

Illustrating caste



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Deeptha Achar Photo: Special arrangement

The idea of Dalit art would challenge caste notions of beauty and aesthetics, feels Deeptha Achar.

Dalit art is going where Indian art discourse has not ventured before —responding to a society divided on caste, through the artistic medium. Despite the fact that Indian art has strong foundations in caste, its history offers little insight into it, directing you to the realm of anthropology instead. At a recent lecture at Mumbai's Bhau Daji Lad museum, Professor Deeptha Achar pointed to the lack of writing on the linkage between caste and modern art.

Excerpts from a conversation:

When and how did the term Dalit art find its way into the discourse of on Indian art history?

My point is that the term has not as yet found mainstream acceptance as a category in contemporary Indian art. The question we may ask, therefore, is why not? Only rare artists like Savi Sawarkar (Delhi) and Chandru (Chennai) have sought to identify their work within such a framework, roughly in the 1980s.

Categories and labels are always somewhat problematic. Could you highlight some concerns with the definition of what is Dalit art is and who is a Dalit artist?

Dalit art is a relatively new category. Investigations of Dalit art have conventionally been part of anthropological or folklore studies and only in the past decade or so have there been discussions on the idea of Dalit art in art criticism or visual culture. These discussions have taken either a recuperative route by invoking traditional Dalit practice or they have concentrated on the idea of visual imagery in the context of Dalits in the public sphere. In rare instances, there is a focus on a particular artist or work and these have, in many cases, been either very tentative or sharply polemical. Since it is a category in the making it would be difficult to draw clear boundaries.

What is the need for this category? For instance, we do not have a category called upper caste art and so on.

Certainly one function of a category such as Dalit art is to underline the idea that the apparently unmarked or caste neutral category of modern Indian art is also constituted by caste — its concerns, its thematics, its understanding and representation of social structures have a caste dimension. What goes as “contemporary Indian art” is an unmarked elite category; it does not need to proclaim its elite position. A category such as Dalit art would problematise the caste dimensions of apparently unproblematic terms.

As you have pointed out, there is a lack of ‘individualisation’ in Dalit art – works of art without names. And you don’t find many artists who consciously position themselves as Dalit artists or works that are self-consciously Dalit. Who then are the Dalit artists and what role does their work play in the art discourse?

Attempts to study art within the frame of Dalit thought have often worked away from individuation, though authorship is central to the institutional structures that house contemporary Indian art. A few artists such as Savi and Chandru have consciously taken on this identity. Many more are beginning to do so but have not found prominent gallery or institutional support.

Art production in India has been with Dalit castes, that is the artisanal castes, since the beginning of caste itself. Isn’t it ironical then that Dalit art is seen as a sub-category?

Artisan castes have traditionally been the producers of objects for aesthetic consumption, as sculptors, painters, weavers, potters, etc. So yes, it is a bit ironical to view Dalit art as a sub-category or as an oppositional category to ‘Indian art’.

Could you broadly describe the framework of Dalit art — the themes it engages with, the socio-political messages, treatment of subjects, and how it deals with canonised notions of ‘beauty’ and ‘aesthetics’?

Dalit art is perhaps a category in the making, so it would be difficult to be specific about precise frameworks or themes and so on, but one might imagine that the idea of Dalit art would challenge caste notions of beauty and aesthetics.

Please elaborate on the difficulty of visually representing caste.

For example, in a realist figurative mode, how does one address the problem of visually representing the caste body? How does one engage caste and community through drawing a figure, a landscape or an object? Are these simply elements of a drawing or are there more structural things which one can do with the design? These are questions that might confront a Dalit artist.

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