Art, Work and Artwork—Lines of Inequality in Bhagwati Prasad's Political Artivism

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Original Article

Art, Work and Artwork—Lines of Inequality in Bhagwati Prasad's Political Artivism

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Abstract

This article focuses on the works of Bhagwati Prasad, a New Delhi–based Indian graphic artist, with two book-length works—*Tinker, Solder, Tap* (Prasad, 2009) and *The Water Cookbook* (Prasad, 2011)—and several short graphic narratives to his credit. Prasad has recently also come into the picture for his internet zines, particularly for his *Hashtag* series, in which he showcases the political power of art. In his forthcoming project, titled *Auzaaron ki chuppi aur Kolaahal* (*Silence and Clamour of Tools*, unpublished), he attempts to chart a history of Delhi, through the eyes (or hands that use tools of construction) of migrant labour: labour that crosses over geographical lines or borders in search of 'work' and food.

Basing itself on the mentioned artworks of Prasad, this article attempts to understand the relationship between 'art' with 'work'. In doing so, it would look at how artwork in tandem becomes a tool of creating socio-political awareness and how such 'conscious propagandizing' of art (which I call artivism) becomes a final cry for change in structures that are deeply entrenched in hierarchy-ridden socio-economic or caste/class disparities. Much of Prasad's artistic expression is rooted in a characteristically Indian cityscape and what can specifically be termed as peri-urban sustenance in the marginal spaces, which the postcolonial, neo-imperial and casteized Indian condition constructs. His artworks, besides being inspired by his own lived reality as a child that grew up in a Dalit, working-class habitat, forge the indispensability of a downtrodden workforce that builds and constructs cities with the *clamour* of their tools, yet remains invisible and *silent* to histories. In an atypical but exciting way, Prasad swaps the artist and the worker, dismantling the artificial divide between their societal positions. The methodological approach this article uses to interpret and assess Prasad's activist art is through the notion of 'lines': the smallest unit of drawing out a sketch on a page. Lines, by definition, connect dots while giving these connections a semblance of shape, expression and meaning. These lines that connect also concretize into lines that divide and segregate. This article argues that the migrant physical labourer (often those belonging to the lower castes) or the *shramik*, twice removed beyond lines of inclusion/exclusion that society draws with the indelible ink of caste and class, remains unknown, invisible and hated perhaps, for the very work they do. The artist-as-a-worker trope is fundamental to understanding the ways in which lines of art and lines of work together critique this discriminatory discourse and re-form political consciousness. In doing the intersectional critical analysis, this study will draw concepts from the multi-disciplinary theoretical traditions of Marxist humanism, caste studies, graphic art appreciation and culture studies.

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Keywords

Artwork, caste-class, cultural politics, Dalit, manual labour, Schedule Caste, social change, visual culture

> This tent is both a habitat and a staging; when it is ready, I will cook all day outside it, in a large cauldron, meats with spices and a recipe both familiar and invented.
> Where would the gravy be but for the water.
>
> —B. Prasad in *The Water Cookbook*

Bhagwati Prasad is not a professional cook, but he often titles his artworks as though he were one: *The Water Cookbook* (2010) and 'The Stutter of Food' (n.p.), and his idyllic 'Begumpura' (n.p.) (a fictive town he creates), where some of his stories are located, is a world of food, an imaginary space where everyone can eat and live with equality. Prasad refers to himself as a person who 'works' with 'drawing and performance'. His projects have been sponsored by the prestigious India Foundation for the Arts (artist-in-residence), Sarai programme at the CSDS (The Center for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi) and various international foundations. He experimented with a mixed media installation using video, drawing, sculpture and performance during his three-month art residency at AIR Antwerp, Belgium (2013). Digital media has played a crucial role in amplifying Bhagwati Prasad's artwork, enabling it to reach a broader, more global audience and engage with contemporary issues through a digital lens. His use of digital platforms and social media has been particularly effective in disseminating his works like the 'Hashtag series', which has gained traction on various social networks since 2017. This series utilizes the immediacy and viral nature of digital media to comment on societal issues, allowing Prasad to interact with audiences directly and instantaneously. Additionally, his performances and installations often incorporate digital elements, which are then shared online to expand the reach and impact of his physical exhibitions. The digital dissemination of his art not only enhances its accessibility but also invites interactive engagement and discourse, reflecting his thematic focus on the interplay between technology, labour and culture. This strategic use of digital media underscores Prasad's recognition of its power as a tool for modern storytelling and social commentary.

Bhagwati Prasad represents a refreshingly inventive approach to graphic storytelling from a methodology that artistically explores the intersectionality of labour, machinery and work. But Prasad is not a popular name in the Indian graphic novels/works/visual cultures scenario. In fact, his work has not been included much in the Indian graphic narrative canon (if there is one), excluding some stand-alone graphic short stories in Vidyun Sabhaney's anthology *First Hand Vol. 2* (Prasad, 2018). Based out of the 'heart' of India—Delhi—his art/works speak mostly of the 'invisible' people and 'visible' problems around them. In *The Water Cookbook* (under the chapter titled 'The Stutter of Food'), he paints himself as a cook who

> put(s) meat on each plate and tell(s) a story. Of food and the world, of love and longing, of belonging and of sharing. Stories desire worlds, however difficult the terrain. (Prasad, 2011, n.p.)

The metaphor of food for stories is both visceral and olfactory. Cooking is work, but it is also a culinary art. Prasad's works (performative, art exhibitions, workshops and projects) blur the 'lines' between work and art. Sometimes silently, sometimes with a bang, they rupture, renovate and recreate 'lines'. Not surprisingly then, his interview with *Fukt* (a German magazine) is titled. The artist-worker creates 'drawings with ink on it, *lines* that merge worlds of animal, techne, and habitat' (Prasad, 2011, in 'The Stutter …', n.p.). A line is one of the most fundamental units of drawing, as it can be stretched in any direction. It creates illusions of depth and dimension. A line can be used to carry and convey the dynamic/dormant energies that an artwork comprises. Lines can show texture, structure, emotion, movement, form, function, economy and abstraction. All of these put together make lines oxymoronically the most fundamental complexity of composing and interpreting art.

[AQ2]

How do lines that draw out structures, hierarchies and rigid symmetries populate Prasad's creative universe? What do his visual narratives, with or without the accompaniment of words, intend to describe? In the answers of this question lie the answers of another question asked above. What are the parallels he poses between the tropes of: art and work, thought and sweat, cooking and drawing, devouring and viewing, and also possibly an individual and the collective? He seems to be addressing, through his performances and sketches, the role of an artist in a body politic, his functions and value and, predominantly, his responsibility as an artist-writer in his social habitat.

Speaking of lines, Prasad creates this fundamental complexity in drawing water as a visual metaphor. In many of his artworks, he draws water as lines: broken, dotted, deep and bold, all of which signify varying meanings in differing contexts. Interestingly, not just his, but a lot of politically informed Indian graphic narratives make use of the water symbolism. Orijit Sen's (1994) *River of Stories*, believed to be India's first (chronologically) graphic novel, made the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save River Narmada Campaign) a much politically debated and media-covered issue back in the 1990s, the plot and setting of his work. The novel talks of how the civil movement in parts of Gujarat and Maharashtra took charge of the Indian government's apparently benevolent project of building a massive dam across the river and how people came together in protesting against it, as it posed a serious threat to the region's ecological sanctity. Water, in this graphic novel, serves as the uniting force among the protesting masses. Sarnath Banerjee's (2015) *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* also talks about the insidious 'water racism' of India's capital city, which results from a nexus of systemic structural inequalities and corporate monopoly markets that commoditize water, creating a cloud of pseudo-scarcity around it.

But the most striking use of water imagery is made in *Bhimayana*, the visually aesthetic graphic novel, loosely based on the life of Bhimrao Ambedkar, India's foremost intellectual revolutionary who mobilized a large-scale anti-caste movement in post-independent India. *Bhimayana* talks of a pre-independence India, where problems of caste-based discrimination were so rampantly atrocious that even drinkable water was not freely accessible to people belonging to lower rungs of the caste ladder. The historically significant Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 was Ambedkar's anti-Brahminism movement, to make water a freely accessible resource for one and all and to eventually criminalize untouchability. *Bhimayana* refers to Namdeo Dhasal's poetry (another writer-activist known for his contribution to Dalit literature/movement):

> The heart of water is generous and reaches the very roots/It's healing touch makes the scabs of a thousand sorrows fall/What walls, how many walls, can you build around water/How will you shackle the rushing form of water? (Dhasal's 'Water', qtd in Vyam et al., 2011)

Since caste system had been legitimizing an exclusionary structure of society, on the purity-pollution principle, a major segment of Indian society remained devoid of accessing water from public places. Water, therefore, is very sensibly poeticized to effectively wash away the lines of coercive exclusion and oppression. Another Dalit blogger named Siddhesh Gautam (n.d.) (also a visual artist and writer), under the title Bakery Prasad, writes on his blog that despite the constitutional abolition of untouchability, Dalits are treated as lowly untouchables sin they are born impure. Suited to do only menial jobs such as tanning leather, cleaning lavatories and latrines, manual scavenging, cremating dead bodies, etc., they ought not to be treated equally with the middle and upper castes. These duties have been seen conventionally belonging to the domain of Dalits. In all of this cleaning and purification, water is essential, but it was the very thing that was and still is a matter of contention for Dalits. Bhimrao Ambedkar started the modern Dalit revolution during the British colonial period and firmed up the equality provisions by way of the Reservation Act in the 1950 Constitution of India. Yet, in the modern post-industrialist context, Mukul Sharma (2022) argues that politicization of environmental concerns fuels a condition within which pollution-causing industries and the 'polluted' Dalit workers' bodies become interchangeable entities.

[AQ3]

[AQ4]

Prasad too, like Ambedkar, reiterates the readers' attention to this age-old problem of water/caste matrix. His visual adaptation of Challapally Swaroopa Rani et al.'s (2018) poem 'Water', in Sabhaney's graphic narratives anthology, is a telling example of how the artist visualizes water's historical relationship with caste. As the poem reads,

> It (water) knows the difference of race/ between the Samaria
> Woman and Jesus the Jew/it also knows the sub-caste difference between leather and spool. (n.p.)

Prasad matches the words with resonantly multi-layered images of water in a well, strikingly similar to the image of a whirlpool, scarce rain as tear drops from skies, and symbolic sketches of water as being used by multinational companies to make processed 'mineral water' and bottled soft drinks such as Pepsi. In a varying combination of actual and implied lines, these images juxtapose the poem's anti-caste narrative with an environmentalist leaning. If a century ago, it was caste that kept water an inequitably distributed natural resource, it is the inexorable nature of capitalism today that has morphed caste into class, determining water's unequal access and distribution, only in renewed forms of segregation. Ramkrishna Mukherjee (1999) comments on how the British colonial rule in India influenced an 'invagination' (p. 1759) of the caste structure into an equally insidious class structure. Class became the new caste. Clean, accessible water thus became a commodity only for those that can afford it.

Water is a much politicized issue in India, as access to it has been historically tied to the questions of caste, class and regional schisms in complicated and multifactorial dimensions. Economically too, it has been an entity/commodity imbued with the dynamics of power and control. Dalits and other peripheral communities (Muslims, SCs and STs) have borne the brunt of oppressive exclusion in the name of water, as they have been denied rights over owning, constructing and using water bodies such as tube wells and ponds. Narratives and texts centring around water have always been written and circulated to expose deeply problematic casteist and communitarian attitudes that clutch the Indian society.

The United Nations' (2023) Progress Chart towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) warns that SDG-6 (clean water and sanitation, hygiene [WASH]) might fail to be achieved by 2030, and at the current pace, thrice as much effort is required to meet the goal in time. In India, there still remains a large percentage of population without access to clean drinking water and sanitation. Problems associated with clean water and hygiene are not restricted to the urban–rural geographies, but also to caste–class figurative boundaries. Although caste-based atrocities have been incriminated by law, there still are socio-cultural attitudes towards caste which hinder India's growth as a nation.

In the 77 years of independence from British rule that India has had, modernization has been synonymous to westernization. More and more people are denouncing caste as an entity and debunking it to own a more egalitarian outlook. But progressive change is moderately paced and massive societal reformation is still to be achieved. Caste has not yet completely been abandoned as it continues to be an inextricable element of familial identity. Believed to have its beginnings in the Vedic Period, the regressive system has since undergone multilateral evolution through different eras and epochs. The underlying principle of the caste system—the dual ritual of purity and pollution—has remained a permanent blotch on the community's fabric. Even in this techno-cultural, digital age, caste prejudice taints the educated youth (Deshpande & Spears, 2016). Various social media platforms are a legitimate platforms to assess this claim as massive electoral campaigns in the General Election of India, 2024, were run in the name of caste. Among the four major constituents of caste, Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes are at the bottom rung of hierarchy, followed by Other Backward Classes (OBC). The marginalization of STs and SCs is conspicuously visible in the labour market, education industry, fields of health and nutrition, and access to basic shelter/safety (Arora & Choudhary, 2024; Deshpande, 2011). Dickin and Gabrielsson's (2023) study claims access to

WASH services is severely affected by social status and caste identity. Prakash et al. (2022) have also studied the access to public hygiene of WASH services and how the caste–class matrix influences the benefits associated with *Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan* (*SBA*, the Clean India Initiative, by the 2019 Modi Government campaign), and the socio-economically privileged upper caste people are often exclusive beneficiaries of such initiatives, policies and campaigns. Prasad's artwork engages with such uncomfortable truths and exposes the segregationist mindset gripping not just the upper echelons of administration but also the elite liberal intelligentsia that often critiques the state's inaction towards the issue, but is itself reluctant to initiate socially responsible action and street activism. It is at these junctures that artists such as Prasad come into the picture. They make their art act. With his work, Prasad redefines caste as not just having a ritualistic and archaic function, but a dynamic function of the modern market-led, neo-liberal economies, which continually create new pockets of the peri-urban poor, surviving on the scraps of the caste elite.

Prasad's artistry, it can be argued, focuses much on the relationship between 'thought and sweat', where thought functions as the metaphor for creativity/ideation and sweat, needless to explain, is the toil that any work brings along. His works critique the oppression that age-old structures of caste, class and race have wrecked, etched and branded on our very minds and bodies. An admirer of Ravidas (his *Begumpura* collection is inspired from the sixteenth-century Bhakti poet in pre-colonial India), he says that the 'lines' or chains of bondage, whether political or social, can be broken by making them *khallas.* The word *khallas* resonates with contemporary slang (in Marathi, Gujarati, colloquial Hindi and Urdu), but can be studied to find its etymological roots in the Arabic, where *khalli* means 'enough' or 'let it be', or in Sanskrit, where *khal* means bad or impure. Both, however, have evolved to variously mean: empty, free, completed, finished, free of slavery or bondage, in common parlance. Extensions of this word as in *Khalaasi* also mean daily wagers or *shramik*, working in ships, buses and other such places, for bare sustenance. Quoting Ravidas in the *Fukt* interview, Prasad says,

> *Kahe Ravidas, khallas chamara, jo hum-seh*
> *ri so meetu hamara.* [Says Ravidas, the tanner
> now free, all are co-inhabitants, co-travellers,
> my companions]

The *chamaar*, considered the lowest of the *chatur varna* (the fourfold hierarchical structure of the Hindu caste system), as he works with the carcass of animals, is in the real sense a free man as he knows no fears and dangers. Rejected and pushed yonder the 'lines' of ostracism, he has no worries or inhibitions. He can sing, travel and create his artworks with the hide of dead animals. His 'techne' or skill yields him livelihood, and the skin with which he works is also his 'habitat'. Whilst the world makes the 'lines' of exclusion and oppression for him, he draws his own 'lines' of fate and lives on his own terms. The tanner then is, in a Humboltian sense an artist: 'men who love their labour for its own sake, improve it by their own plastic genius and inventive skill, and thereby cultivate their intellect, ennoble their character, and exalt and refine their pleasures … But. Still, freedom is undoubtedly the indispensable condition' (qtd in Chomsky, 2013, p. 133).

Prasad's visual art deconstructs the panel (as central to the comics/graphic novel structure) as it breaks away from rectangles, squares, speech bubbles and captions. There are no perfect lines controlling his thought; instead, there are haphazard curves transforming into entangled wires and cables of the cityscape, grids transforming into streets and lanes, circuitous roads, as he draws out

> an excess—of wires, of pipes, of rooms, of songs, of bodies, of
> decorations. Garbage always overruns the grid. Labyrinthine
> built space is my idea of habitat. The grid is not attractive; it's violent. Our
> entanglement with animal and machine cannot be wished away, cleaned off.
> My whole work is that. (*Fukt*, 2019)

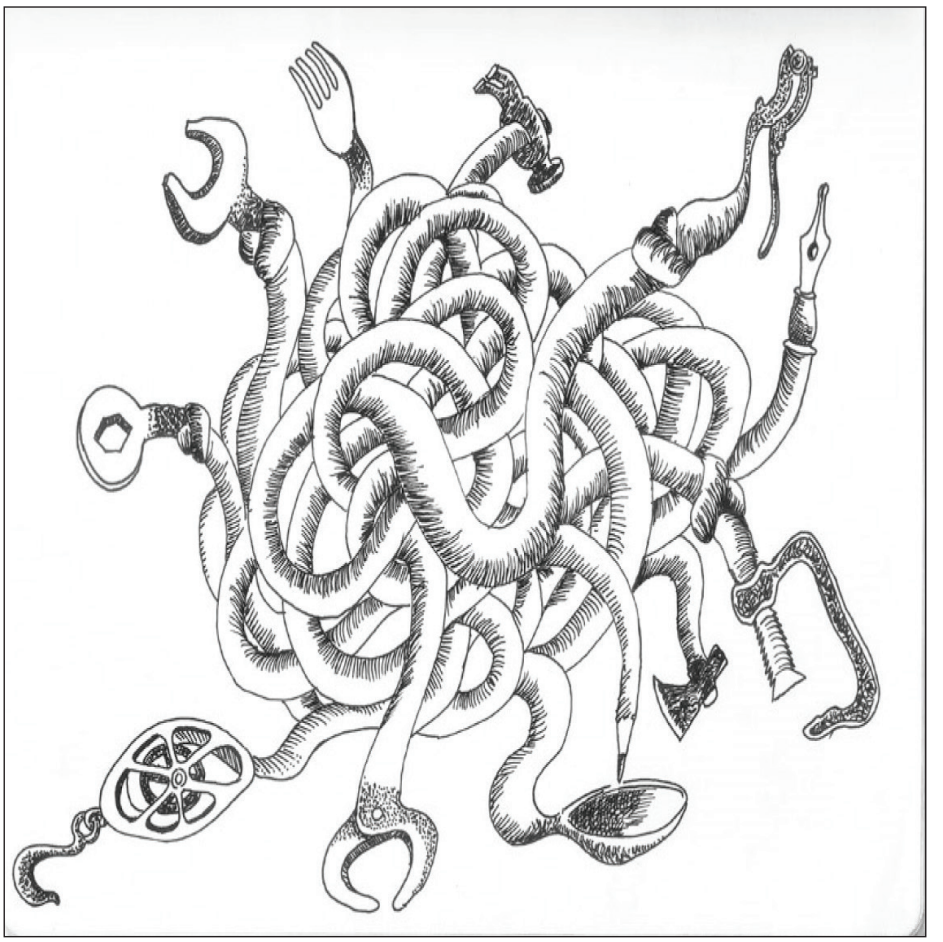


Figure 1. Image from *Auzaaron ki Chuppi aur Kolaahal* (Unpublished Work).

Figure 1 shows curved and entangled lines: tools of work attached to each wire/cable serve a polysemic function. It is so densely symbolic as the tools of labour included in the frame range from a hammer to a pen. These curvy enmesh could be anything from ropes, electric cables, water pipes, sewage pipes and intestines. The image is powerful as it is replete with indexical and symbolic associative images that invite the viewer's imagination to make critical connections between art and activism. Prasad composes an open visual poetry to titillate the readers' aesthetic response, which cannot afford to be apolitical in nature.

Violent and unattractive if they may be, as the artist himself categorizes his works, then what is its artistic/aesthetic value? Is Prasad's work a form of rejection of the *ars pour l'art* school of thought? Much of his work exists as drawings or sketchings and seldom has colours—an aesthetic decision he makes, quite consciously, it may be assumed. Drawing/sketching is a very close form of imitation, as it intends to record the moment in its 'is-ness'. Philip Rawson in his seminal book *Drawing* treats drawing as an important form of 'realization' or making things real (realization in the figurative sense, too, might hold true for Rawson). Drawing, he says, is a way of asserting the validity of an 'actual presence' of what the artist intends to show visually (Rawson, 1969, p. 19). Bhagwati Prasad is an artist who chooses to present the

'now' and the 'current', as it is or as it appears to him. Untrained in any school of painting (he holds no degree in fine arts), the choice to sketch is not out of a limitation, but an authorial intention to project truth in its barest minimum form, albeit as having a symbolic function. His internet zines by the name of *Hashtag* series, which go viral on social media platforms, are a case in point. He is quick to record through his zines, 'happenings of the world'.

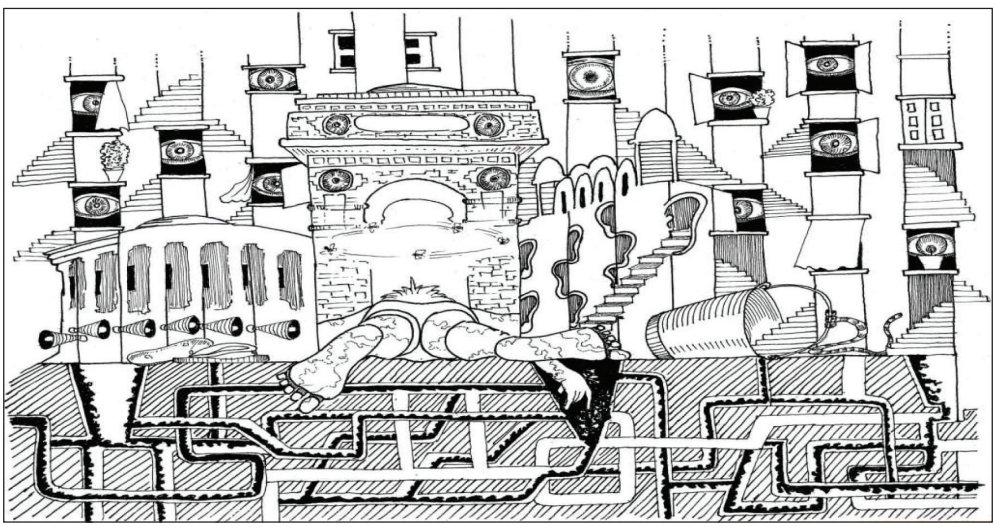


Figure 2. An Image from His *Hashtag* Series #deathinthesewers.

Figure 3. An Image from *Auzaaron ki Chuppi aur Kolaahal* (Unpublished).

Figure 4. '*Majdoor* Library': A Frame from Prasad's *Autographic* Collection (Unpublished).

Prasad's Delhi (or India), like St Ravidas's Begumpura, is not a world of equal hours of leisure for all. In a country where manual scavenging is still not entirely illegal (let alone dehumanizing), equal right to creativity is a dangerous and distant dream. It is through a cacophony of dense and enmeshed carvings that Prasad hits the viewer's hitherto detached sensibilities. The violence of the artwork besides blurring the line between art and stark imitation of reality brings to the forefront the daily wager, the manual scavenger, the mason and the mechanic in all their degraded, demeaned lifelessness. Davies (2018) speaks of a 'visual impenetrability' that Prasad's artwork creates, diagnosing and critiquing marginalized spaces that neoliberal projects of urbanization create. Prasad refers to the manual scavenger in his short graphic narrative titled *Chashmadeed*, or the eye witness, included in *First Hand: Volume 2*. In a complex enmeshing of visual symbols, he makes a *sutlee* (a thick rope made of jute), an eyewitness for a range of events in a day. The rope tied to a metal bucket in the hands of a manual scavenger witnesses his deep dive into a gutter (manhole), which he enters bare-bodied, sans safety equipment or appropriate work-wear. The rope functions as the inanimate/disembodied observer that bears testimony to the worker's crass dehumanization, in which he becomes one with toxic human excreta. His human body ceases to have a function beyond its base usability; it is forced to metamorphose into a contraption that scoops out blockages in the sewage 'waters'. Bacharach (2023) observes that conversations between art and political activism can help expose injustice to the audience. Documenting the world's wrong is not simply driven by a mimetic impulse; it also incites the viewer/reader to 'bear witness', through the (re)exhibition of both material and figurative components of historical events. This is what Prasad achieves, as he makes it implicit in the *shramik*'s plight. The reader's fear and gore-struck mute empowers an already corrupt political system. The image of a death in the sewers pleads agitation.

In his management of lines, Prasad works up images and pictures of the lowly *shramik*, who is indispensable to the society, but is doomed to be despised for what he is and what he does. Like a true artist, Prasad mediates the lines to bring focus to the body. 'Always the line, never the body' was the cry of Goya, lamenting the paintings of his time, as he saw 'only masses in light and masses in shadow' (Bodkin, 1927, p. 31). Likewise, Prasad too eschews lines for blobs and blotches of black against white, evades geometry and chooses a unique symmetry of thought developed into a symbol, instead.

Like the nineteenth-century French painter Gustave Courbet's (1849) iconic oil on canvas, 'The Stonebreakers' (painted only a year after Marx published his *Communist Manifesto* in 1848), which was revolutionary in its choice of theme and form, can be read/viewed as seething with 'socialist propaganda'. He, like Courbet, chooses to represent those limbs, those bodies and those faces, which are being constantly shoved off across the margins of a proclaimed social order. Those that make and create, slog and plough, are never the ones to derive profit from their industriousness. But unlike in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, art movements of Realism, which celebrated the working class and made an 'art subject' out of them (as opposed to their subtle romanticization), Prasad's art celebrates or fetishizes nothing, since in his case the artist himself is one of the *workers*. The drive to draw the lives of the workers comes from a lived reality, an internalized observation and not some book-acquired, refined notion of Socialist Realism. It is also noteworthy that much of Bhagwati Prasad's artwork sources itself from an urban dwelling labour. Since not all forms of labour are the same, his particular choice to show tools and objects a daily wage labourer uses in an urbanesque setting, compels the reader to redirect their gaze towards multiple intersectional layers that inform this choice. The labourer is an ultimate outsider, as he is a migrant; a derelict outcaste, as he belongs to the low caste; and a petrifying other, as he is covered with dirt, dust and debris. The plight of this city-dwelling worker is complete as his life and death matters to none and functions only to figure as data in statistical reports of research value. Prasad's proletariat, therefore, is not Courbet's working-class hero, but a faceless, nameless number that keeps shifting places.

In his recent work 'The Silence and Clamour of Tools', he personifies tools of construction and production: 'tools hote hi hain kaam keliye' (tools are meant for work). Prasad distinguishes between his tools, 'tools of silence' and 'tools of clamour', as he sees the world itself as being defined by violence of the two extreme kinds: the silence (invisibility) of the oppressed class and the noise (visibility) of the empowered. 'The inequity, absurdities, exaggerations, silences, and wear & tear of infrastructure are ubiquitous. That's what makes for stories of micro-lives of tools … This work sees this collision, expresses its roar', professes Prasad of his own work. The tools of creation transcend into tools of creativity. The artist's tools are his pencils and brushes, while the labourer's tools are a hammer and an axe. The worker with his tools is the *objet d'art* for Prasad, and again, the choice is significant beyond the mere valorization of the labourer's contribution to the society. The choice is strongly political as it exposes a critical contrary in the reader-viewer. The reader-viewer who fixes their gaze to the image of 'A Death in a Sewer' is helplessly trapped in a pathos which the picture creates, but is at the same time made conscious—provokingly aware that it is not just the State but also the unprotesting, silent individual (the reader in this case) who is responsible for the fate of the worker. The reader is incriminated in visualizing the death of the Dalit sewage worker.

This image echoes Tennessee Ernie Ford's song 'Sixteen Tons':

> Some people say a man is made outta mud
> A poor man's made outta muscle and blood
> Muscle and blood and skin and bones
> A mind that's a-week and a back that's strong
> You load sixteen tons, what do you get?
> Another day older and deeper in debt …

The image quite skilfully (very visibly though) shapes out the Marxist symbol of the hammer and the sickle, on which a labourer is seen carrying load, his hands and legs appearing to be disembodied mechanical tools designed to carry out orders. The sickle's shape suddenly transforms into a question mark: not in the least a coincidence. The question mark seems to be asking endless questions: What has been the fate of communism? Is Marxism's equality principle only a theoretical notion, or does it have any objective existence? And finally Ernie Ford's question, 'What do you get?' What does the *majdoor* get for his work? The artist that paints the labourer does so out of an acute sense of empathy, but the artist's labour, it may be argued, is not even remotely comparable to the latter's wretchedness. And in this sense art can be seen as living at the other end of labour. The artist's hands are *free* to draw, but the labour's hands are cuffed to his wage/sustenance. 'The hand is not just an organ of labour, *it is also the product of labour*' (Marx & Engels, 1973, p. 128). When evolution of mankind made his hands free, they could acquire greater skill and craft. The hands so far tied to drilling, hammering and creating objects of utility could over years of adaptation play music, paint images and re-create objects invoking aesthetic perception.

This aesthetic perception/appreciation is not simply a visual eulogizing of the working class. It is a space where the artist becomes one with the worker, acknowledging his hands, sweat and thought as his own. His primary function in this regard, as Herbert Read says, is 'to materialize the instinctual life of the deepest levels of the mind. At that level we suppose the mind to be collective in its representations' (Read, 1966, p. 95). Prasad's work can be classed as 'disruptive' art-activism of a 'participatory' character (Holm & Tilley, 2023, p. 131). He uses and heightens art's potential to create an alterity of experience, where the observer of art feels a compelling need to suspend their perception beyond their own monadic life and become the subject of the art. As Kate Evans points out, it is the immediacy of the graphic medium that enables the empathy in the reader: there is an almost instant identification with the character/subject, attributable to the ways in which a verbo-visual text is read (see Evans, in Davies, 2017). Artists such as Bhagwati Prasad make lines between 'work of art' and 'work for art' indistinguishable. The artist bears a 'felt' emotion with the thought, sweat and perhaps the blood of the *shramik*. Art, then, is neither sublime nor propagandist when it serves the function of pure collective representation; it is, in the true sense of the word, organic, visceral as it sounds out the indispensable need for re-construction and re-formation of class, caste and other segregationist structures of society.

Conclusion

Propagandizing art can be crucial to shaping political consciousness by simplifying complex socio-political issues into accessible visuals and slogans, thus facilitating a broader understanding among the populace. This form of art often evokes strong emotional reactions, leveraging feelings such as pride, fear or hope, which can galvanize public action and sway opinions (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). Its capacity for widespread dissemination allows these messages to be shared extensively through various mediums, such as posters, digital media and murals, enhancing the reach and impact of the propagated ideas.

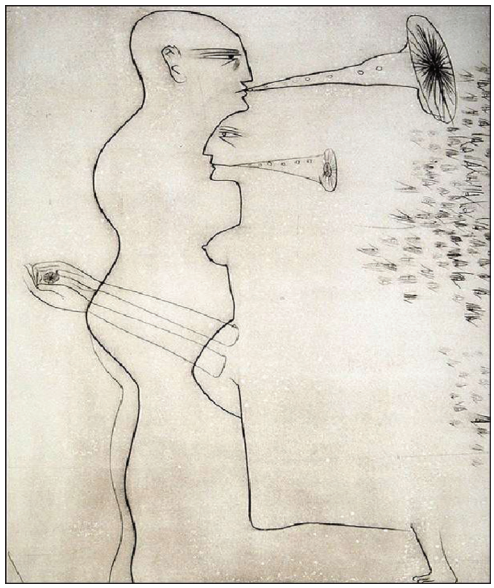
Furthermore, propaganda can either unite a community around a common cause or deepen divisions by emphasizing differences, thereby playing a pivotal role in the political landscape (Bernays, 1928). By presenting issues from new perspectives, propagandist and political art (which I have been using as artivism/art activism) challenges existing beliefs and encourages the public to reassess their views. Over time, repeated exposure can normalize the ideas it portrays, gradually altering societal norms and values (Taylor, 2003). This strategic use of art demonstrates its potency as a tool not only in mobilizing support or dissent but also in fundamentally transforming societal and political paradigms.

Artivism merges the creative power of the arts to move people emotionally with the strategic planning of activism necessary to bring about social change. It challenges the traditional boundaries between the artistic and the political, utilizing various forms of visual art, performance, digital media and public installations to address and engage with social, political or environmental issues. The purpose of art activism is not just to present an idea or a message but also to provoke a response and inspire action towards change. This can manifest through various mediums such as murals, installations, performances and interactive art, which are used to raise awareness, foster community engagement and influence public opinion on issues ranging from racial and gender equality to political corruption and environmental sustainability. In contemporary India, art activism has evolved as a potent medium for challenging and reimagining societal norms through diverse creative expressions. Indian artists increasingly use their platforms to address a myriad of social and political issues, leveraging both traditional and digital mediums to reach and engage wide audiences. Similar to Prasad, artists such as Tushar Joag and Amar Kanwar are prominent figures in what I understand to be the 'process' of artivism (as opposed to a movement). Joag, known for his public interventionist art, delves into socio-political themes, compelling viewers to reflect on their roles within a democratic society. Meanwhile, Kanwar's documentary films subtly critique human rights injustices and oppressive regimes, providing a voice to the marginalized and promoting social change.

Prasad's art echoes another contemporary artist Savi Sawarkar's contribution to politically charged artwork. Sawarkar's drawings of *devadasis* can be viewed as a form of political art that critiques and brings to light the historical and social issues surrounding the devadasi system in India. Through his artistic depiction of these women, who historically were dedicated to worship and service in temples but often marginalized and subjected to social stigma, Sawarkar raises questions about gender, exploitation and the intersection of religion and social justice. His work not only reflects the lives and experiences of devadasis but also serves as a medium to challenge the romanticized perceptions that society might hold. By portraying the harsh realities and personal stories of these women, Sawarkar's drawings act as a form of resistance and commentary, questioning the societal norms that allow for such practices to exist and persist. This use of art to engage with political issues places her work within the broader context of art activism, where art is used as a tool to provoke thought, evoke empathy and inspire social change.

Sawarkar's focus on *devadasis* might resonate strongly on a cultural and emotional level, pushing for a re-examination of traditional practices and their effects on women's lives. In Figure 5 (the resemblance to Prasad's own metaphoric art is unmistakable), a *devadasi* is shown to be escaping the body (clutches) of a Brahmin. The embrace is not without symbolism. While the control of Brahmins over liminal castes is self-evident, the connotative meaning may be associated with the Brahmin lusting after a *devadasi* and who he would not let go off willingly. The artist here also uses the minimalist notions of 'lines' to draw the *devadasi.* While Prasad's use of lines to draw an enmeshed visual chaos of industrial and post-industrial themes speaks to universal concerns about modernity, labour and environmental degradation, often calling for a critical review of societal progress and its costs, Sawarkar uses 'lines' to satirize caste, perverse sexuality and untouchability. He, like Prasad, 'critiques caste-Hindu consciousness' (Alone, 2017, p. 157). In essence, while both Sawarkar and Prasad use their art to engage with and critique social realities, their methods, mediums and specific focuses reflect their personal artistic narratives and the particular issues they aim to highlight. Their works underscore the diversity of approaches within the realm of contemporary Indian art activism, each contributing uniquely to discussions around cultural and societal issues.

With the proliferation of social media, art has become more accessible, allowing artists to amplify their messages and engage directly with the public. This digital engagement is evident as artists like Shilpa Gupta use interactive art to explore and comment on issues such as national borders and



[AQ5] **Figure 5.** Savi Sawarkar, 'Freedom to Devadasi', Available on Google Images.

surveillance, effectively blurring the lines between the artist and the audience. The role of community-driven projects in art activism is crucial. Initiatives like the Fearless Collective, founded by Shilo Shiv Suleman, engage communities through public art projects that address gender violence and communal tensions. These projects not only transform public spaces into platforms for solidarity and healing but also foster widespread community involvement and dialogue. Contemporary art activism in India serves as both a mirror reflecting the complexities of society and a hammer forging paths towards social reform. Other forms of artivism such as graffiti and stencil art (informally known as Banksy) serve to engage the community, provoke public discourse and inspire individual and collective action. They transform walls, streets and various facets of the urban landscape into canvases that challenge passersby to reconsider the status quo, contemplate deeper truths and acknowledge overlooked issues

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