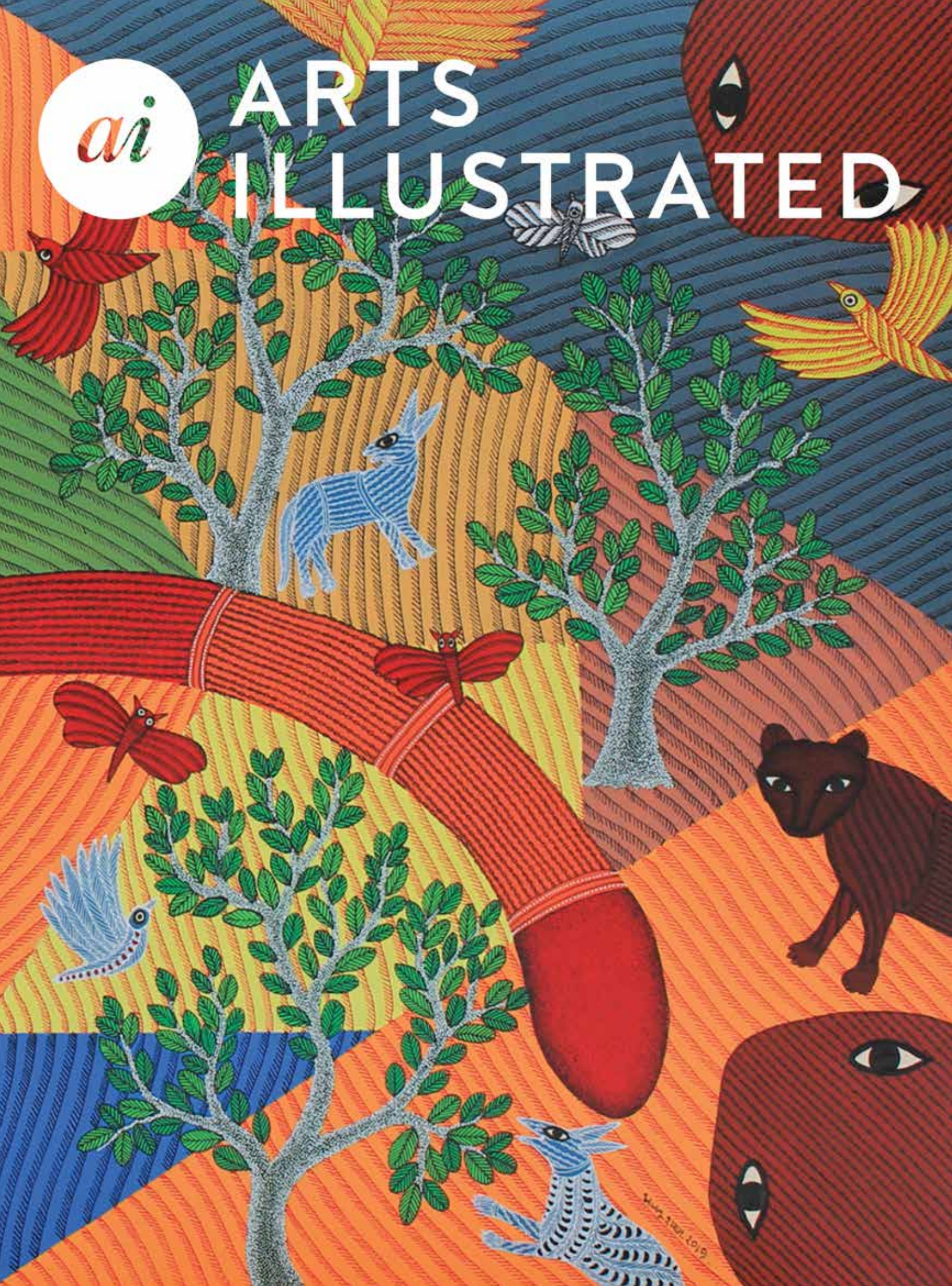




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Art Feature

A Stone Is Cast

Art as a space has the ability to both transcend barriers and break them, while also creating newer, more sensitive and tolerant boundaries from which to view, like unexpected ripples distorting perceived perfection

PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

The idea of memory is that it constantly deceives. Not intentionally, but by its very nature it shifts colour like a chameleon, merging into the background of our minds till we are lulled into giddy acceptance, while it continues to move, so that many years later we realise it was not really what we thought it was and are either pleasantly surprised by the revelation or deeply distressed. It's like an intricate maze of chameleons – you never know where you are going to find one, what colour

it is going to be, and whether it will still be there when you come back. I can almost hear Richard O Brian's deeply theatrical voice saying 'Let the fans begin' as I am stuck inside the crystal dome of my memories, with golden and silver tickets (chameleons?) flying about me, flitting away from the grasp of my fingers in playful abandon.

But look, I caught one.

I am in P. Sainath's journalism class at Sophia's Polytechnic,

Mumbai. P. Sainath is asking us if we know which caste we belong to. The class of 40 privileged, city-bred women reply as if in one voice of incredulity that 'caste' isn't something we think about, that it is almost an uncivilised, self-deprecating question that surely we have outgrown, and we look at each other, an awkward, knowing smile on our faces. Then P. Sainath, a rural journalist and Magasasay Award winner, tells us one of the Dalit farmers he met in Tamil Nadu was nicknamed

'Poochi' by the upper caste, and he turned to the handful of Tamil-speaking students in class and asked us to explain what 'Poochi' meant. We said, surprised, that it meant 'insect'. And, in a manner typical to all his lectures, that moment when Sainath allows his entire being to become his words, he said, 'And that is what caste does; it reduces someone to an insect, a poochi, so don't tell me you don't think about caste. The fact that you don't is as important as the fact that you should think about caste. You should understand what it does.'

And another.

Sixteen years later, I am reading Siddhartha Sarma's incredibly nuanced book, 'Year of the Weeds' that follows the story of young Korok in a Gond village, swept into a Goliathan battle with the system and its insatiable hunger for development. It reminded me of Poochi, a memory so stark and yet one that changed within the pages of Sarma's book, from gaunt realisation to a heady vortex of empathy that could, in itself, become impossibly mired in the tangle between authorship and ownership. Could one truly ever understand the experiences that shape lives

without getting lost in intoxicating curiosity or debilitating sympathy? And, more importantly, could one situate oneself at the centre of caste politics in India even when at the periphery or vice versa without losing sight of either? Within this spectrum of dialogue, art survives as Sunil Awachar, Prabhakar Kamble, Sajjan Mani and Rajyashri Goody showed us. In all their works you find that when something is viewed from the inside, it radiates out through every window, door, crack and crevice, till you cannot delineate where it really began. Till you realise, it does not matter.

Another one.

At the recently concluded Chennai Photo Biennale, I am at the Senate House, marveling at the architecture of the space, usually closed to the public, more than the exhibits themselves. Late afternoon sunlight is streaming through its stained-glass windows, making shapes and patterns on the floor and our minds, and the building, with its old, weathered history, is suddenly alive to the attention of many pairs of eyes, like background dancers enjoying that rare spotlight. Upstairs, Chhachhi's

photographs on Kashmir's women with text by Sonia Jabbar, are placed on prayer book stands. I am reading the everyday stories behind the numbers – 40 dead, 50 shot, 70 killed – that grace my newspapers, punctuated by the laughter of my children as they play hide-and-seek through the many doors of the Senate House. And I am reminded, again, of Poochi and Korok, and the deep silence of privilege that pervades, stagnates and corrodes this overwhelming sense of self – where my feet stand, others have stood; and where my stories begin, others end. A stone is cast and the ripples must reverberate.

And here it does; here where my memories must stop, to allow wordless art to visually communicate in voices that are mine but not my own. A reminder that with its complicated history of unjust social structure, caste is never outside of us, steeped as it is in the earth of our memories, and therefore, whether we are listening to a lecture, reading a book or watching an exhibit, it is important to stop, pause and breathe, to willingly and consciously blend into the background, so something else can arise, emerge and grow.



Sunil Awachar, Khairlanji II, Acrylic on canvas.
Image Courtesy of the Artist.



Brahmanism has enslaved the minds of Indians for a long time and continues to control the aesthetic calibre of the oppressed communities. It is so deep rooted, that their expression in the form of music, art and imagination remain arrested in the realm of celebrating their masters and do not find the possibility of emancipation. My art emanates from this space valiantly and militates against the oppressive structures of Brahmanism and capitalism to symbolise the rigour and power of assertion. It agitates against established aesthetic norms and ventures into new possibilities of emancipatory struggles and liberation. It not only celebrates identity but also depicts the possibilities where the oppressed can realise their self and self-worth in relation to the other.

Sunil Awachar

It's very important to fully understand the power and the privileges one's identity carries, and how it is linked to the larger social, cultural and political systems at play. Once you're more aware of these factors at play, I feel like it becomes more possible to strip one's identity of the power it holds over us. This, however, is a long journey. I would definitely situate my sense of self in the thought that drives the expression. The expression of my art is simply a tool for conveying my thoughts. If that stops becoming powerful, or perhaps even relevant to my personal and political understanding, I have no qualms in finding other ways to express my thought, such as anthropological research or more hands-on social activism.

Rajyashri Goody

Rajyashri Goody, Joothan, Laddoos made out of Manusmriti pulp, pictured here with a ceramic bhaakar and recipe booklet, 2018. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

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IS HUNGER
GNAWING AT
YOUR BELLY?

Memories of food in
Laxman Gaikwad's autobiography
'The Branded: Uchalya'
extracted, interpreted, ingested
into recipes by Rajyashri Goody.



Prabhakar Kamble, Still Practicing, Terra cotta pots and plaster of Paris, 84" x 30", 18".
Image Courtesy of the Artist.



‘The cultivation of mind should be the ultimate aim of human existence.’ – Dr. B.R.Ambedkar.
As an artist I understand that my art practice shouldn't be only to get a representation in an art gallery but also my commitments should be more towards the movement of liberation. Liberation from discrimination, inequality, and injustice. I can understand art cannot make changes alone, although I believe art can fortify the movements of those doing great work for the annihilation of caste. And it's a long process; it won't change in a generation and it requires timeless efforts. I believe art can also be a way to question this system.

Prabhakar Kamble



Sajan Mani, *Secular Meat*, a 2-hour-long performance with 200 eggs, 5 grilled chicken, 3 colours and 2 bodies, Sensorium Art Festival, Edition Love, Sunaparanta Goa Center for the Arts, 2016. Image Courtesy of the Artist.

Even though I feel like I am carrying multiple oppressed bodies that connect to a Dalit identity, I am also distancing myself from this idea of just being an identity. As I say, I am carrying the shame, the powerlessness of Dalit social bodies, and when I am performing, I am not one, I am carrying these long, deep memories and yet they are not just memories either. Also, in my practice, I am interested in the culture of archiving. We have archives only from the colonial period and even that we barely have access to. The hegemonic, Brahminical knowledge production always erases our histories, so my endeavour is to find alternative ways of archiving, and how to use this material to push forward new imagination – that is my responsibility as an artist, to find new languages with which to express.

Sajan Mani

