional Brahmanical system. Indeed many elect to work for social reform.

Americans as a nation are ahead of Indians in the effort to overcome racial stigmatization. But Americans, as we know are still facing a good long ways to go, if standards of health, life-expectancy, educational attainment, segregation and opportunity are a measure. If Indians still have a great long and difficult way to go to overcome their traditional caste system, they are as a nation and as individuals embarked upon that journey.

Savi Savarkar’s situation as an artist in contemporary Indian culture is much like that of James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Jacob Lawrence or Frida Kahlo in American art.

### **Seeing Savarkar's *Manu* (*The Law Giver*)**

As the chief advocate of the traditional caste system one can see why Dalits would have a different view of Manu than Brahmins or any of the higher or even lower castes. All castes stand higher in Manu's estimation than the Dalits and so favored in the treatment, Manu says, they are to receive.



Savi Savarkar's *Manu* is a large, 2 x 3 foot, wash painting of the monster's face. Great slashing black strokes nearly fill the entire frame. They all but overwhelm its hysterical expression. The few places where the paper shows through have been washed in a dull tan. Were it not for the

whites of his eyes and a spot or two, that appear as irrationally placed as the individual slashing strokes themselves, the depiction would be lost in the ink of the brushwork. The only relief from the ink is found in vacuums to either side that read as space and separate the face from the frame.

The style is a familiar one, *Expressionism*. Everyone familiar with the modernist art of the 20th century recognizes it from the established canon of modernist styles. The work fits right in with the Expressionist painting and prints of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Emile Nolde and George Rouault.

No one would call such things beautiful, but no one can deny their presence or their power. It is an art of desperation and horror and for all that a major aspect of the human response to the human condition. It shares its emotional orientation with the poetry of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, or Amiri Baraka's play, *The Dutchman*, and more directly with the poetry of Namdeo Dhasal and the Dalit Sahitya (literature) that burst upon India from Maharashtra in the 1970's as the first generation of Dalits to grow up in literacy took vividly and violently to the obvious task of crying out who they were and what had been done to them. As the Dalit Sahitya cries out so Savi Savarkar's visual imagery reaches out from the depth of stigmatized despair into the elite artworld of India's bourgeois galleries and museums.

What else should the world of letters have expected? The creative writing teacher's advice, to "write what you know about," is normally hedged by the elite sanctions against criticizing the established order. The actual meaning is "write about what you know about *that is not going to get you in trouble, that will not ruffle too many established feathers.*" In school we work the ABC's and practice sentences out of the copybooks and then move on to assignments that are designed to turn us into good citizens, followers of our society's accepted paths. Hegemony is the smothering guide. We learn to write formulas for success in business and the established society. We learn to toe our marks so that we'll be allowed a certificate and a job, so we can feed and clothe ourselves and our families *in a comfortable fashion*. Few of us try writing, much less publishing the thoughts running rampant through the anxieties, privation and fears of our daily lives. Some few have the energy to grasp the opportunity to record their feelings of rejection, when passed over for a position or refused entry into some institution that considers us inferior. Even fewer can assault our hegemonic elites head on.

Few among the impoverished and disinherited have the paper and pens, much less the time or inclination to strike at those who exercise devastating power against their entire community. After all, who would want to hear their cries of pain? It's only those who get a little schooling in the cities who may aspire to have others read of their inner thoughts. Those who, strangely, think the poetry of their betters is a tool they may use themselves, who break out. And so, in the generation born after independence (1947), in the first generation of the India of mass public education in the cities, there rose poets who spoke of themselves rather than their masters, who wrote of their own trials rather than those of the people they were supposed to envy and imitate. There arose in Mumbai and Maharashtra men so imbued with Bhimrao Ambedkar's spirit and with the intoxication of the potential power of letters that they could change the name their society had long used to label them, and change their religion as well, the Dalit Panthers. And

slowly from roots stretching back to the same pre-literacy that gave us Dr. Ambedkar and gave him the readers of his first newspapers, there developed a literature in Marathi that told the story of untouchability in the voices of the former “untouchables”, who then began calling themselves Dalits (*Oppressed*).

Fewer still have paints and canvas or cooper etching plates and needles to scratch out and paint the imagery of the lives they lead. Those who go to art schools and learn to express themselves in visual images are as broken to the hegemonic plowing of the established fields as any of their writing peers. Those who go in to commercial illustration and design create the imagery they are paid-for, they are no more likely to rock the social boat than the advertising writers and interior decorators who employ them. When we get to the bourgeois art market, we find it as free as any other for those who can afford it. And so the scope for Dalit artists to live from the product of their art, or to have it widely viewed, is not nearly as wide as that for a Dalit poet, autobiographer or novelist. Though there was and continues to be a market for Dalit writing, there has developed no comparable market for Dalit painting or prints. The cost of a printed book as compared to the cost of an oil painting govern their accessibility to different classes that purchase them. Most Dalits can afford to purchase a work by Baburau Bagul or Sharankumar Limbale, very few can afford an original painting or even a small fine art print. Savi paints largely for the public exhibition hall and for the relatively minuscule community of middle-income Dalits or social activists who have discovered him. The inhabitants of urban India’s artworld of museums and bourgeois galleries may know of him, but they are a much smaller circle than that of literate readers of every class. His work is known internationally and in public and private collections in the big cities. It is starting to be seen on book covers and in the international press and in the political press. But where most gallery artists are displayed and sold, he is as unwelcome as any other Dalit politician.

If we wish to recognize a category of Dalit art, in visual imagery, comparable to the Dalit Literature that has made such an important impact on the high art world of contemporary India, Savi is one of the few whose work belongs there. There are other Dalit artists. But their work for the most part blends seamlessly into the conventional subjects and styles shared throughout the artworld. What marks off Dalit Sahitya from the rest of India’s literature is not that it is about Dalits as subjects or that it is by Dalit writers, but that it is the authentic expression of Dalits about their cosmic contradictions of the Dalit social situation in modern India. In the world of the visual arts, Savi Savarkar is a rare as well as a brilliant example of a Dalit visual artist.

### **An “Untouchable” Artist Reaches Out: *the catalog***

Little political rhetoric is presented as personally as Savarkar's. The art we are used to in the contemporary market gallery is often highly personal, ambiguous, ambivalent or all three. So, we are used to enigmatic symbols, that are too opaquely personal to be understood without an accompanying description, that is likely unavailable if it exists at all. We surely know what it is like to peer at a work of modern art and wonder what this or that sign may mean, or in the case

of representational works, just what is going on. The enigmatic is one of the hallmarks of the modern that extends to the post-modern. To a certain extent it is the idiosyncratic lack of transparency that renders the work modern. And we find that in Savarkar's work too. It is for that reason I am going to take apart the works in this exhibit in the familiar manner of an art historian or critic, the same way I might parse any work by Pablo Picasso or Max Beckmann in a lecture or a guided tour.

Picasso's *Guernica*, it turns out, is a good comparison for the more elaborate works of Savarkar's oeuvre, such as *Pune-Peshwa* in this exhibit. *Pune-Peshwa* is a particularly personal and yet politically charged image, filled with symbols that the casual onlooker may have only the vaguest intuitive guess to go on in forming an interpretation. If Indians have a jump on Americans in this case, it is hardly more than a short head start into a maze. If you call up the image of *Guernica*, which most contemporary gallery goers can, you will remember how complex and confusing a work it is, and how filled with enigmatic signs. And so I'll offer the specialist's guided tour: "Savarkar from what I know of him."

The suite of works on paper we see here were assembled as a set, during Savarkar's three year sojourn in Mexico, studying mural painting, and sent to the US for exhibition at a conference on Caste and Race in 2002. They are augmented in the exhibit by three oil paintings sent earlier to be exhibited at an event in Manhattan at the release of the Human Rights Watch's volume on Dalits, *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchable"* in 1999.

# 1 ***Untouchability I***, etching, artist's proof, 13 x 9.5 inches.

*Untouchability I* is an evocation of the Dalits' vulnerable state, portrayed in the traditional form demanded by the Brahmanical rulers of 17th to 18th century Maharashtra, the Peshwas of Pune. As a Mahar, Savarkar is a descendant of the largest Dalit caste of this Marathi speaking region. It is a striking example of the anomalous reality of the caste system that the Peshwas could claim to be Brahmins, zealously upholding the traditional rules of caste and at the same time act as rulers, a role that the Brahmanical system reserves for Kshatriya, the royal, warrior caste.



One of the most famous examples of the zealousness of the Peshwa rule is said to have been their requirement that those they claimed to be outside the caste system must wear pots around their necks so that if they might chance to spit, anything coming from their supposedly-polluting touch would not fall onto a pathway or field, where it might infect someone of the supposedly purer, higher castes. The defamatory claim, that all born outside the Brahmin-blessed castes were cosmically polluted, was the dialectical opposite of the equally presumptuous claim of the caste-Hindu's purity. It is these theologically self-serving metaphysical claims that the traditional Brahmins used to justify the dramatic humiliation of every Dalit by forcing them to wear this pot as the ungainly sign of their supposedly infectious status. In Savarkar's imagery the scale of the pot helps us recognize it, as the equivalent of the pink triangle and yellow Star of David armbands of Nazi Germany.

A pitifully passive Dalit stands at the center of this scene, his spittoon hung pendulously from his neck. He dangles a lamp from his right hand, which may signify his possession of the potential for lighting his way, and possibly ours as well, though this seems to be denied by the dimness of the lamp and his eyes that stare off into the distance. The woman behind him seems to be his pair. She too supports a great pot around her neck, while looking toward him. To the side stand three men, or one man with a trio of personalities. The full, central, figure rubs his hands together in a gesture of supplication. Along with the face on his right, he looks toward the main figure. A third head, dangling a spittoon, looks away, from the scene.

The central figure appears to be wearing a loincloth. The burgeoning beards obscure all the men and make the reading of the trio ambiguous, so that the multiple faces may be read as the well known three-faced imagery of such gods as Brahma. This ambiguity of the figures is heightened by the clarity of the single pair of legs that supports the figure in front. The group stands in an undefined space facing out toward the viewer as icons in the traditional popular print imagery. The scene is unified by the spittoons swinging out to the left and right and marking the center of the image.

Who would put such an icon on their wall? If this was meant for a Dalit household, it is for one that doesn't want to forget the humiliations of the past. The wearing of a spittoon around the neck is no longer a legal necessity, indeed India's modern Constitution outlaws public demonstration of untouchability, and there are numerous laws to punish any one who would inflict such a humiliation on a Dalit today. Though the reality is, such humiliations are reported daily in the news papers, as the great majority of India's Dalits live in villages where caste Hindu landlords have greater power than any policeman or politician. Though I have never heard of a case of anyone being forced to wear a spittoon today, Dalits in villages are regularly forced to go barefoot and to wear rags, or refused the right to dress in prescribed ways by more powerful caste-Hindus. Newspapers are filled with accounts of Dalit women being harassed and paraded naked to humiliate them and their entire community.

# 2 **Dry-Point**, etching, artist's proof, 13.5 x 10 inches.

With its modernist title, that cites the technique of its production rather than its subject, *Dry Point* is technically the subtlest work in this heterogeneous suite. Unlike *Untouchability I*, where we see Savarkar's usual insistent strength of gesture in every mark of the needle on the plate, here the image melts away into the light of the paper's ground. Unlike his most strident marks, here the sketching is so subtle the figures tend toward disappearance. And because of this the viewer is allowed to see the lyricism in Savarkar's line that is often obscured behind the power he favors most often in the drawing of figures. Though the modern period has taken our eyes away from the issue of anatomically-convincing rendering of the human figure, we still have the artist's expression located strongly in their portrayal. Ambiguous and amorphous as his figures and faces often are, they have striking expressive effect.



The scene we are offered depicts a line of half-a-dozen or so Dalit women (A), colliding with an equal or slightly larger number of Brahmin priests (B). Many other figures clamor around the margins of each group, in a lighter line, subordinating their prominence and turning them into spectators (C).



A



B



C

Even vaguer figures circulate around the borders, along with three particularly dark accents: an overturned pot, menacing the Brahmin at the point where the two groups collide; a crouching, sleeping Dalit,



D

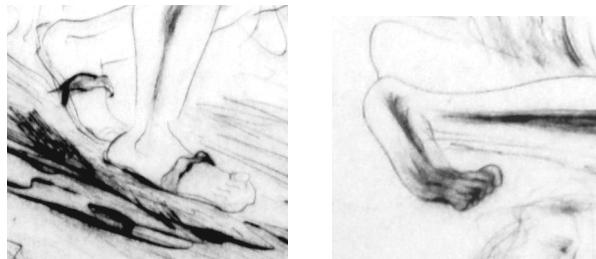


E

with a dark crow pecking at his ear, at the feet of the women; and a Dalit man's face staring up at the scene from its lower border (D) .

The Dalits here too are marked-out by the spittoons slung around their necks. Though these have the added mark of the Brahmin's good luck sign, the swastika painted upon them. *Swastika* is a Sanskrit term identifying a symbol of *well-being*. The mark of the Brahmin's good fortune is, of course, the mark of the Dalits misfortune! It is the Brahmin's claim to the greatest purity that makes him close to the—even purer—gods. And that claim is based on the complementary claim that there is a being who has the greatest lack of purity, the supposedly polluted Dalit. The combination is not incidental; it defines the opposite poles of the caste scale.

The women stand in a line, old and young, darker and lighter, clothed and naked. The Brahmins carry the marks of their rituals on their foreheads. Unlike his Dalits, Savarkar's iconic Brahmins are beardless, with the shaven heads and side-locks common to traditional temple and priestly Brahmins. Two carry long staffs. In India, where firearms are rare, the *lathi*, a pole with iron rings at intervals along its length, is the most common weapon in everyday life. There is also the *danda*, the judge's staff symbolic of judicial punishment, which is as traditional a Brahmin's tool as the ladle for pouring butter into the sacrificial fire. The Brahmins wear sandals; the Dalits' feet are bare, as is in some cases enforced by caste violence.



Savarkar's work usually assemble a set of iconic figures in a scene, where we read his cast of role types to determine what is going on. For the unusual modernist viewer, who is willing to spend a few minutes reading the full image rather than simply blinking "yes" or "no" to the composition and moving on, there is the necessity and opportunity to explore the scene for its major and minor characters and their interacting personalities and gestures.

The Brahmins here reach out to touch the Dalit women, while the one male Dalit sleeps, despite the crow that tries to waken him. Others look on from all sides. Is that Savarkar himself, who looks up from the bottom of the scene? Why or how is the spittoon menacing the Brahmins from above? The most famous, and infamous relation between temple Brahmins and Dalit women, and one that continues in many places to this day, is the practice of Devadasi, in which Dalit women are married to the god and forced into temple prostitution.



The richness of the black ink achieved by the dry-point focuses our gaze on the crow trying to arouse the sleeping Dalit, as the vessel of Dalit humiliation is upturned over the temple Brahmins as a single bearded Dalit head watches from below, watched himself by a woman beside him.

# 3 *Arahath* (*Enlightened Being*), etching, artist's proof, 21.5 x 27 inches.

Here is another character in Savarkar's cast, the *arahath* (perfected being). In the Theravada Buddhist world of Sri Lanka, *arahat* is the Pali term for an enlightened being, almost exclusively applied to *bhikkhus* (monks), who are the only ones expected to reach any level of enlightenment in this world. But this figure is bearded, rather than clean-shaven like the *bhikkhus* of Sri Lanka. And, the word is written in the contemporary Marathi or Hindi of central India, that is, the language of Navayana Buddhism, not the Pali of Sri Lanka or the ancient Mahayana Sanskrit.



Dr. Ambedkar's Buddhism, the Navayana Buddhism of contemporary India's great recent revival, sees the goal of enlightenment (*bodhi*) as available for all living humans, rather than restricted to supernatural beings or even monks. There are *bhikkhus* in the Navayana world, but they are expected to be social working community leaders, not a monastic elite and they are not assumed to be any more likely to be enlightened than other members of the community. This arahath is an enlightened Dalit. His somewhat disheveled or worn appearance and beard indicate that he is not an economically comfortable man. What looks to be an atomic explosion bursting from his head is the mark of his enlightenment, comparable to the *ushnisha*, upper protuberance familiar on a Buddha, or enlightened being, in traditional Buddhist imagery.

# 4 **Pune-Peshwa**, etching, artist's proof, 19.3 x 38.75 inches.

Now here is a chaotic kettle of very strange fish for anyone looking on their own, without a guide. Beside my study of Savarkar's art and its contemporary Indian context, a useful preparation for me in analyzing Savarkar's *Pune-Peshwa* has been an earlier, extended study of *Guernica*, Pablo Picasso's giant mural, about the terror bombing of a Basque Town, by Hitler and Franco's air corps during the Spanish Civil War. Like *Guernica*, *Pune-Peshwa* is a deeply personal and enigmatic work at the same time that it is intended to be a public and political one. The combination of goals would be a fatally flawed one, of a common modernist variety, if it were not for the fact that an interpreter familiar with the artist has taken the opportunity to explore it. Which is to say, that like so many works of modern art the *Pune-Peshwa* is thoroughly freighted with idiosyncratic personal symbolisms we could not hope to recognize without a guide. In this case, because I've been studying Savarkar's work in its social context and with opportunities to talk with him about it over the years, I can offer an approach to the work that should be useful. But we all know how often we've faced modernist works without a guide and could only bask in the bliss of ignorance as we enjoyed or didn't the imagery before us.



The formal basis for my approach to this strikingly chaotic work is an extended study of *Guernica*, which is nearly as chaotic, and at the same time as deadly serious and deeply personal, despite its equally public presentation. *Guernica* is laid out intentionally in the form of a triptych, the conventional Christian altarpiece, that lines up three scenes in a single composition, with outer quarters that may fold in to cover the central half. Savarkar's format here appears to line up of four portraits within a field of observers, with the same basic proportions as a central

scene flanked by wings about half its width. Before we can take up the individual portraits and their observers, we need to step back a bit further and acknowledge that this is no ordinary scene from the natural world. It is a surrealist, nightmare image, a phantasmagoria out of the artist's imagination. It is a Kublai Khan fantasy. We cannot interpret it as a simple representation of a past or even possible event. It is a conglomeration of symbols, a bilious rumination on the Dalit experience in modern society. Indeed it is Savarkar's rumination on Savarkar's personal Dalit experience, offered to us as a sort of psychological portrait of the Dalit experience in general.

*Pune Peshwa* is a Dalit's fantasy meditation on the Dalit experience, presented for our entertainment and our enlightenment as it was created for his.

While Savarkar is a Mahar from the provincial city of Nagpur, he is also a university-trained artist, working as a professor in one of the better-known schools of India's capital, New Delhi. And as a graduate of Baroda and a participant in the capital's gallery scene, he is as knowledgeable of the art scenes of New York and Tokyo, Berlin and Buenos Aires, as any viewers in Austin, Seattle or Amherst, Massachusetts. As a working artist, he's actually a lot more aware of what's gone on there than most of his viewers.

### The Four Portraits

I'll begin with the most prominent figure, the man in the mask, as the most developed human face in the scene it is the element we can identify with most clearly and likely the one that draws any viewer's attention first. This is the most likely protagonist: a man hiding behind a mask, or coming out from behind a mask. Below you will see a hand reaching in from the side to point to the staff holding the mask. To me this appears to be the Jak (Yaksha) that one puts up in front of a new building or a grain stack to ward off the evil eye. It is a mask to protect the wearer against curses. It is superstition. *And the one behind it, looking flatly out into our gaze is Savarkar himself, or us, or both.*

The symmetrically posed pair to this image is far more ambiguous and opaque. It is an abstract silhouette of a head without features. As you look throughout the suite of images here you will see it appear in several of the other works, like *Where I Was and Broken*. It is a head without a face, but not without a personality. Above it has a few tufts and a lock of hair flopping down over the three horizontal lines that the worshiper of the great god Shiva places upon their forehead during worship. The lock comes close to the U-shaped *namum* that identifies the worshiper of the other great god, Vishnu. A few of the smaller scaled and more lightly drawn figures—that I am calling observers—float in the face, verging toward indicating eyes or a nose, but nothing definite. The face remains vacant. Vacant, that is, except for a prominently dark scribble in the area of the mouth that mutates into a vague cleft and then a single line, as it descends toward the bottom of the sheet. My intuition, based on my familiarity with other works of Savarkar's but also much on my personal response, is that this vertical cleft is a vagina descending to separate as legs.



Thus our central image is a double portrait, of a man and a woman connected below by a fish swimming from the woman toward the man, and above by lightly-drawn face of a shaven-headed Brahmin with a top-knot behind, reaching out from the man toward the woman. The Peshwas were the Brahmin rulers of Pune, who ruled the region east of modern Mumbai, from the 18th into the 19th century, particularly remembered by Dalits as most tyrannical persecutors of “untouchables”, and their particular symbol for caste Hindu tyranny. This is our central pair, a complex male of indeterminate status hiding behind his superstition and a generic woman reduced to the vulnerable mechanics of her gender.

No, If I hadn't offered you this interpretation you would not likely have come upon it yourself, but I am aware of this pairing as well as the use of vertical crevices in Savarkar's imagery. And you probably never noticed or thought about the bird carrying the message of fear from the picador's dying horse to the bull in *Guernica*, before a specialist told you about it.

Men in Savarkar's art are often menacing women; he is nearly as interested in gender-oppression as caste-oppression, and we will not wander too far from him in recognizing the confluence of the two in life as well as in his paintings. Or as I could have pointed out about the horse and bull in *Guernica*, which are the horse and bull of the corrida and so a truculent, male ox who devastates a vulnerable, female horse during the usual course of the bullfight.

There is one figure here even more central than the protagonist pair; it is the “untouchable” in the very center of the print. This is one of Savarkar’s most persistent images and one, unlike the other two that I can identify without question, because it appears often and consistently, and with a distinct identity, not something to suppose. The center of the painting, and the center of the wheel of imagery I have begun with, is Savarkar’s—and in some ways India’s—prototypical “untouchable” the scavenger of dead cattle remains. It is the man doomed to the savagery of scavenging, as a living that dooms him to the savagery of Brahmanical pollution. It is the Dalit, village servant whose occupation and life sentence is to remove the carcasses of dead animals from the village. As the presence of the animal’s death is considered polluting to the society, the Dalit serves the society by taking the pollution on himself in touching the dead body and disposing of it. There is hardly a month that goes by today in India when the newspapers do not carry the story of Dalits who have been charged with this traditional occupation, murdered by caste fanatics for the crime of refusing to carry out the corpse of a dead animal, or for the supposed-crime of killing a cow in order to sell its hide. Yes: doomed if you don’t and sometimes doomed even when you do!

The drawing is crabbed and rather, sketchy. I am always forced to search for a long moment before I can locate his features, staring straight up under the carcass. The easiest way for you to find them is to see the carcass circling the head and drooping down to the figure’s left. His bearded and hairy head looks straight up. It is largely a scribble here; but for those who know Savarkar’s work, and for Savarkar himself, it is the reappearance of an icon that walks throughout his work. It is the proto-typical “untouchable,” with earthen spittoon dangling from his neck. One does not need to be an Indian to recognize how uncomfortable it would be to be forced to wear such an object around one’s neck. Or, to recognize how humiliating to live with such a humiliation. But this was and is the very essence of the caste system and so the center of the work: the humiliation of the Dalit that is required by caste society in order to claim supposed freedom from pollution for their higher castes, by its transfer to the lower castes. A woman, with a spit pot hung around her neck, clings to him from behind.

Strange, round, pot-headed figures flank the central pair, like guards in the wings, on each side. On the right, accompanying the woman, is a scarecrow with a pot for a head. It has a double-vertical stripe on its forehead, the mark of the worshipper of Vishnu. This bald, round head too has a Brahmin’s hair lock. Its expression is menacing. Between it and the woman, a male Dalit crouches with a spittoon around his neck. This crouching Dalit is as common in Savarkar’s work as the carcass-bearer.

The pot-headed figure on the left is smaller and less clearly articulated into a face, though it too stands on a stick-necked, scarecrow body. This pot face has a skull’s grimacing teeth and eyes of tilted Brahmanical swastika and *Aum* signs. Its silhouette is fringed with hair and it has a namum like the other.



There is a large contingent of secondary, accompanying figures here. A Brahman following an unidentified man, following a Dalit with a spittoon, are lined up behind the skeleton scarecrow on the left. This last figure also carries the staff strung with bells, which the Peshwas required Dalits to carry to warn caste Hindu's of their approach. There is a pair of swastika-marked Brahmins below. Dozens of faces, sleeping and awake, accompany and surround the man behind the mask. Dozens of others swim beneath the woman. My fear that she is a Devadasi, a temple prostitute, is corroborated by the Dalits who walk through her mind.

### **Swastikas**

Savarkar is a Navayana Buddhist and one of those Dalits who continually point out that both caste and untouchability —caste's most evil aspect— are essentially Brahmanical constructions denied by Buddhism. Much of his art is an indictment of Brahmanical Hinduism. And that cannot be disguised or ignored, if we are to look at his art. Most Dalits, however, consider themselves Hindus and there is no simple way to assess how different individuals react to his

imagery. The great fact of such fine art in the Indian context, is that it is created in a world with an even greater split between the tiny elite that is attuned to bourgeois gallery art and the masses who are more or less entirely unconcerned with it. If the great majority of Americans are no more likely to put an abstract expressionist painting on their walls or a surrealist installation in their living room, than they are to visit a museum to see one, the great majority of Indians live in a rural world of mud walls where a three foot etching is among the last things they might conceive of. This is an art composed essentially for the literate urban elite middle classes, and at this scale, more for the museum or institutional wall than for individual homes.

Most Indians seeing swastikas in Savarkar's images would initially suppose them to be a positive reference to just what the term means in Sanskrit or Hindi: good fortune. But in Savarkar's intellectual circles, in the urban, gallery artworld of internationally sophisticated New Delhi, the concepts of surrealism, expressionism and the German Nazism of the 1930s are as present as they are in Rio de Janeiro or Paris. Swastikas there may refer to fascist racism as easily as Brahmanical or Jaina good fortune. And Savarkar is clever enough and ruthlessly-political enough to want them to stand for both at once. For him Brahmanism is casteism, is religious fascism. And he knows his audiences will not miss this imputation in the context of his work.

There is no particular symbolic difference or exclusiveness between swastikas in terms of their clockwise or counter clockwise configuration. But swastikas on a diagonal bear a peculiar relevance for the fascist imagery of Hitler's Nazi party. The significant point for anyone looking across cultural boundaries is that meaning in visual imagery is never implicit in a particular sign itself. Meaning is located in the use of a sign within a particular culture or sub culture, and even more critically, it is located in the particular usage of the particular user. What is for most (rural) Indians a good luck sign and only for a few, in the urban elite, a reference to fascist racism, can be seen by the latter as standing for either or both, depending on what they understand to be the intention of the maker. Like the racial epithet most threatening in the United States, meaning can be positive or negative depending on who uses the term and what they intend to convey when they use it.

Indeed I am caught, and so we all are here, in the same difficulty as I refer to Brahmanical practices and Brahmins here. Traditional Brahmanical practice is the source of the caste system. But many people who are born into Brahmin families today would eschew such practices as unacceptable, as most whites in the United States would have no truck with ideas of enslaving Africans or anyone else. To negotiate the cross cultural waters of our now densely interconnected modern world, we need to be able to distinguish between particular practices that exist in a nation or with a community and the nature of that community as a whole. India's caste system, like the United States' foreign policy, may emanate from a large portion of the nation, as indeed it must, and yet it doesn't actually stand for all. We can condemn the practice and those who do practice it, while embracing those who come from the region in which the practice holds sway but resist the practice and so work toward its elimination. As racism in the United States, which still flourishes both personally and institutionally among a majority of the population, casteism flourishes even more prevalently in India. And yet, there is progress in eliminating it. If

the desire of many urban elites to claim that it is a thing of the past or rural villages is any measure, there is a desire among them for its elimination.

How we react to that here is another thing. And one we need to consider. Is anti-caste art necessarily anti-Hindu? I don't believe so. That is because there are many different sorts of Hindu. Those supporting caste practices I refer to here as "caste-Hindus" and "traditional Hindus." I have Hindu friends who not only admire Savarkar's work but see his anti-caste ranting as totally justified. Not all Hindu expressions are caste-bound, though still today, most are. Many deny caste altogether. Hinduism is that diverse. Precisely as the racism of the contemporary U.S. shouldn't lead anyone to dismiss the many progressive trends that exist as insignificant, no one should take India's most difficult social problem as its only aspect. That said, there is no way to look at any nation with such glaring social inequalities and ongoing torture of large proportions of their population as successful in any but the most rudimentary and preliminary manner.

# 5 *Where I Was*, etching, artist's proof, 19.3 x 38.75 inches.

*Where I Was* is a second phantasmagoria in the elaborated vein of *Pune-Peshwa*, where we see a number of the characters in Savarkar's troop spread across the plate in altogether unique combinations that seem to have tumbled in a barely-premeditated fashion, directly from his unconscious.



The overall composition seems controlled by a trio of three heads, surrounded by a number of (mostly) smaller scaled heads and figures. The shaven-headed portrait at the center has its features drawn on a single line down the center of its face, offering us a cubist full frontal face that is a profile at the same time. Is this a being of multiple personalities? The portrait to the left takes the form of a tantric diagram rather than features. A bird swoops from the sky to peck at its “eye”. Another reaches in from the edge of the frame. The head to the right comes into the scene horizontally, from the side of the frame, like the one in *Broken*, [figure 7]. In this case, unlike the opaque back of a head rendered in *Broken*, we get features. A zig zag line divides the face roughly, while three fine lines offer the elongated ellipse that I called a vagina in *Pune-Peshwa*. Here there are also lips and a pair of profile bursting, goggle eyes. The clear eye is pecked-at by a bird, swooping in from the border. The other eye is black.

The three heads are only an armature. The most interesting activity in this phantasm of free-floating figures and faces takes place around them. Beneath the zig zag head lies a horizontal profile head and torso of a woman that doubles easily, in this sketchy drawing style, for a landscape, its tallest mountain peak a dark breast that reaches its nipple almost close enough to touch the black eye of the zig zag face. Hanging from this horizon is a glowering face with a bearded man, an amorphous form growing out of the head (?). Another bird swoops up from this corner to peak at the one coming in from the side of the frame. A partially nude woman, with a lamp on her head stands out (is dreamed out?) of the zig zag

head, and beside her, in the upper right corner, two more faces are sketched and possibly another swooping bird. The face dangling from the upper boarder is a Brahmin with a side-lock.

A crowd also swirls around the tantric head, on the left. A man standing and a woman lying, both wear spittoons. As the man floats up on the side of the head, a Brahmin floats downward beside him. Paralleling the bird swooping from the upper frame to peck at the tantric face's eye is another swooping on this Brahmin. A strange dark cloud steams off from the head above which two sketchy dogs reach in, one menacing a man's head. Ambiguous faces with what may be namums, side-locks, and beards look down from above.

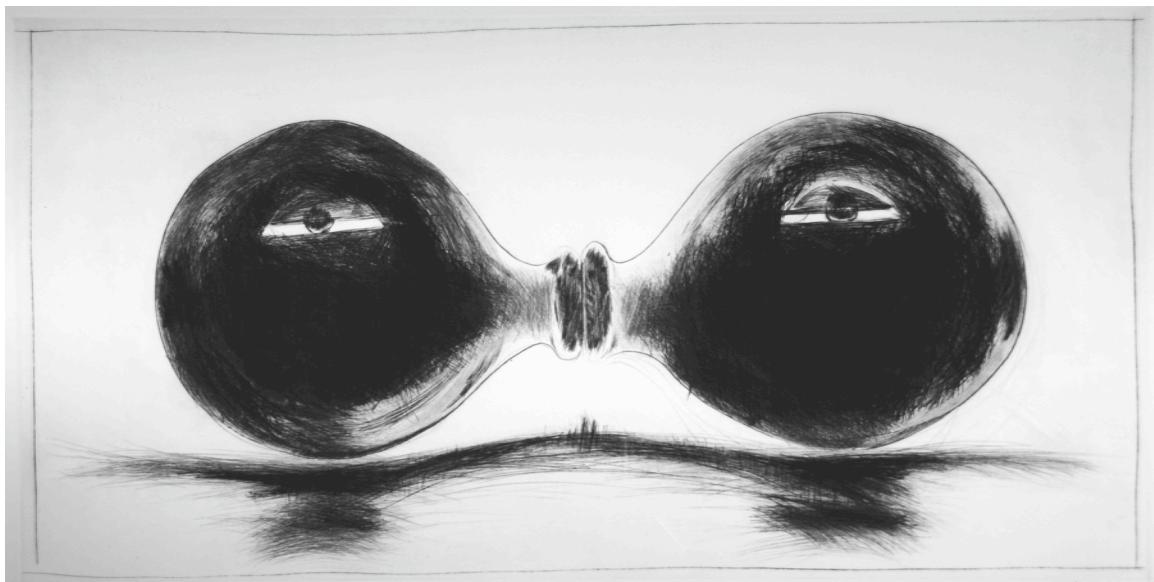


Around the central head the imagery is most developed. There is a bearded man in a long robe with symbols of the various religions that Dalits have clung, or converted, to bristling from his head: a cross, a slice of moon, a flag: Christianity, Islam, Bhakti Hinduism. A dark pot hovers over his head like a strange balloon. Emerging from the central head is a naked man blowing an amorphous horn or chewing on a towel. Behind him a tree erupts and a woman peeks from behind it. Beside the naked horn blower is a pair of heads on a larger scale, a woman and a bearded man, each with spittoons hung around their necks. This couple seems to be looking down at the central head, or across at the man in the robe. The naked horn blower looks out toward us. At the base is a last, spittoon-laden figure, pondering the central head, which by this time I am willing to see as a stand-in for us, the viewers.

All this phantasmagoria seems to emerge from the central, multiple-identity figure, who dreams—as we look through its unseen eyes—this imagery, as the universal Dalit dream that each of us may have through Savarkar's mind and Savarkar's hands and their marks on the etching plate from which this giant print was pulled. As more than one observer has pointed out, the standard format of the Indian icon features gods looking straight out in communion (*darshan*) with their onlooking worshippers. It is in a similar fashion that Savarkar's works present his cast of characters for our communion. As a Navayana Buddhist, Savarkar doesn't believe in gods. But as a modern surrealist and expressionist with a license to dream into his own subconscious, he searches his cosmos for us.

# 6 ***Tell Them My Pain***, etching, artist's proof, 19.3 x 38.75 inches.

*Tell Them My Pain* offers us a surprising and even sweet example of dark humor. At least that is the best I can make out of it. Savarkar's vision seems so unrelievedly distressed that it is a surprise to see a bit of humor flash through once in a while. And that is how I see these two spittoons kissing. Kissing? Humor? Why not? One could, of course, read the two forms as communing with each other in another mood, but the interpretation would hardly be any different.



Savarkar's approach to his imagery often seems to start with the creation of a single character or combination of characters that he allows to evolve as he goes along and various other identities arrive to interact with inside the frame, like the characters in a play. Sometimes he seems to have a planned-script to illustrate, as in *Broken* or *Arahath*. But on other occasions he seems to have begun by evoking a familiar character or set of characters and then allowing them to develop on their own, as a novelist might with characters in the first draft of a story. In this way he seems to give free range to his subconscious to suggest relationships that he can react to as he goes along, rather than following a predetermined plan.

So why shouldn't the result sometimes be humorous? Savarkar has a variety of moods like anyone else. He may be a prophet fastened to the horrors of the world of caste, but he's also a man capable of being surprised, even by himself. What would two spittoons have to say to each other, meeting by accident? What would your father's shoes have to say to your mother's?

Sometimes artists reach out to study a possibility without knowing in advance where it will take them. This is one of the hallmarks of modern art. The artist experiments with a form to see what it will trick out of their subconscious. It was a favorite technique of the Surrealists, and one they have bequeathed to all who followed. It may sometimes leave an artist wondering at the end of his or her creation as much as any other viewer might.

# 7 **Broken**, etching, artist's proof, 19.3 x 38.75 inches.

*Broken* lines up three of the personalities we find scattered through Savarkar's imagery. The head in the center is the bearded Dalit, worn but unbowed, staring frontally toward us. The face to the left is in outline and profile facing him. Within the outline of this face rise a series of abstract designs, modeled on the ritual diagrams of tantric Hinduism, which illustrate the locations of metaphysical centers within the human anatomy. Such ritual diagrams, with their quasi-geometric mandala forms, affect a device commonly employed in esoteric tantric religious practice. A number of modern gallery artists have offered playful variations on their forms.



The club-shaped form on our right repeats the portrait outline, as if turned on its side, coming from the right border rather than the base of the composition. It has no features; so if it is meant to be a head, it is turned away from us. Protruding downward from this head bursts an explosion such as we see in the *Arahath* [figure 3]. Is this a Dalit trying to decide how to identify himself, religiously? On one side is the tantric Hinduism that is a sort that refuses the graded-hierarchy of caste Hinduism. On the other side is Navayana Buddhism. Most Dalits today are raised in some form of Hinduism.

The political activists among the Navayana Buddhists — and Savarkar is one — claim Dalits must choose a religious path that rejects the caste hierarchy of traditional Hinduism, or be guilty of accepting the traditional Brahmanical claim that they deserve to be punished, because they have been born into a metaphysically and materially polluted family as a consequence of some evil *karma* adhering to them from a previous birth. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and many of the modern Hindu sects, such as Brahmo Samaj, or Arya Samaj explicitly reject the caste system and the graded hierarchy of purity and pollution. Though in practice, most of their existing sects continue to carefully observe the traditional rules by strict adherence to established marriage circles and separation of their worship as well as their private lives from those they continue to treat as if polluted.

# 8 *Peshwa*, etching, artist's proof, 19.3 x 38.75 inches.

*Peshwa*, is densely dark scene, titled for the last traditional, royal rulers of Maharashtra. A disheveled Dalit stands to the right, staring up into the air, his spittoon dangling from his neck. Behind him is darkness. Before him are two crowds of Dalits stretching away into the distance. Both the men and the women are hung with spittoons. Some of the men carry the pole strung with bells. Some are naked. One man carries a second pot. Most of them are marked by the Brahmanical mantra, *Aum*. One carries a lantern, giving off a minuscule amount of light. The most prominent figure in the central group faces off toward the second group, from which the most prominent figure looks back. The rest of this group is etched in weaker lines and faded aquatint, so that it fades away into the distance, as its figures grow smaller. The two groups are aware of each other, but don't communicate with each other. A male Dalit crouches next to a barely visible prone woman in the lower corner.



It is the Dalit community, huddled together in their caste-imposed distress: nowhere to go, no way out. The contrast between the densely black ground to the right and the lighter aquatint-shaded figures to the left suggests an unfinished element in the image or the story. In the lighter crowd, one woman bears a child, another seems to be naked, and at its center a disembodied outline of a head stares upward. Naming the work after the Peshwa, may be intended to suggest that he is the cause of their distress.



# 9 ***Untouchable with dead Cow***, etching, artist's proof, 38.75 x 19.3 inches.

The *Untouchable with dead Cow* is one of Savarkar's iconic images. There is a smaller version of the theme at the center of the *Pune-Peshwa*. Among the oil paintings in this exhibition, there is an even larger version. In the smaller example the Dalit has the spittoon around his neck. In the larger image the Dalit bears the spittoon, which is marked by both the Brahmin's swastika and the sacred mantra "Aum." In all three the dead cow's carcass is slung around the bearded Dalit, engulfing him like a fur coat, uniting the two beings into a single form.



In this supersized-print the cow's open-eyed head and horns are prominent as usually the case. Also usual is the nakedness or near nakedness of the Dalit, and the lamp hanging from his visible arm.

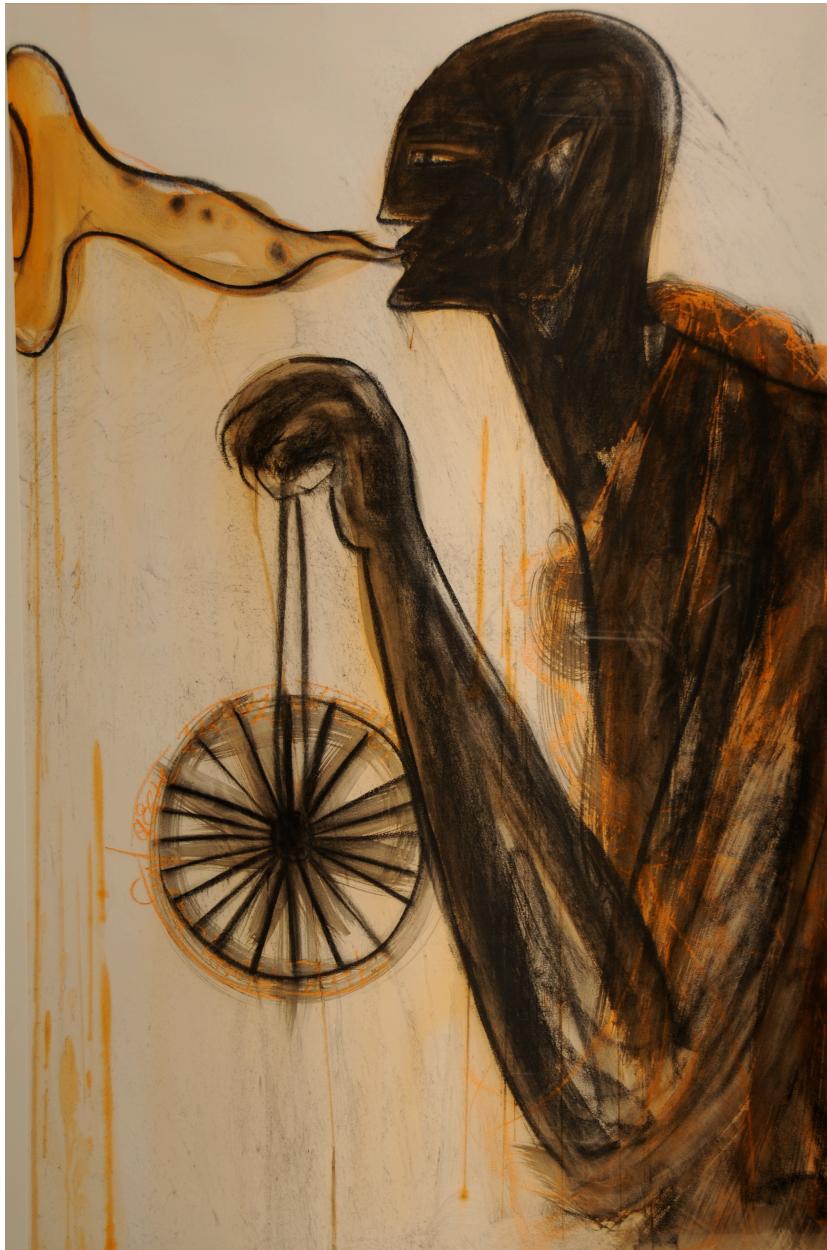
Here we see an etched version of the slashing paint strokes of the *Manu*. Etchings are created by scratching a design out of a varnish-coated plate that is then submerged in an acid bath to bite the scratches deeply into the surface, so that several separate, identical prints can be pulled from it. Where the paint brush for the *Manu* was inches across, and produced strikingly broad strokes on the surface, the etcher's needle only scratches a thin line, and so it required a repetitive slashing and gashing of the surface to create this Dalit and the carcass he more or less inhabits, at this giant scale, quite unusual for a print. All we see of the Dalit is his left arm and his face. His body is swallowed-up by the carcass.

In India's villages, where three-quarters of its population still resides, as a rule it is still Dalits who are the ones charged with the disposal of dead animals. Caste Hindus normally refuse to touch a dead animal for fear of acquiring impurity they associate with the death. Whether they want to or not, Dalits are forced to do that work, and so to free the caste Hindus of the danger of pollution, by supposedly taking on that pollution themselves. For performing this service they are usually allowed to take the meat of the animal to eat and the hide to sell or cure, but that is little compensation for a job that is believed to be deeply polluting, and which is then used to explain why they are themselves supposedly polluted. Indeed they have no choice. In many locals the local Dalits will be murdered if they refuse to remove the dead body and absorb the pollution. In a good number of regions, Dalits are also the hiders and tanners who make leather goods out of the hides of the animals they cart away. In a land famous internationally for the supposed-sacredness of their "holy cows", one can see how those at the opposite end of the Brahmin's hierarchy are, like the scapegoat in the Abrahamic Testament, punished for the crime of removing sin from everyone else in the village.

So, when Savarkar makes an icon out of his Dalit with a cow's carcass slung over his shoulder, he is throwing the Brahmanical Hindu's worst nightmare into his face. If the Dalit is going to be forced to remove the dead carcass and if he is to be treated as polluted by the very ones he aids by this act then he will do it defiantly and out in the open. Savarkar's Dalit carries the cow's carcass on his shoulders as the Christian's Jesus carries the cross of his execution. What his antagonists created as an instrument of torture and martyrdom, he seems to bear aloft in triumph as sign of the punishment he has endured.

# 10 **Bhikkhu** (*Buddhist Monk*), crayon, ink and wash, 46 x 30 inches.

Who is this *Bhikkhu* carrying a wheel and a trumpet? Perhaps it doesn't matter. Like most of Savarkar's figures, he is not a particular individual, but a type. He could be any *Bhikkhu*, any *Buddhist monk*. Savi, like a large number of Mahars, is a Navayana Buddhist, a member of the Buddhist community initiated by Bhim Rao Ambedkar on October 14, 1956, that brought Buddhism back to India after an absence of seven centuries, on the 2500th anniversary of the historical Buddha's nirvana.



Shaven headed and garbed in the orange robe common to most Buddhist mendicants, the Bhikkhu faces to the viewer's left. In his left hand he holds a wheel on a string. For Buddhist's one of the most common of symbols is the "wheel of the law" the sign for the Buddha's Dharma. Anyone may convert to Buddhism, but to do so one normally needs a monk to perform the ceremony. The conversion ritual used by Navayana Buddhists was created by Dr. Ambedkar specifically for their conversion out of Hinduism, the Brahmanical religion that is based so-largely on caste that it is difficult to know how it can develop away from it.

What is this jellyfish of a horn that this Bhikkhu is blowing? I cannot say. Though, it might be convenient to see it as his broadcasting of the Buddha's Dharma, one of the Bhikkhu's most fundamental acts. The Buddha's way, as laid-out in Ambedkar's last book, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, is the path of rationality and of social equality, the single most important goal of India's Dalits.

# 11 *Manu (The Law Giver)*, crayon, ink and wash, 46 x 30 inches,.

[See page 7 above]

### Savarkar's Prints and Paintings

Along with the nine prints and two wash drawings, we have three of Savarkar's oil paintings, which were also done during his sojourn in Mexico City. Savarkar's oils are regularly done in the two-meter size we see here, and so suited more for public display than for a private home. Considering the stunted confines of common Dalit home, this orientation of Savarkar's work for public rather than personal display is even more obvious. This is as true of the prints seen here. As medium, prints are normally the size of a sheet of writing paper or even smaller, and intended for intimate viewing or for illustration in a book. This is because the fine scale of the needle's mark renders the labor of creating an etching less economical the larger they get. These prints, on the other hand are strikingly large, and so intended for larger venues.

Unlike the prints, which are despite their extraordinary size, works composed in a fine hand, his paintings are produced in broad flowing strokes. There is the same assurance of touch, but here at a fearlessly larger scale and so with roughly expressionist flare. Without the need for extended time to pick out the inner shading and dark patches, modulated stroke by stroke, the paintings are done more rapidly than the etchings. Each seems to be a furious evocation of a fevered vision.

Unlike his prints, which are —because of their detail and format— essentially intended for unhurried contemplation, these oil paintings are intended to have instant impact and monumental effect.

# 12 *Untouchable with Dead Cow*, oil on canvas, 78 x 60 inches.

The *Untouchable with Dead Cow* offers us a broader version of the same character seen in the prints. Here we see the torso of the bearded Dalit, the Aum-swastika marked spittoon dangling from his neck. The carcass of the dead cow is slung around his broad shoulders. One hand reaches up, almost to caress it. Its blue snout and glaring red eye and tongue hang beside him, with its fore-hoofs. Its body swings behind. In his right palm the Dalit bears an upturned face that in some works Savarkar has labeled the Devadasi—the temple prostitute: a role almost exclusively forced upon Dalits. Her face, looking to him for help he cannot give as he looks away, is distinctly lighter in color than his sun-baked body. He thus bears three terrible marks of his enslavement and humiliation, spinning in a spiral that weirdly echoes the swastika. Below a top-knotted Brahmin's face peers upward. To the side flutter six Hindu temple banners, the upper one bearing the Brahmin's swastika. This is the Dalits humiliation in the midst of the Brahmanical system.



Savarkar's motif of the untouchable bearing the carcass of a dead cow is the Dalit iconic equivalent of the Christian's crucifix, the Hebrew's menorah, or the American's Statue of Liberty.

# 13 **Temple Brahmin**, oil on canvas, 58 x 60 inches.

By now we are familiar with Savarkar's traditional temple Brahmin: the shaven head with the prominent side-lock, the three or four horizontal Shaiva marks of ash across his forehead, and the Vaishnava-namum crossing vertically through them, with the red line representing the goddess at its center. In this rendition unseeing-eyes, fixed and empty, stare out and a tiger-claw amulet dangles taughtly across his throat. Behind, or beside the Brahmin we see a hollow box with a cylindrical pillar at its center, supporting a sharp peak like a spearhead, from which flies a banner carrying the image of a swastika.

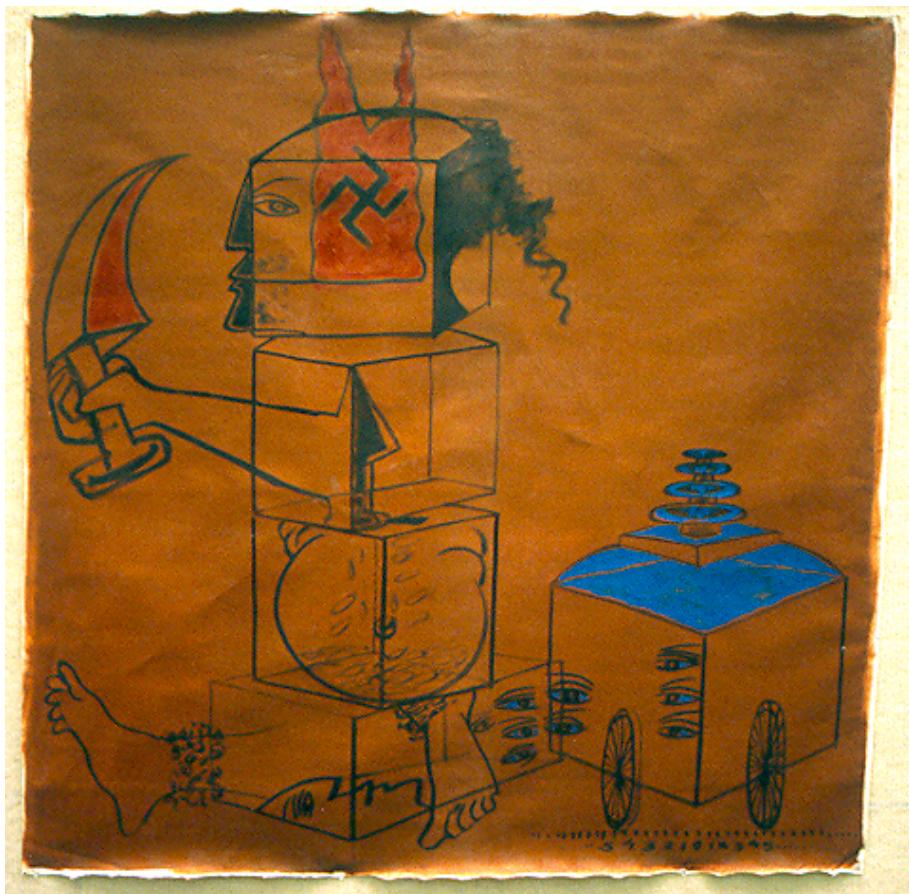


I had this painting rolled up in my closet for two years after it was sent to me from New York, where it was to be shown at the release of Human Rights Watch's volume *Broken People*, that describes interviews with the Dalit victims of discrimination and violence from the late 1990s. I unrolled the three paintings to look at them when I first got them and then put them back in the closet. At two meters, there was no way to leave them out and easily accessible. I unrolled them once to photograph them. After which I rolled them back up, where they have remained until the preparation of this exhibit. During all this time I thought of this as a Brahmin with the arrow. It wasn't until sitting down to describe it for this catalog and reading through the elements one by one that I realized this was a temple.

Hindu temples are constructed around the form of the cube, taken to be the perfect form of the universe from the earliest Brahmanical texts. The sanctums of most temples are cubes, over which rise towered roofs. The place of the god is in the sanctum at the base of the tower. The ritual texts of temple construction explain how the power of the gods descends through the tower to connect with the icon, and how it ascends back through the tower to the heavens. The eye in the shaft here represents the Brahmin's god in the sanctum. The eyes clustered on the side of the temple, against the blue ground, represent the god's worshipful followers receiving *darshan* (recognition and so communion). The crowning banner at the pinnacle carries the Janus-faced swastika: promising, still today, good fortune to the Brahmanical Hindu and persecution to the Dalit.

# 14 *Vedic Sacrifice* or *Foundation of India*, oil on canvas, 61 x 60 inches.

What we see here is an evocation of the seminal reference to caste in Brahmanical scripture, connected to its more modern incarnation in Hindu temple imagery. The strangely cubic figure we see here is *Purusha* (the primordial being), described in the Rig Veda, in the earliest surviving Brahmanical reference to the caste system (c. 1000 BCE). The Purusha hymn describes the original sacrifice that produced the four castes. From the mouth of Purusha was created the Brahmin (priest); from its arms and shoulders, the Ksatriya (royal warrior); from its belly the Vaisha (producer of food); and from the feet, the Shudra, their servant. The meaning of the face looking up from the bottom is most likely the group who go unmentioned in the classical formulation, the Atishudra, the Dalits.



As the creation of the castes is the result of a sacrifice of Purusha, the composite being is shown with a sacrificial cleaver in his hand. The swastika brain-banner is Savarkar's characterization of the caste-creating Brahmin and so the caste system as a whole, as fascist in the modern sense.

Behind the sacrificing sacrificer we see is the Hindu structure that the texts declare to be the equivalent of a Brahmanical sacrifice. The cube with the pointed tower is the Hindu temple. Because the temple is considered to be a vehicle of the gods as well as a palace, it is also marked by the presence of the

wheels. The eyes we have seen before. They are the human multitudes of followers, looking on. Those whose eyes follow the Dalit wherever they may go.

### Meaning in Visual Imagery

The meaning of visual images, as we have been following it throughout this essay may now be clear in ways it might not have been before. Meaning lies in the context-of-use and in the users thinking through that context from their own particular perspectives. The swastika can have different meanings for the Anglo-American whose main context is the fascism of the Nazi party, than it does for the average Indian, whose context is a two-and-a-half-thousand year old Sanskritic tradition, in which it has stood for auspiciousness (good luck). Ah, but then, for the seventeen to twenty-five percent of the Indian population for whom Brahmanical cast system is a monstrous burden, this two-and-a-half-thousand year old Indic tradition is more or less equivalent to what the Jews of Europe suffered from the middle ages up to the holocaust of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.



For the contemporary Indian, whether citizen of the modern democratic, capitalist Indian state or immigrants or the children of immigrants to the United States, there is the painfully disquieting question as to where to stand and how to formulate their individual and community responses to this as well as other traditional Hindu institutions. They can renounce their ancestor's ways, as the priest of the Kalaram temple at Nasik, whose grandfather so famously barred B. R. Ambedkar and his followers in the 1930s, leading to Ambedkar's renunciation of Hinduism and adoption of Buddhism. That would be what European-Americans have done with the slavery and dehumanization their predecessors used to brutalize African Americans and to partially annihilate Native Americans. Or they can seek to continue with a tradition that flies in the face of modern science and attitudes on race and caste and the individual ideal of equality required by the modern democratic state and the capitalist market.