

# Survivorship Wisdom & Resistance: Dalit Art from Bengal as a Response to Caste Oppression

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## Abstract

Art is a substitute for acting or living. If life is the willful expression of emotion, art is the intellectual expression of that same emotion. Whatever we don't have, don't attempt, or don't achieve can be possessed through dreams, and these are what we use to make art. Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* Art has served as a critical medium of expression and resistance throughout human history, particularly for marginalised communities.

This research aims to examine the intersection of artistic practice and survival mechanisms within Bengal's Dalit communities through the theoretical framework of Elena Cherepanov's "survivorship wisdom." The paper investigates how art created by Dalit artists in Bengal functions not merely as aesthetic expression but as a crucial form of resistance against systemic caste oppression and cultural erasure. The Indian artistic landscape has traditionally been dominated by upper-caste perspectives, with institutional barriers limiting visibility and recognition for Dalit artists. As noted by Padma Shri awardee photographer Sudhakar Olwe, "In India, art, in general, has been associated with and practised by the higher class. The work of Dalit artists is either ignored or thought of as activism instead of art." This systematic marginalisation has resulted in a profound absence of Bengal's Dalit artistic traditions within academic discourse, museum collections, and cultural archives. While artists like Savindra "Savi" Sawarkar have made significant inroads as the first Bahun artist to critically examine Dalit experiences of caste discrimination within Delhi's elite exhibition spaces, Bengal's rich tradition of Dalit artistic expression remains critically understudied. Unlike other regions of India where Dalit art has gradually gained some degree of recognition and representation in galleries, academic discourse, and cultural institutions, Bengal presents a striking anomaly with an almost complete absence of documented Dalit artistic traditions. This regional disparity in visibility and acknowledgement further compounds the marginalisation experienced by Bengal's Dalit artists and communities, whose voices and creative expressions have been systematically excluded from both regional and national artistic narratives. Contemporary Dalit artist Jithinlal NR characterises India's artistic sphere as fundamentally "Brahminical," operating within privileged notions of artistic freedom that remain inaccessible to many Dalit creators.

This paper addresses this scholarly gap by documenting and analysing the distinctive characteristics of Bengal's Dalit art traditions. Through primary research, including interviews

with artists, analysis of artistic works, and examination of community archives, this study explores how these artistic practices embody forms of "survivorship wisdom" – knowledge systems developed through generations of resistance to oppression. The research examines how these artistic traditions serve multiple functions: preserving cultural memory, challenging dominant narratives, creating community solidarity, and enabling psychological resilience in the face of continued discrimination. By centring the voices and creative practices of Bengal's Dalit artists, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Indian art history while illuminating how marginalised communities employ artistic expression as a crucial tool for both survival and liberation. This investigation has implications not only for art historical scholarship but also for understanding broader patterns of resistance to structural inequality across cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Dalit art, survivorship wisdom, archival Silences, marginalisation, institutionalised caste oppression