

Liberatory Visuality: Some Reflections on Sanjib Mondal's Art

Pinak Banik

Visual Art being uniquely positioned as a distinctive practice among human cultures, supposedly enjoys its own set of political and linguistic structure and conceptual apparatus, thereby emphasizing relative or complete autonomy. However, the Indian subcontinent, with its historically stratified social orders and strict norms of cultural productions centered on caste and Varna contracts, complicates the question of visual cultures, it's so called autonomy and proposed biological essentialism. Since last one and a half century, there has been a hegemonic control over cultural capital by the ruling classes who claim an organic inheritance over discourse of "Art" defined, as opposed to art with lower case "a," as a prestigious practice of creating privileged visuals. The upper caste institutional bastion of visual art has hardly allowed any "infiltration" of visuality with subaltern agency and reflexivity. The visual politics of subaltern experience, on the other hand, had negotiated and challenged discourses in and around this institution, with little scope of alteration. A subaltern artist, within the institutional space of Visual Art in the broader socio-cultural context, cultivates strategies to assert alternatives for new persistence, charting the course of a new emancipatory politics in visuality.

In this essay, I analyze the embodiment of this dialectic process between closed doors of visual art as an institution dominated by the social elites and the subaltern artistic positions as echoed in visual-conceptual artist Sanjib Mondal's art practice. Sanjib contextualizes his practice within the socio-spatial, regional, geo-political terrains of his own societal-cultural and institutional presence. Trained as a printmaker from Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, Sanjib is also a proficient painter, who is persistently engaging in making images, while tangled in the crisis of "A"rt and artist's material survival. His involvement

with visuals is multifaceted, the processes, outcomes, and encounters being habitually anomalous to the norms of visual art's methods.

Making of images between the masked and the unmasked

A complex visual world emerges in fragments, where quotidian realities of Sanjib's social world are converted into pictorial testimonies. Sanjib's works freeze a psychological world of idle moments, which refuses to change despite the change-seeking subjects constantly trying to surpass them. Subjecthood of these spaces is inhabited by the tribe of what Dr. Ambedkar called, "broken men," the *antyajas*, placed at the margins of caste society, remains unchanged throughout the ages of history and across the so-called colonial-postcolonial-global village-posthuman rhetoric. In Sanjib's images, this world of broken "Other" reconciles with Fanon's "wretched of the earth," resonates the innate psycho-structural violence of society, and reveals the epistemological violence of history. The emancipatory objective of anti-caste struggles, born out of the complex consciousness of self, proactively changed the future dimensions of broken men by identifying the very historical implications of brokenness. Discursive formations emerge out of subaltern experience, which is both rupture from the hegemonic epistemic oppression, and a juncture which enquires the state of being where isolation and social ineptitude is a historical normative. Such a historical normative makes possible the meeting of the spiritualist sanction to the "end of creation" and socio-spatial order of "end of village" (to allude to Ambedkar). These political dynamics finds an artistic function in a group of images by Sanjib, which I would be further engaging with in the essay.

A strange agonizing sense of loneliness consumes the spaces of Sanjib's images, which one might read as minimalist at the first sight. But this minimality is not limited to pictorial mannerism in its essence, but it is the existential reality, denial of access to social-material commons, a pictorial indication of crisis in a caste society. This pensive loneliness and virtual blankness suggest a vacuum of being, which is also a manifestation of absence of any recorded form of existence. Impediment of social order towards participation in literary representational discourse and thus, unavailability of history keeps the spaces blank, away from cultural grand narratives.



Figure 1: Untitled, Lathi Series 2011 (woodcut, paint)

However, on a constructive front, it is the minor narrative and a narrative of minor social beings, that Sanjib creates, or rather cornices in the drawings, like self-curated, edified pages of his psychological sketchbook, where violence and liberation plays out rather in semi-dead silence. Charcoal appears in this space as an instrument in the battlefield of dynamic doodles, depictions, overlaying and erasure of line, shapes and texture, where Sanjib's own spaces of familiarity are constructed. Its temporal, shifting impressions, colorlessness, smudgy, loose ends indicate representation of the marginalized environments of the people, the mainstream force of material-cultural production of the society. In historical absence of discursive light and loss of identity in the course of Brahmanical memocide, Sanjib's marginalized environments are unable to form a known, concrete and complete image. It is continuously built through an artistic process of trial and error, in simultaneity with its socially evolving process in the face of historical betrayal. The size of the paper, many impressions of charcoal and frequent conceptual appearance of elements of alien glitter, are closely linked with the environment of the cramped mud-huts, Sanjib's home

and neighborhood, where most of his works are physically produced. There are different series of drawings, which tries to distinguish their focus in various contexts of Sanjib's universe, though canonizing a quality which makes them counterparts of each other. A corporeal extension of the artist also leaves significant traces, which is unlikely to be kept by intention, and in some cases is not considered for pictorial accounting. Otherwise, the artist mostly tries to keep them out of sight with marking efforts.

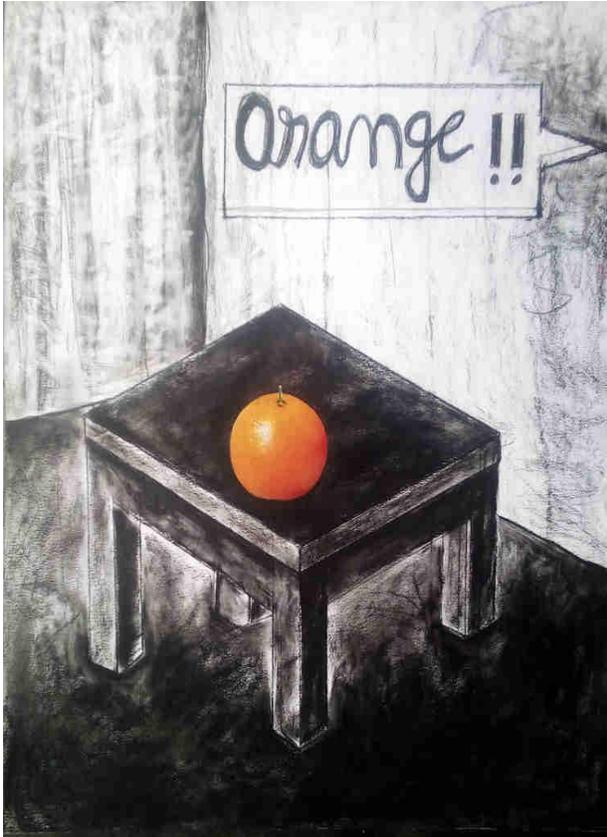


Figure 2: Untitled, Yellow Series 2013 (charcoal, print)

It is in these efforts that we encounter a double consciousness within the visuality of artist's presence. Firstly, these efforts are about presenting himself into the persona of a "natural" modernist artist, who leaves his presence for the consumption of visual art's customary cultured viewership. The miniscule cultured class, with its great balancing acts, sustains itself standing on the shoulders of many such bodies of broken "Other" represented by Sanjib. It is in this anxiety of presentation and recognition, where his casual everyday becomes conscious and elements of "presentation" takes over certain spaces of

representation. Even though a potential of resistance subverts the presentable into subversive selection of images and parodic language, disturbing the very core of presentability in this context, we still see conscious erasures of another self (non-artistic, social self-reminder).

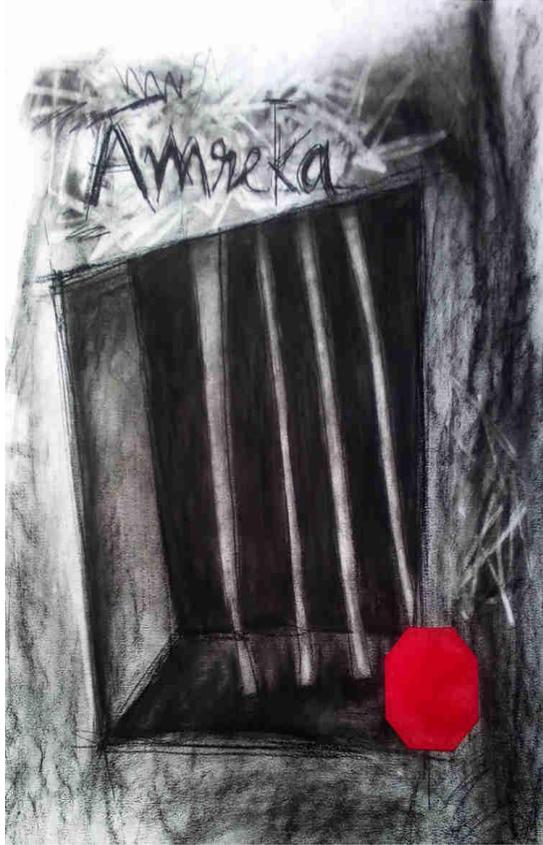


Figure 3: Untitled, Red Dot Series 2016 (charcoal, print)

We also see the formal fonts, standard text formats, the glitter of gold or sometimes snappy objects, all proposing their fake presence on a constructed surface, politicized, ridiculed, mocked, minimized/maximized, broken/distorted and put upside down. The (white) mask of the visual artist is so openly translucent and its institutional codes are so much deranged that the black skin behind triumphs its voice at the same time tearing the white mask of its fake sanity. The white mask is replicated over and again, in its unapologetic surficial arrogance but works as a defeating force from inside, within its own logic of presentability. Here it becomes artist's *objet petit a* in his brutal game of mark making.



Figure 4: Untitled Red Dot Series 2016 (charcoal, print)

Communitarian aesthetics

An intense communitarian concern for his fellow people as co-travelers from the margins of society marching towards the center composes an aesthetics of fraternity at the very heart of Sanjib's conceptual frame. Though the fraternity co-inhabits, cares for each-other, since there is no historical and dignified visual idiom representative of its self-respect available yet, physicality of this fraternity remains out of site, bringing a great sense of historical emptiness to the frames.

The identities that are conversing sometimes covers the imposing proprietors of the spaces depicted, who also remain invisible since their visibility is in the ownership of the represented spaces. The spaces, however coarse or unsophisticated, are spaces of transaction, means of which are clearly owned by mighty voices. These voices, however, which keep appearing within the conversation of the fraternity, cutting the fraternity off off, inspects the maintenance of order and leaves. In another group of images, the commodity, the worker's produce and alienated labor features in the absolute distance and isolation of blankness of surface, which can be expositions of both class distance and agrarian relations of caste society. Inscription-like testimonies on the architectural facades of a factory from a Nehruvian industrial town within the rural-tribal belt in Birbhum, West Bengal, compel

Sanjib to derive fakeness from narrative of glitter. The glitters of Equality, in the space in pictorial argument and also in Sanjib's participation into this space as an artist through another bigger art project, are conceptual subversion of the journalistic expectation and revolt against the nation-state's false promises on the own high grounds of Panchsheel policies.

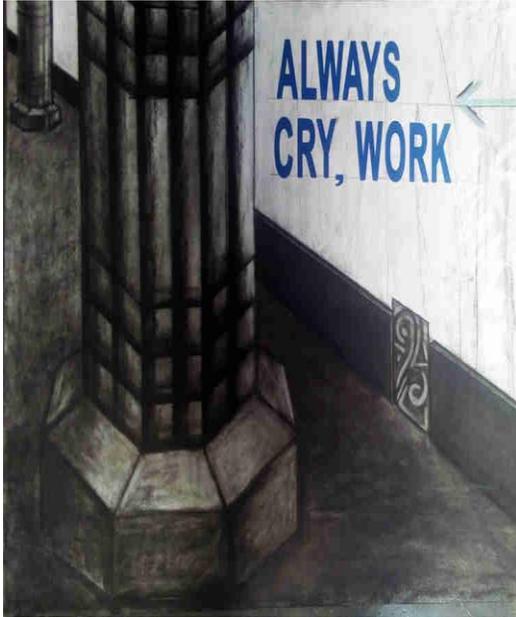


Figure 5: Untitled, Imprisoning Socio-Political Psychedelia 2017 (charcoal and chalk on paper)

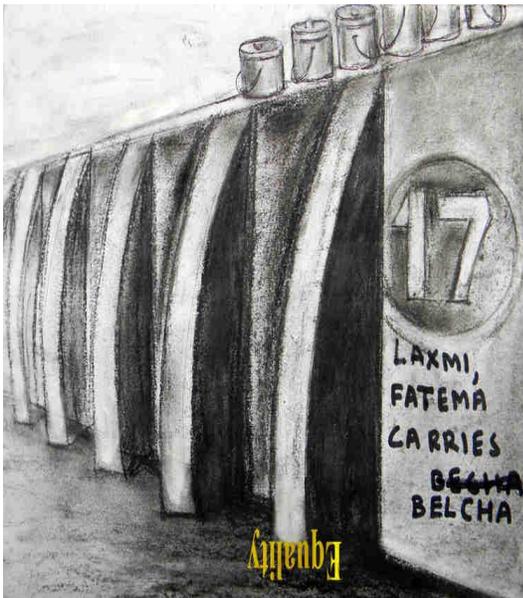


Figure 6: Untitled, Khariya Series 2013-17 (charcoal, print)

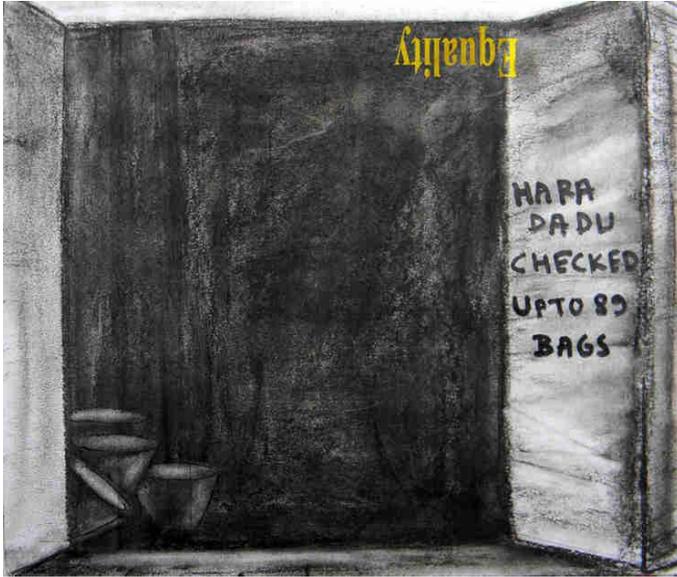


Figure 7: Untitled, Khariya Series 2013-17 (charcoal, print)

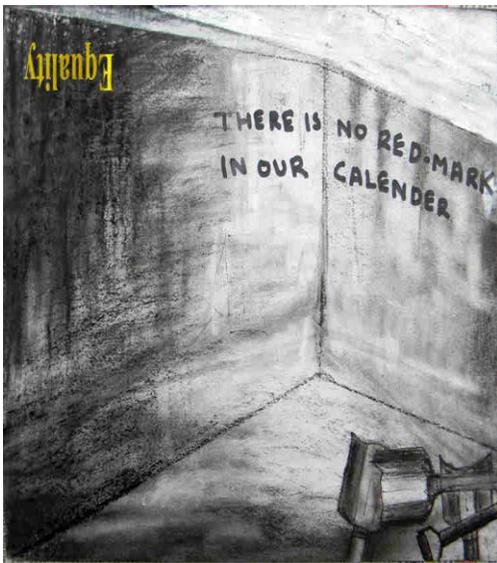


Figure 8: Untitled, Khariya Series 2013-17 (charcoal, print)

In another series, Sanjib superimposes plates from public holidays on the friable corners of moribund home, mud-houses, teashops where he dwells every day in his native town of Rampurhat. The commentary seems simplistic but is deeply penetrating, with the calendar sheets floating on the top right corner in the frames, almost impossibly placed on the backdrops of the doomed architectures. These days are of national/international importance, cultural and religious significance, which are holidays for the households,

schools, universities, government offices, newspaper agencies, spent either to reflect on their significance or to enjoy a break from regular monotony of systematized public life. A very interesting incorporation of Gandhi Jayanti, May Day and Ambedkar Jayanti, unfolds a deep critique by equating these days under the same frame of exploitation of labour and denial of right to leisure. This idiosyncratic comparison of calendar dates is to be seen in the context of the artificial integument of secular, casteless and even progressive society, along with the upper caste hegemony in all social and institutional aspects of life in postcolonial Bengal. The contradiction lies in the meaninglessness of these three calendar dates to the subaltern within the failed project of nation, not in the ideological separation of these dates. More importantly, with the use of Dr. Ambedkar's birthday, this becomes a vital critique, in one hand of the appropriation of Ambedkar within the nation-state's framework of memorializing legacy and on the other, it points to the irrelevance or rather intentional out-casting of Ambedkarite political consciousness in Bengal.

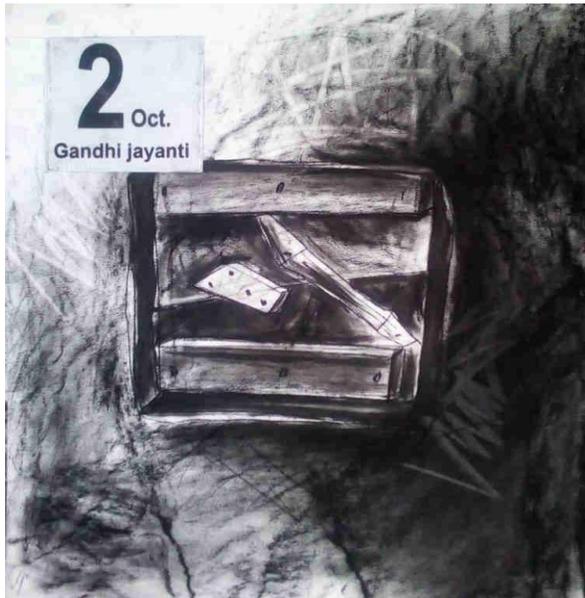


Figure 9: Untitled, Calendar Series 2017 (charcoal, print)

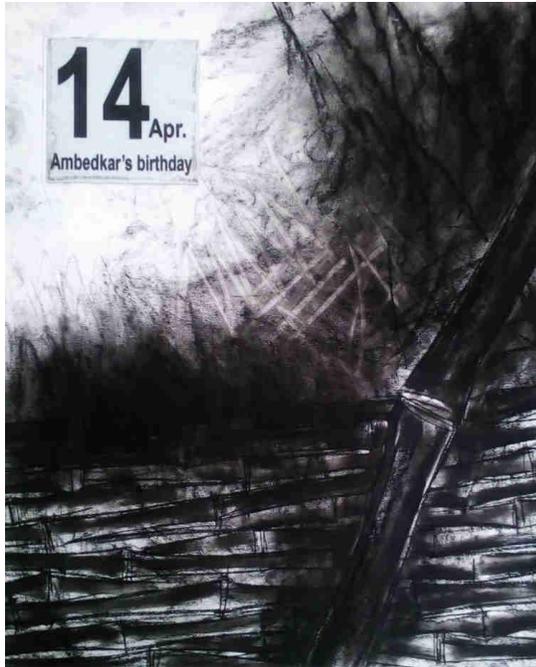


Figure 10: Untitled, Calendar Series 2017 (charcoal, print)



Figure 11: Untitled, Calendar Series 2017 (charcoal, print)

Sanjib's concerns also transcend the direct human linkage to address further the conditions that make human existence possible. Centered on the local and region specific concerns (on Bengal), a varied list of involvement in nature, natural being and natural resources, takes over the thematic frameworks. The awareness of value and material prospect of resources for life at large concerns his images. The productive classes, the cultivator, the artisan, the Bahujans have different context of ownership to resources. Here Sanjib's protesting images remind of the Bahujan's fateful journey, from historical restrictions to access of resources to the state-designed repudiation of resources. In a parallel context, *Kaala*, the subaltern protagonist in Pa. Ranjith's eponymous film (2018), while redressing the statist Brahmin oppressor, would popularly say "our need for land is for the sustenance of life and yours is nothing but a symbol of power." This gesture of protest is an apt reminder of anti-caste struggles for fundamental reclamation to life-sustaining resources, notably Dr. Ambedkar's Mahad Satyagraha. Thus, Sanjib's aesthetics is historically knotted with the communitarian struggles.



Figure 12: Artist with his work titled "Death," in Golden Dots Series 2016

Caste of the Middle-Class Child

In Mrinal Sen's 1982 film *Kharij*, based on one of Ramapada Chowdhury's novels, an adolescent village boy named Palan, who was employed as a young male attendant in an urban middle class household in Calcutta, dies of breathing poisonous carbon monoxide while sleeping in the cramped kitchen on a chilling winter night. The charcoal oven was not

extinguished enough for the sake of some warmth and the claustrophobic kitchen turned into a gas chamber overnight where Palan, the perceived archetype of exploited rural innocence, passed away inhaling the poison, symbolic of the degenerated Bengali middle class values, without even feeling his death. We see the whole story through the lens of Sen and his protagonist, Anjan and family, both representatives of the same class. The film takes to augmenting the guilt of the hypocritical middle-class mind, revolves around the psychological trauma of its protagonist couple, as if until Palan's death everything was indisputable in their happy uninterrupted life. Pity and sympathy for the fragile state of this ideal urban, independent, small familial unit, echoed the larger question of the very foundation of middle-class values. Sen ends the film by offering another chance for reform of Bengali middle-class mindscape, to correct its very foundational nature of self-centric opportunism and attend to the unresolved and overlooked pacts of life. The rural working class does not rebel against them, and life goes on as usual following the return of middle-class happiness and eventual senility to psychological turbulence. We do not hear what Palan's father, friend, relatives thought, as they remain voiceless throughout and the only time they talk, is the submissive adieu to the "babu" and his familial unit's socio-cultural power. A psyche where violence is internalized as normal as we sense it. But is it really so or is it the lost image at behest of upper caste gentlemanly guilt in a class-factored narrative where social locations are conveniently obscured?



Figure 13

A group of Sanjib's images, when seen in this light, is a radical antithesis of this established culture of guilt and submission, and a confrontation of the covert violence of Bengali middle-class values. Sanjib returns to this theme over and over again, the expense of childhood bothers him. Children, who are to be one of the most protected entities of a society, are also the available cheap targets of exploitative forces in a socio-economically stratified society. In one early series (Khoka series, 2010), Sanjib's child, the crawling toddler from Nandalal Bose's iconic linocut from *Sahaj Paath*, the kindergarten textbook written by Rabindranath Tagore. Every Bengali child's formal introduction to the world of letters includes Tagore's *Sahaj Paath* (1937), which introduces the basics of standardized Bengali, its alphabets, letters, structure, grammar, sentence and paragraphs. The male child persona, "Khoka" of *Sahaj Paath* is not yet able to speak but only communicates through his expressive vocabulary. He is at the nucleus of the continuity of familial structure, whose childhood is secured within the protective network of home, family, society and its material economics. He is the very product of caste endogamy. He is very much unlike of Palan, or the aspiring voices in Sanjib's works. But Nandalal's toddler reappears in Sanjib's work as a visual unit, suffocated under severe socio-cultural pressure of becoming competent, productive etc. through whom the requirements of the perseverance and continuity of kinship and familial capital will be assured. Sanjib places him in rectangular blocks, in blank playground, inside floating balloons, under the shadow of heavy books, sometimes caged and uncaged, uncovers the burden on his delicate anatomy. Within such condition, he is protected, sheltered inside the home, under an umbrella or within the boundaries of the park, watched over by guardians. One image shows Khoka exposed to us from under the cage like food cover, while two paper planes fly out of the frame. In these images, Sanjib discovers the abusive inland of the standard childhood in Bengal, something that he did not witness as insider but have been under its cultural effect, since this childhood has been a model for others to follow. Interestingly, these works were created in Kala Bhavana during Sanjib's final student days, at the institutional space where the "original" imagery of Bose's Khoka was produced. Reconceptualizing the "equipmentality" of the Khoka imagery, one of the iconic visuals produced by Santiniketan school, in a local cultural context is a method of critique of the visual paradigms of the school and its national prerogative. Sanjib critically scans the valor

of the celebrated male child image and places it in his image positions against caste-economy. Sanjib's retake of Khoka is close to Sen's Tukai in *Kharij* (the comparatively grown up upper caste male child of the protagonist couple), who is shielded by middle class parents, a male attendant of his age, protected and reared by the institutions like school, municipal park, tuition classes. Sen's film's lost image is Sanjib's scanned fragile anatomy of Khoka.



Figure 14: Untitled, Khoka Series 2010 (woodcut, mixed media)

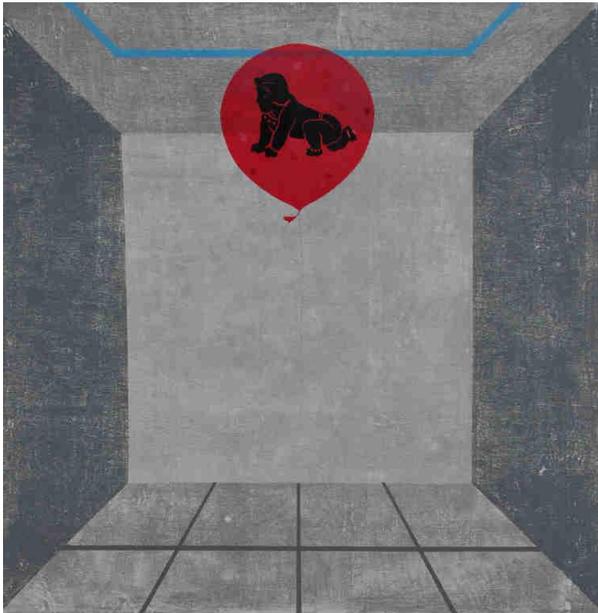


Figure 15: Untitled, Khoka Series 2010 (woodcut, mixed media)

The Khoka imagery is contradicted over and over again in other series of drawings. Here the not so privileged toddlers of marginalized communities in their own historical circumstances, appear as child labours in factories and in local eateries, as agricultural labourers.

Exploration of the possible potential reflexiveness of a child imagery as a variant bearer of caste capital, Sanjib's images stress on social reproduction and measures of inequality at the very beginning of life cycle moderated by caste.

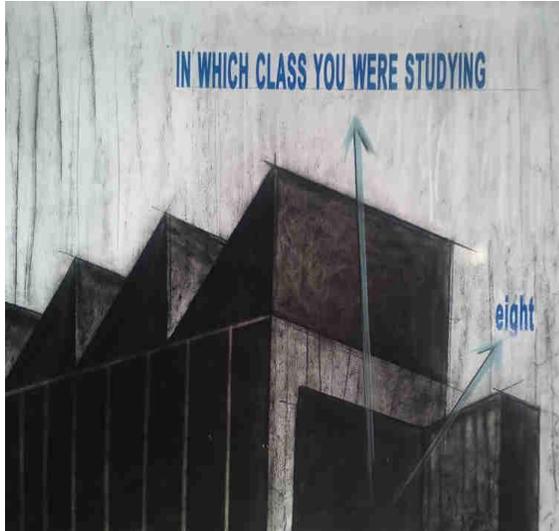


Figure 16: Untitled, Imprisoning Socio-political Psychedelia 2017 (charcoal and chalk on paper)

Postlude

Sanjib's visual politics is an aim of unburdening himself from greater structural burden through means of art, where creating visuality is meant to be a liberatory experience. His image making processes and methods offer an equally emancipatory experience, in the non-elite materiality of charcoal, collages and experimental graphics techniques. His large woodcut prints are often partially hand painted, collaged or screen-printed. Besides disregarding print making conventions, he also refuses to mass produce and creates exclusive images with repetitions based on material accessibility. In the light of context and materiality, Sanjib's larger body of works can be seen as prominent political antithesis of much celebrated visual normative of cultural history of nation, which partially consists of upper caste Bengali contributions. With further expansion, I hope the forthcoming practice would address the unresolved provocations and manifestations, keeping the fire of art and resistance alive in Sanjib's visual world.

Acknowledgement

All the artwork images are used here courtesy of the artist Sanjib Mondal. The essay was written in conversation with the artist.

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Author Information

Pinak Banik is an artist and researcher from West Bengal.