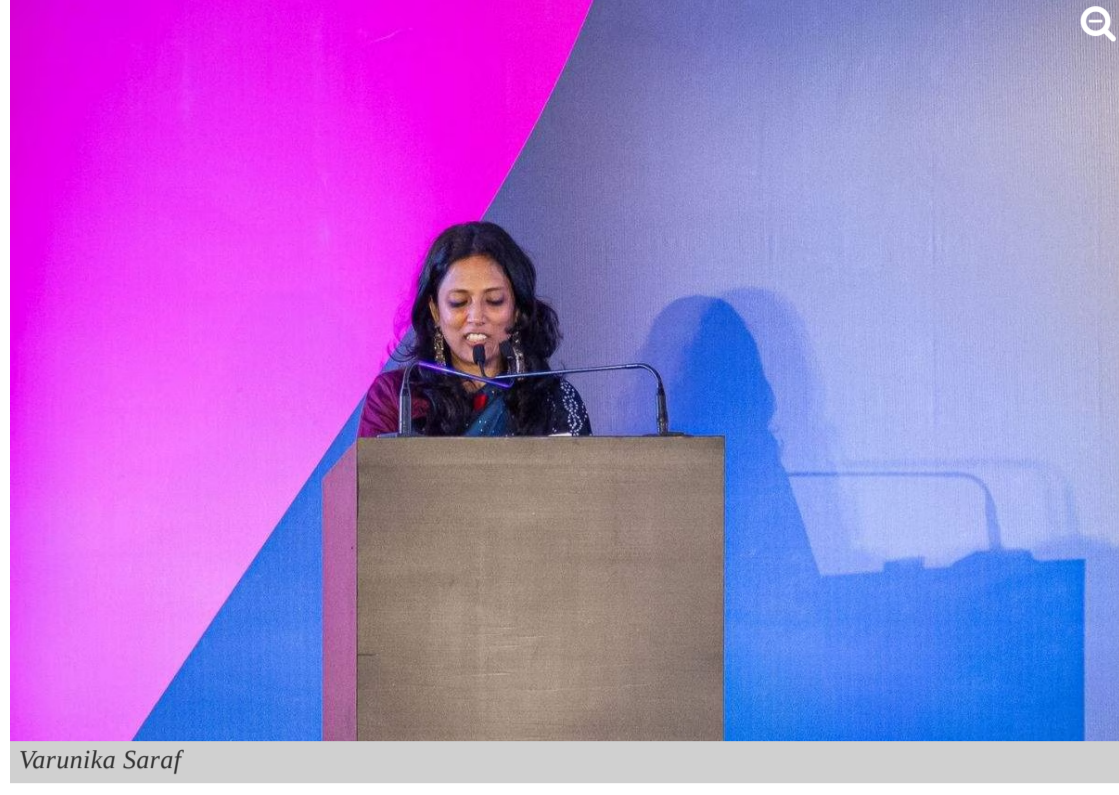


# Varunika Saraf: ‘For the women before me, and after’

The 2023 Asia Arts Game Changer award, which Varunika Saraf recently won, is an encouragement to keep expanding the limits of her ideation

Chokita Paul | Published : | 17th March 2023 12:00 AM



City-based artist and historian, Varunika Saraf is known for weaving together the threads of the country's past and present. Harboured a deeper meaning that speaks to the soul, as well as impassioned a striking forte to chronicle historical events, which she connects with today, her art illustrates lived ramifications that are long forgotten. The artist draws on archival sources, delving deep into the past to uncover hidden truths — caste discrimination, feminism and politics. Each stroke of her brush unveils a new layer of subtle existential angst. She has a keen eye for detail that embodies the essence of our uprooted antiquity. Her art is not just an enlightening visual experience, but also discursive, with each brushstroke eliciting a heart-wrenching sentiment. The 2023 Asia Arts Game Changer award is a fitting recognition of Varunika's artistry. The award bestowed by the Asiatic Society was a call to continue pushing the boundaries of her creativity, explore new ideas and persevere to be a game-changer in the art world.

**You have just been awarded the 2023 Asia Arts Game Changer award. How does this milestone serve as a push-forward in your art frontier?**

Asia Society is an organisation that is known for its incredible work across many spheres. This is why this award is so special. It's an important validation of my practice. It is good to be a part of Asia Society and I hope it will bring more opportunities to learn and grow.

**When did you decide to become an artist?**

As far as I can remember, I have always liked working with my hands. The practice of painting was something that I turned to early in life, but I never thought I would become a professional artist. In fact, even today, I have trouble identifying myself as an artist; in my heart, I am more comfortable with the word 'maker'. Because it allows me to hold space for my belief that learning is an incomplete project and that I must continue to learn and evolve. The word 'artist' carries with it the undertone that one has 'arrived', and this is not conducive to learning.

**Do tell us a bit about your larger body of work, which is now showcased at the Sharjah Biennial. Through that, how did you bring forth the artist and the art historian in you?**

*We, The People*, the series of 76 embroideries that are currently showcased at the Sharjah Biennial, attempt to chart an alternative timeline of the nation through the fissures and faults that structure our present. This body of work is an attempt to understand who we are as a society and the past that shapes our contemporary realities. Drawing inspiration from Eduardo Galeano, who implores us to "search for the keys in the past history to explain our time", this work maps our collective past and memory, highlighting lesser-known events that can shed light on our present. Moments from the history of modern India, beginning with Margaret Bourke White's heart-wrenching photographs of the partition and images of subsequent events such as the Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal, the Narmada valley and the Chipko movement drawn from news archives are hand-embroidered onto individual khadi textiles inscribed with a map of the country. A map formed by an assemblage of tiny blots and bleeds created by tie and dye with carmine extracted from Cochineal (a scale insect, *Dactylopius coccus*), symbolising the blood that continues to be split in the making of the nation. One map in this series is deliberately left empty to signify that thinking about overlooked and erased histories that upset the narrative of progress is an incomplete project. This map becomes a space to record events, for thinking about the future through the past must be a collective activity to heal as a society.

**In your recent works, you have engaged in 'apocalyptic manuscripts'. Can you take us through that?**

I draw on "apocalyptic manuscripts", particularly the Augsburg Wunderzeichenbuch, a 16th-century manuscript from Bavaria. I use the medieval imagery of interpretations and revelations to develop a language that allows us to process violence, phenomena, and socio-political upheaval.

**We have seen how you meticulously delve into embroidery for your artwork. How do you think it lends a fresh perspective to art aesthetes and the artist?**

I don't think embroidery as a medium lends a fresh perspective to art aesthetics and the artist. There is a very long history of artists particularly women engaging with embroidery, it is not new. I believe it's what you do with it that's more important. But having said this, it is a tribute to the women who have come before me, women who have paved the way making our current practices possible.

**You have also explored watercolours and *wasli* for your series, *Miasma* – wherein you have depicted hubris, and amnesia in your discourse on violence. Why was the medium important to you to highlight these?**

I primarily work with watercolours, it is my medium of choice. *Wasli* or paperboard, a surface created by the Mughal technique of binding together layers of paper has been central to my practice since 2001. I modify the original scale and form of this technique and adapt it to my artistic requirements. On each hand-made *wasli*, I cast a rich deposit of colour, each layer painstakingly built-up by different washes of watercolours ground from natural and synthetic pigments. These colour-rich surfaces are further enhanced by the use of dyeing, appliquéing, collage, embroidery, block-printing, etc.

**You also fall back on historical archives to signify how the country's past tumults are still triggering present ones. Do walk us through your creative process.**

My work engages with the past to understand our present situation. I choose subjects and events from the past that can shed light on our current predicament, particularly forgotten and erased circumstances that were relegated to the annals of history which should have served as a warning.

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