

Eyes of Dignity and Canvas of Transcendence: Savi Sawarkar's Aesthetic of Liberation

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Abstract

This essay examines Dalit art through the artistic practice of Savi Sawarkar, positioning his work within the comprehensive liberation framework developed by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Moving beyond conventional understandings of Dalit art as merely protest or resistance, this analysis explores how Sawarkar's paintings embody a multidimensional vision of liberation that encompasses socio-political, cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions. Drawing on Buddhist philosophy and Ambedkarite thought, the essay argues that Sawarkar's artistic language represents a transformative aesthetic practice that challenges caste oppression while simultaneously pointing toward transcendence and enlightenment.

The study analyzes four key aspects of Sawarkar's work: his distinctive artistic language that employs rugged lines and contorted figures to express both the anguish of untouchability and the potential for transcendence; his reclamation of dignity and beauty in Dalit representation, particularly through the confrontational yet dignified gaze of his subjects; his reimagining of beauty standards through Buddhist-Ambedkarite aesthetics that challenge discriminatory norms; and the soteriological dimension of his art that presents suffering as a pathway to liberation rather than mere victimization.

The essay demonstrates how Sawarkar's paintings, particularly "Untouchable Carrying Dead Cow," unite aesthetic awareness with acute social consciousness, creating what the artist calls an "aesthetic-eye" that enables viewers to respond to inhuman suffering with genuine empathy. His work exemplifies Dr. Ambedkar's assertion that true social transformation requires "the reform of the mind of man," achieved through confronting rather than escaping suffering. By carrying the struggle against casteist values into the realm of modern art, Sawarkar creates a visual idiom that transcends the particularity of caste oppression to invite universal human communication and the possibility of a discrimination-free society.

This analysis contributes to understanding Dalit art not merely as political expression but as a comprehensive aesthetic practice that fulfills the often-neglected cultural and spiritual dimensions of the Ambedkarite movement. Sawarkar's work demonstrates that genuine liberation encompasses both external social transformation and internal spiritual development, offering a model for how art can serve as both mirror of social reality and pathway to transcendence.

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Introduction

The artistic expressions of Dalit communities represent a profound intersection of aesthetics, politics, and spiritual liberation. This essay explores Dalit art through the lens of Savi Sawarkar's paintings, situating them within the Ambedkarite-Buddhist perspective that envisions liberation beyond mere socio-political emancipation. Savi's work exemplify how Dalit art functions not only as protest against caste oppression but also as a pathway toward aesthetic fulfillment and spiritual transcendence—a comprehensive vision of liberation aligned with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy.

The Multidimensional Nature of Liberation

The Ambedkarite movement teaches us that the goal set by Bodhisattva Babasaheb Ambedkar has sometimes been reduced to merely socio-political liberation. However, Dr. Ambedkar's vision for liberation went far beyond the socio-political realm—essential though that is—to include cultural, aesthetic, and Dhammic (spiritual) dimensions. Unlike Marx and other revolutionaries, Ambedkar recognized that true transformation requires not only structural changes but also a revolution in consciousness.

This comprehensive view of liberation is reflected in Savi Sawarkar's artistic philosophy. As a well-known Ambedkarite-Buddhist artist, Savi strives to unite aesthetic awareness with an acute sense of suffering caused by social and political injustice. His painting "Untouchable Carrying Dead Cow" looks at the harsh reality of atrocious injustice without pity or sentimentality, but with an invitation to human empathy. The Untouchable figure is depicted as oppressed and outcast, yet simultaneously, his eyes are lit with dignity and the potential for transcendence. Through this aesthetic approach, Sawarkar introduces a perspective that raises our awareness toward a liberation that ultimately transcends the mentality that creates caste oppression.

Artistic Language of the Oppressed in Sawarkar's Work

The artistic language developed within Dalit communities offers unique ways of expressing lived experiences, perspectives, and resistance through distinctive symbols and creative expressions. Sawarkar has developed a visual idiom that is "distinct and different from traditional, modernist and post-modernist idioms of elite aesthetic practices that hover between high aestheticism and unbridled free market." His rugged lines express the anguish of untouchability, and his keen sense of bodily existence differs markedly from the cultivated sensuality of high or pop art.

Sawarkar's figures are "contorted and skewed by brutal facts of casteist exploitation," yet they simultaneously express Buddhist aesthetic values of liberation. Unlike figures in popular art, Sawarkar's subjects are not "watching being watched"—they are figures traumatized by pain, yet possessing an "indomitable and quiet courage which no exploiter can subdue." They are

"defeated but not destroyed," reaching out to the human and non-human world through their pain, a movement that leads them "out of pain into the deep serenity of liberation."

This artistic language employs symbolic choices that convey messages of empowerment, solidarity, and the reclamation of cultural identity. These symbols become visual shorthand for complex historical experiences and aspirations for social transformation. Through his distinctive visual language, Sawarkar preserves Dalit identity and transmits collective experiences across generations.

Being as Beautiful: Reclaiming Dignity Through Art

Oppression is perpetuated through misrepresentation or underrepresentation of Dalit communities in mainstream culture. Sawarkar's work directly challenges this misrepresentation by insisting on the dignity inherent in Dalit existence. His paintings assert that human existence is dignified and beautiful regardless of caste identity.

The way Sawarkar's "*Untouchable* stares at you compels us for deeply engaged human communication which transcends the particularity of its socio-cultural context." This gaze invites viewers to "transcend the limited, caste-prejudiced self that is arrested in shallow materialistic privileged comforts." Through this confrontational but dignified gaze, Sawarkar reclaims representation for Dalit communities, challenging symbolic choices that have historically been employed to subjugate or marginalize Dalit groups.

By highlighting the beauty and dignity inherent in Dalit lives, Sawarkar creates spaces that promote inclusivity and accessibility, inviting audiences to break the binaries between oppressed and oppressor to recognize shared humanity. His canvas "is not just an illustration of the problem of untouchability or caste-oppression or Devadasi, but he also expresses that suffering could be sublime and could transcend the situation itself."

Re-caste'ing Beauty Through Buddhist Aesthetics

Sawarkar's work reimagines notions of beauty through a Buddhist-Ambedkarite lens. His art "alters the visual space of contemporary Indian visual-culture through strategies that are difficult to explain in terms of modern or traditional aesthetics." It is "not just a vision of the eye burning, but it delivers an aesthetic sensibility that expresses social concerns as well as the eye going through a burning transformation."

This transformation of aesthetic vision aligns with Dr. Ambedkar's assertion that "the greatest thing the Buddha taught the world is that the world cannot be reformed except by the reform of the mind of man and of the world." Ambedkar famously noted in his celebrated work, "Annihilation of Caste," that "Caste is a notion, it is a state of mind... What mind creates, mind can undo."

Sawarkar's reimagining of beauty challenges discriminatory beauty norms that have historically contributed to the marginalization of certain caste groups. His approach fosters a more inclusive and diverse definition of beauty through creative practices that value equality and liberation. By redefining beauty in terms that center Dalit experiences, Sawarkar challenges hierarchical aesthetic notions that have privileged upper-caste perspectives and devalued expressions from marginalized communities.

The Soteriological Dimension: Art as Path to Enlightenment

The Buddhist understanding of liberation (*vimutti*) provides an important framework for interpreting Sawarkar's art. As described in Buddha's teachings, *vimutti* is not merely ordinary psychological, socio-political, or cultural freedom (although those are not excluded), but goes much beyond. It involves breaking free from the fetters binding us to lower levels of mundane existence: the fetter of belief in an essential, unchanging self (habit), the fetter of attachment to religious observances as ends in themselves (superficiality), and the fetter of doubt and indecision (vagueness).

Sawarkar's art embodies this soteriological dimension by portraying figures that, despite their suffering, demonstrate the possibility of transcendence. His work reflects Buddha's fundamental teaching (Four Noble Truths) that begins with the acknowledgment that "the world is full of suffering" and even "the world is on fire." Yet, like the Buddha who attained liberation through direct experience of the true nature of things, Sawarkar's art suggests the possibility of enlightenment through confronting suffering directly.

This soteriological aspect is evident in how Sawarkar's figures, though traumatized by pain, exhibit a movement "caused by pain, leading them out of pain into the deep serenity of liberation." This mirrors the Buddhist approach of "not escaping from suffering but facing and transforming it." Through his art, Sawarkar demonstrates that the path to liberation passes through, rather than around, the reality of suffering.

Art as Transformative Practice in Ambedkar's Vision

Dr. Ambedkar recognized the value of art and culture in the revolution he launched. He himself painted a beautiful picture of the Buddha with *open* eyes and famously expressed how he would like an image of a *walking* Buddha, symbolizing compassion in action. Sawarkar fulfills this aesthetic dimension in the post-Buddhist-conversion movement, a dimension often neglected in discourses about Ambedkarite politics.

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism on October 14, 1956, opened "a window to see Indian civilization in a new light for privileged and underprivileged alike." This transformation was not merely religious but represented a comprehensive vision for rebuilding a national culture based on liberty, equality, and fraternity—principles Ambedkar enshrined in the preamble of the Indian Constitution and learned from the Buddha's teachings.

Sawarkar carries forward this vision by bringing "the struggle against casteist values right into the citadel modern art." His work provides "an aesthetic-eye to locate and look at inhuman sufferings where a human can respond to another human." His art "invites us to go beyond a particularity of cultures and calls us to transcend prejudiced mind against any form of discrimination, to create a discrimination-less society and a culture of liberation based on genuine liberty, equality, and fraternity."

Intersectionality and the Path to Complete Liberation

Understanding intersectionality in Dalit aesthetics is crucial, as the artistic language often reflects the recognition that individuals may face multiple forms of oppression. Sawarkar's work acknowledges these intersections by confronting the complex realities of caste oppression while simultaneously pointing toward universal human experiences.

The aesthetic experience in Sawarkar's art transcends boundaries and unites audiences in fundamental human experiences of sorrow and salvation. His work demonstrates that appreciating the artistic language of Dalit communities requires an openness to diverse forms of expression and a recognition of the resilience inherent in these creative acts.

Ambedkar's emphasis on the need for social, political, cultural, and spiritual liberation finds visual expression in Sawarkar's paintings. As Ambedkar stated, "The goal of man's life is not reached unless and until he has fully cultivated his mind." Sawarkar's art contributes to this cultivation by asserting Dalit agency, reclaiming narratives previously controlled by dominant groups, and fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment that challenges historical marginalization.

Conclusion

Savi Sawarkar's art, viewed through the Ambedkarite-Buddhist perspective, represents a powerful aesthetic movement that combines creative expression with political consciousness and spiritual insight. His work demonstrates that true liberation encompasses not only socio-political emancipation but also cultural transformation and spiritual transcendence.

Through his distinctive artistic language, reclaimed representations, reimagined notions of beauty, and liberatory aesthetics, Sawarkar challenges systemic oppression while affirming the dignity and humanity of marginalized communities. His art embodies Dr. Ambedkar's vision that genuine social transformation requires both external reforms and internal transformation—what Ambedkar called "the reform of the mind of man."

By creating art that simultaneously confronts the harsh realities of caste oppression and points toward transcendence, Sawarkar fulfills the aesthetic dimension of the Ambedkarite movement. His work demonstrates that art can function not merely as aesthetic object but as vital social and spiritual practice that confronts injustice, reclaims dignity, and manifests the Buddhist path to liberation from all forms of suffering and oppression.