



BOOK REVIEW

Gary Michael Tartakov (Ed.),  
*Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*

Foreward by Sukhadeo Thorat 2012.

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***Biraj Mehta Rathi***

Independent Researcher  
bmehta18@gmail.com

Almost a decade ago, Gary Michael Tartakov's (ed). *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery* charted out a landscape, what eminent art historian Professor Y.S. Alone reviewed as an unattempted terrain in art history (Alone 2015, 255). The book, with a foreword by Professor Sukhadeo Thorat, is a compilation of thirteen essays, nine of which written by Tartakov himself (with the introduction) along with Nicholas Jaoul, Owen Lynch, David Szanton, and Saurabh Dube with hundred plus illustrations that provide a first comprehensive account of Dalit/Buddhist/ Navayana visual art and imagery. As stated in the foreword to the book, it promises to go beyond an exposition of Dalit exploitation, aiming to reveal the sources of exclusion along with Dalit resistance to centuries of exclusion and persecution (Thorat 2012, xviii). It paints a wide canvas and provides a timely intervention into providing comprehensive accounts of Dalit art forms ranging from Hindu temples as sites of exclusions, the Sanchi stupa, the 'Ambedkar statue phenomena', the power of Ambedkar Jayanti meetings and processions, popular art forms, explorations through Mithila paintings, fine art forms particularly Dalit artist Savi Savarkar and imageries of everyday life of Dalits in material lived world (to name a few). It aims to not merely explain the nature and significance of its expression, it provides a narrative of the evolution of Navayana tradition, including its appropriation/ misappropriation and resulting voices of resistance. It is a significant contribution as it opens avenues of further explorations in Dalit art and it's historical inquiry.

A decade (since its publication) has witnessed an increase not merely in the spaces of articulation of the Dalit experience, but also in the force of its articulation. Protest art particularly after the 'institutional murder' of Rohith Vemula,<sup>1</sup> increased representation of caste in mainstream cinema (Neeraj Ghaywan and Nagraj Manjule being more prominent), alternative cinema and proliferation of web-based streaming platforms such as Subhash Kapoor's web series *Maharani*,<sup>2</sup> resistance visualisation and making of counter public through public music (Adarsh Shinde, Sambhaji Bhagat, Sheetal Sathe and Sachin Mali, Kadubai Kharat, Ginni Mahi, Sumit Samos to name a few)<sup>3</sup> and street performances (Yalgaar Sanskrutik Manch Mumbai, Janam in Delhi, Irulat Cultural Troupe in Tamil Nadu, Vanangana in Bundelkhand to name a few), continued rural activism traditions (such as Lavani, Tamasha (Maharashtra), Theyyam (Kerala), Godna Art (Bihar) traditionally practiced by Dalit women style, now translated itself onto paper in its modern form. The graphic novel "Bhimayana" is illustrated by Godna artists Subhash Vyam and Durga Bai Vyam (to name a few) and representation in art galleries such as Dalit art festival *Vaanam* featuring twenty two Dalit artists at DakshinChitra's gallery and recent exhibition 'Interrogations and Ideologies: A Quest for Equality' at the American Center, New Delhi has changed the discourse of representation of Dalits in visual culture and imagery.

Yet, the book remains an important and useful foundation for constructing further discourses in Dalit art historical engagements. As rightly pointed out by Prof Alone in his review, the book seems weak in the contextualisation of the Neo Buddhist/Dalit imagery in the context of being an oppositional force of cultural nationalism in India (Alone 2015, 258). Yet, in its introduction the editor emphatically states that this study is important for understanding the democracy of the Indian modern state, of how far it embraces that goal of inclusion alongside competing forces of capitalist markets (Tartakov 2012, 6). Hence, this book is an important moment of disruption, that is, recognition of the graded inequality that pervades not only our visual perception of the lived world but also the very material and theoretical ways in which the Indian society is arranged and constructed. Further, it acknowledges the forms of resistance in its discussion of the visual imageries of Buddhist traditional art, Ambedkar's statues, public displays of Dalit imagery as well as Dalit art for commercial sale and exhibits in art galleries that aim to make caste visible and develop true prospects of democracy (Tartakov 2012, 7-8). The

first essay “Art and Identity” provides a broad landscape of the visual imagery from the past, that is, ancient Buddhism to Dalit present that sets the tone for the rest of the book. The second essay on Hindu temples is one of pioneering works in examination of the caste based unequal society established through architectural arrangements of the religious sites and its city spaces. The third essay on the ancient Buddhist architecture of Sanchi provides valuable analysis of the adoption of this heritage into the current Dalit lifeworld and political/ personal existence. Picking from the previous essays, the fourth and fifth essays on “Politics of Popular Art: Maharashtra” and “Learning the use of Symbolic Means: Dalits, Ambedkar Statues and State of Uttar Pradesh” respectively, provide insightful commentaries on Ambedkar’s statues that provide an iconographic image of his values of education, constitutional morality, modernism and the making of democratic polity. Commissioned by governments, envisaged by civic town planners, countryside artisans and the spectator public, appropriated by political parties; the essays provide reflections on the formation of the Dalit public and popular imagination. The sixth and seventh essays “The Navayana Creation of the Buddha Image” and “Navayana Buddhist on the Public Stage”, continue to provide indispensable theoretical tools for understanding identity formations through practical means of visual imagery thereby creating concrete meanings and its applications. The eighth essay “We Make these Floats so That They See What We See...” dwells into the powerful expressions of the Ambedkar Jayanti festival that do not merely highlight the force of visual imagery but also illustrate the unifying role that religiosity plays (analysis of the concept of *darshan*) in building the Dalit polity. The ninth essay on “The Mithila Painting: A Dalit Intervention” is an interesting analysis of how caste identities have largely been invisible in the development of this art in market spaces; while being integral, yet distinct with art practices of other castes, the essay is an interesting intervention in contemporary context as its practice continues to be largely driven by urban market that romanticises this art form. The tenth and eleventh essays examine Dalit art as an inclusive category, a “lived politics” (Yengde 2023) derived from experiences that make a mark in the elite gallery spaces (illustrated through Savarkar’s art). It also provides a perspective from the “... outside...” (non-Dalit community) giving it a critical interpretative understanding that counters the tendency to mystify Dalit Art, yet, acknowledging that the ‘outsiders’ understanding must come from the experience of the Dalit (235–237).

The twelfth essay “Dalit Art and Imagery of the Everyday Life” and the thirteenth essay “Sister Mysore seeks the Canon” extend these reflections and analysis to the material world and forced occupations that one inherits (discussion of the *safai karmacharis*) bringing into conversation the larger philosophical, political, social aesthetic question of dignity and accountability of life’s worth.

Since its publication, the book has been much referenced by young researchers, academicians and art theorists as it provides a sort of architectonic structure<sup>4</sup> that lays a foundation (that is firm yet fluid underneath, like earth’s tectonic plates) for possibility of the dialogue between Dalits and non-Dalits (both from India and the world). As explained by Prof. Thorat, this book is important because it engages with a wide variety of Dalit aesthetic experience; ranging from ancient architecture, manual scavenging, rural art forms, popular culture, and appropriation of Buddha and Ambedkar as useful instrumental symbols to expressionist art forms. Further, it makes a statement in locating the ideological roots of caste based exclusion and also forms in which the same was resisted (2012, xviii-xx) . This analysis remains relevant even today but most importantly the book provides a path to move away from the question of ‘What is Dalit art?’ or ‘What is the source, nature, significance and value of Dalit Art’ to a more fundamental exploration of the conditions and possibilities of Dalit aesthetics, its practice and its significant role in ensuring social justice in Indian democracy. The Dalit subject becomes an active agent in redefining art and democracy itself, as it supplies an epistemology from experiences of the most marginalised community to the normatively established political, social, economic and cultural orders; thereby exposing its faults and systems of exclusion. The book thus serves as a productive ground and lays the foundation of possibility of evaluating the constantly evolving multiple competing assertions solely on the basis of democratic reason and evidence in an atmosphere free from coercion; whereby the Dalit subjectivity and collective is also redefining itself.

In recent times augmented realities and tech-art, further acted as enablers in highlighting issues of inequalities and social justice. While accessibility of this sophisticated knowledge system and tools remains a challenge, Dalit interventions in tech digital art space has made it possible to reach out to audiences across the globe. Few of the examples include the global virtual music concert, “Radical

Rhythm” organised by Equality Labs in partnership with Alphabet Workers Union (AWU), Neelam Social and Ambedkar association of North America (on 10th August 2022) hosted Dalit artists and speakers to address caste based discriminatory practices at Google thereby bringing attention to caste in global context (ETHR World 2022), digital artworks of artists Rahee Punyashloka a.k.a. Artedkar, Osheen Siva, Sri Vamsi Matta, Vineet Gadam, Siddhesh Gautam a.k.a Bakery Prasad (participants of the Dalit History Month April 2023, Chand 2023) provide useful interventions in reaching out to a global audience and highlight caste based inequality deepened by economic globalisation. These artistic technological intermediations are significant as they facilitate interrogation into visual manifestations that have been operating within the conceptual framework of what Prof. Alone calls “protected ignorance” (Alone 2013, 140). While the book may not directly address this nor the technology based Dalit art interventions, it remains one of the pioneering attempts to explain how caste life narratives become subjects of visual language.

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## Notes

1. Examples (to state a few): Soon after the suicide, 23rd January 2016, students expressed their outrage through art on canvas, cloth, thermocol and even paper cups at the University of Hyderabad campus (Janyala 2016). More recently, street art at strategic places in Mumbai in 2021; a collage of double page of newspaper articles regarding India's political current affairs forms the backdrop of posters that pastes a heart breaking excerpt from Rohith Vemula's suicide note (Anonymous 2012)
2. As discussed by Harish Wankhede in his article "OTT Platforms and the New Dalit Characters in Indian Cinema."
3. As listed by Ingole Prakash in his online article "Ambedkarite Protest Music and the Making of a 'Counter Public'".
4. This term is in reference to the term used by eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant. The term architectonic refers to the art of building or the art of constructing a system on the basis of the idea of the whole and that idea then serves as the outline for the system. Kant explores the subject of architectonic in his book *Critique of Pure Reason* section titled 'Transcendental Doctrine of Method', chapter III 'The Architectonic of Pure Reason'. There he talks of the art of making a system out of a mere aggregate of sensations (not technical reason that merely aggregates information. Rather, this system is an articulation that develops, refines, and reclaims itself infinitely through its own internal logic (Kant & Guyer 2014, 691).

