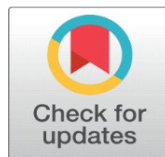
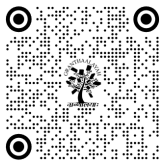


# SOCIO-CULTURAL RESONANCE OF MAHADEV VISHWANATH DHURANDHAR'S ART: TRACING HIS INFLUENCE AND LEGACY IN INDIAN PAINTING

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## ABSTRACT

M.V. Dhurandhar a renowned Indian artist left an indelible mark on the world of Indian art through his unique style, technique and thematic choices. This paper aims to delve into Dhurandhar's artistic contributions focusing on his socio-cultural significance and the lasting impact his paintings have had on Indian art. By considering his style technique and themes we can gain a deeper understanding of Dhurandhar's artistic prowess and the socio-cultural context in which his works were created.

**Keywords:** Themes, Techniques, Impact, Cultural Context and Contribution

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian art dates back to ancient times, but the significant shift towards progress in India's visual history took place in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of company-style paintings. During this time, India was under British rule and experienced a dominance of Western artistic expression. Influenced by the Western style of painting, Indian princely states, wealthy patrons, and native painters began to adopt Western techniques. As Indian social reformists, industrialists, and royal families travelled abroad, they were exposed to Western technology, industry, and art. This exposure led to the dissemination of British knowledge and expertise among the Indian masses. Local artists and artisans adapted to this transformation, with some opting to embrace Western style,

medium, and technique, achieving success in this process. This era also marked the increasing popularity of oil paints as a medium.

The art journey began with traditional *Kalighat* paintings, Early Bengal Paintings, and chromolithographs from the Calcutta Art Studio, and then moved to Maharashtra, showcasing the works of significant painters from the region. Artists from various regions explored similar subjects, showcasing a unique representation of costume, jewellery, and expression influenced by geographical boundaries, cultural milieu, and social practices. The journey continued to the southern parts of the country, focusing on *Travancore*, where Western Academic style art by Raja Ravi Varma, Sekhara Warriar, and Cheduvaranga Naidoo gained popularity. Traditional arts from *Thanjavur* encountered modern printing presses and coloured boxes of *Sivakasi* through the hands of artists like C.G. Ramanujam and C. Kondiah Raju. G.V Venkatesh Rao popularized the Gods with lithographs of Rama and Krishna (Fig. – 1), while Mysore court painter K. Kesavayya immortalized people through his portraits. Traditional faces adapted to European features, and Indian Gods' images were retouched and printed in England, Germany, and Italy. Krishna danced with Gopis in Italian castles, and Dattatreya adopted a muscular physique. The realism that originated in the West and was introduced to India by Westerners was mastered by Indian artists.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Venolola, 1922, Krishna Artwork –G V Venkatesh Rao - Raja Ravi Varma Press  
Retrieve from: <https://www.tallengestore.com/products/venolola-krishna-artwork-g-v-venkatesh-rao-raja-ravi-varma-press-vintage-indian-art-print-art-prints>

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bengal experienced a surge in the Revivalist Movement as a response to the British academic influence. Revivalism is an important art movement within Indian Modernism. The movement is characterized by its focus on Indian culture, politics, and art, with a revival of folk art, Hindu symbols, and a celebration of humanism. Renowned artists like Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Sunayani Devi, Mukul Dey, and Asit Kumar Haldar are associated with this movement.

The Revivalist Movement in India aimed to boost domestic industry and art by promoting the creation and use of distinctively Indian styles. The concept of a new Indian art and aesthetic is often credited to Abanindranath Tagore and evolved around the late 1800s, a time when European realism was dominant in Indian art, particularly in Company paintings and the creations of artists like Raja Ravi Varma.

Meanwhile, artists in Bombay were creating artwork that showcased a strong academic approach in terms of technique and portrayal, while also highlighting indigenous themes. Among these artists, Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar (1867 - 1944) stood out as a prominent figure who skillfully blended academic realism with popular commercial art, drawing inspiration from the renowned Raja Ravi Varma. (S. Bahulkar, - 2023)

Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar (1867 - 1944), an oriental realist, is most famous for his illustrative series depicting the city of Bombay and its people, *Women of India* (Fig. – 2), scenes from Hindu mythology, and *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (Fig. – 3). He played a crucial part in shaping the early Indian art scene. In addition to being a notable painter who worked in various mediums, Dhurandhar was also a formidable arts educator and administrator. He served as the first Indian Director of the Sir J.J. School of Art from 1930.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Illustration of a woman in a Pink Dress from Pathare Prabhu community, Water Colour, from the 'Women of India' series, published in 1920. Illustrated by M.V. Dhurandhar. Retrieved from: <https://artguide.artforum.com/artguide/dr-bhau-daji-lad-mumbai-city-museum-9324/m-v-dhurandhar-the-artist-as-chronicler-1867-1944-160721>

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam Series 01 (Poster), Water Colour, - M V Dhurandhar <https://www.tallengestore.com/products/omar-khayyam-series-01-m-v-dhurandhar-indian-painting>

## 2. OBJECTIVES

This paper intends to carry out

- Socio-cultural significance representation through the brush of M.V. Dhurandhar
- Transition and impact of M.V. Dhurandhar's works in Indian art.

## 3. STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

After performing well in the intermediate grade examination at Rajaram High School, Mahadev Viswanath Dhurandhar received valuable guidance from artist Abalal Rahiman in Kolhapur. He then journeyed to Bombay to take his matriculation examination and was enchanted by the Sir J. J. School of Art's collection of Graeco Roman statues. In the year 1890, he joined the school for advanced art education. In 1896, Dhurandhar was invited to join the Sir J. J. School of Art as a teacher, and in the year 1910, he became the Principal. By 1930, he was the first Indian director who led the art school and at that time his individual and group exhibitions gained significant popularity among various societal groups.

During his time at the school, Dhurandhar was influenced by European and British artists due to the predominantly British faculty. Unlike Eastern art, which focused on line drawing, Western art was more pictorial. This led Indian students to emulate the European Academic Art form, and Dhurandhar was a product of this influence. His works, including the famous '*Women at Work*' (Fig – 4), earned him recognition such as the British Government Award in 1892 and a gold medal for '*Marriage Ceremony*' (Fig – 7) in 1908. Dhurandhar produced over 5,000 paintings and 50,000 illustrations and received numerous gold and silver medals during his lifetime.

Dhurandhar developed a distinctive painting style that was more dramatic than Raja Ravi Varma. His '*Sarasvati* (Fig – 5) in *Red Nauvari*' portrays the goddess seated gracefully on a peacock playing a Sitar, a popular north Indian musical instrument, instead of the traditional *Sarasvati Veena*. There are notable differences in the placement of the rosary and *pothi* book in the paintings. However, Dhurandhar made an error by showing more than 20 frets in the sitar. Additionally, his depiction of *Lakshmi* (Fig – 6) during *Samudramanthana*

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** A rare Oleograph '*Shri Vidhya Saraswati*' from Ravi Varma Press.

Original composition by M V Dhurandhar. Retrieved from:

<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/01/00/61/010061dcffebef78447f35b132423747.jpg>

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** 'A fishwife of Bombay' a watercolour by Rao Bahadur M. V. Dhurandhar, 1928. Retrieved from: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fishwife.jpg>

**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** Samudra Manthan 'Laxmi', Oleograph, M. V. Dhurandhar Oleograph, Raja Ravi Varma Press. Retrieved from:

<https://www.beyondsquare.co.in/product/samudra-manthan-laxmi/>

shows her in a white *saree* instead of red and features over-ornamentation, which is absent in Ravi Varma's work. The splashing water on the lotus with the blurred background of gods and demons performing *Sagaramanthana* brings a sense of vitality to the painting, conveying the idea that Lakshmi has just emerged from the water. Dhurandhar's portrayal of women in *nauvari sarees* is a significant marker of the early phase of naturalistic art of the Bombay school. In his painting 'Hindu Marriage Ceremony' (Fig – 7), he depicts over thirty *Pathare Prabhu* ladies on a single canvas, each uniquely beautiful. His ability to depict numerous figures in a painting is uncommon. Furthermore, Dhurandhar's paintings often feature magnificent and grand backgrounds. His accurate portrayal of life forms is elegant and bears the influence of Mannerism. Dhurandhar's art embodies an old colonial charm, showcasing a unique combination of European idealism and Indian aesthetics and symbolism.



**Figure 7**

**Figure 7** 'Scene of Hindu Marriage Ceremony', M.V. Dhurandhar. Retrieved from: [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:M.V.\\_Dhurandhar%E2%80%99s\\_Scene\\_Of\\_Hindu\\_Marriage\\_Ceremony.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:M.V._Dhurandhar%E2%80%99s_Scene_Of_Hindu_Marriage_Ceremony.jpg)

Dhurandhar's artistic style can be described as a fusion of academic realism and traditional Indian art forms. M.V. Dhurandhar pioneered the development of refined, classical applied art in India. Over thousands of years, Indian art has evolved through various visual styles. The influence of foreign invaders introduced different art forms, which eventually took root in the region. The early art forms of Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Patna Kalam and the local visual language merged over time to create a hybrid art form.

This cultural synthesis resulted in art styles such as *Warli*, *Madhubani*, *Rajasthani*, *Mughal-Persian*, *Deccani*, *Pahari*, *Basoli*, and *Kangra*. The art form, originally two-dimensional, transitioned into a three-dimensional form during the British colonial period when Greco-Roman influences were introduced. The work of academic artist M.V. Dhurandhar exemplifies this synthesis.

'The progressive art movement of 1947 completely wiped out the 'Bombay School,' which was heavily influenced by the British Empire during India's National Movement for Freedom. 'Shantiniketan' symbolized the national spirit in opposition to the 'Bombay School.' It was largely a myth created by a few individuals to demonstrate their patriotism. When examining the career of M.V. Dhurandhar, who explored various art styles over nearly fifty years, his work stands out as authentically Indian and innovative in style.' (Joshi, - 2020)

Dhurandhar was significantly influenced by renowned Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma and his works. He changed into excited by Raja Ravi Varma's art due to the fact he realistically supplied Indian mythological narratives. Dhurandhar's artistic style can be described as a fusion of academic realism and traditional Indian art forms. He skillfully combined Western techniques with Indian aesthetics creating a visual language that resonated with both Indian and international audiences. His meticulous attention to detail, vibrant colours, and realistic portrayal of subjects showcased his technical expertise and ability to capture the essence of his subjects.

One of Dhurandhar's notable techniques was his use of light and shadow. He employed chiaroscuro to create depth and dimension in his paintings, infusing them with a sense of realism. By skillfully manipulating light, he accentuated the features of his subjects, bringing them to life on the canvas. M V Dhurandhar's art mainly focused on depicting scenes from Indian history, literature, and mythology in a Western academic style. The Kolhapur-born artist was considered the second most popular Indian artist in the first half of the twentieth century, after Raja Ravi Varma.

His popularity among the masses, artistic finesse, and services to the British government led to him being awarded the title of Rao Bahadur in 1927. Dhurandhar significantly contributed to the academic style of the time by creating impactful works that blended the European style with Indian ethos, thereby expanding the discourse around contemporary Indian art in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

#### 4. THEMES IN DHURANDHAR'S PAINTINGS

M.B. Dhurandhar's paintings often focused on themes that reflected the socio-cultural fabric of Indian society during his time. He depicted various aspects of everyday life, covering a wide range of subjects such as portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes.

Limited research has been conducted on Dhuranadhar in the English language. Notable mentions are Partha Mitter's chapter on him in his influential book *'Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1920'* and Allan Life's article *'Picture Postcards by M.V. Dhurandhar: Scenes and Types of India-with a Difference'* in Visual Resources. (Mitter, - 1995)

Dhurandhar's most remarkable skill was his ability to convey personality and drama through his characters. Whether it was the illustrations in 'Women of India' or the figures in his postcards and paintings, each person he drew possessed character or a distinctive action element that made them memorable. When we think of 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian painters and artists, quite a few names instantly come to mind. If not, a quick Google search would likely feature Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar as one of the prominent names.

British colonial rule had a significant impact on the Indian art form. Popular art in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was bold and uninhibited, particularly in the depiction of women, drawing criticism for not aligning with Victorian notions of chastity. In response, many Indian artists attempted to blend Victorian aesthetics with Indian traditions, including Raja Ravi Varma and Dhurandhar. Compared to Ravi Varma, not much has been written about the latter, despite encountering his work numerous times without acknowledging the recognition he deserves in contemporary times.

**Figure 8**



**Figure 8** M. V. Dhurandhar, 'Household Work.'

Dhurandhar, the first Indian to win an award Rs. 50 for his painting 'Household Work' at The Bombay Art Society's (BAS) Exhibition, when he was still a junior student. This early work showcased his growing fascination with depicting human figures in everyday and intense scenarios. The artist's talent and attention to detail are evident in this powder shading drawing.

Retrieved from: <https://dagworld.com/mvdhurandhar-collaboration.html>

Dhurandhar's education at the institute helped him develop a sense of realism and the classic technique of chiaroscuro, using light and shadow to create three-dimensional portraits. He was the first Indian gold medal winner of the Bombay Art Society in 1895. Dhurandhar's work is best known for his documentation of city life, his paintings of Indian mythological figures, and, most importantly, his depiction of women navigating the realms of the private and public spheres. His charcoal drawing, '*Household Work*' (Fig. – 8) depicts two Maharashtrian women chatting while carrying out their errands. The artist spent hours by the promenade, observing people as they went about their mundane activities, capturing the essence of their actions in his intricate drawings.

The manifestation of Maharashtrian society and its cultural celebrations is especially remarkable. In retrospect, Dhurandhar's work also provides insight into the sartorial sociology of Bombay and offers a clearer picture of the status of women in society as perceived from the inner sanctum. As one of the few commercial painters from India, he illustrated women from different regions for Otto Rothfield's book '*Women of India*' (1920). A detailed study of these illustrations draws attention to the garments worn by women across regions and socio-economic strata, making his work a valuable resource for historians and art lovers studying.

## 5. SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Dhurandhar's artworks have great social and cultural importance as they provide a glimpse into the past, capturing the lives and experiences of individuals from various backgrounds. His works serve as historical artefacts providing valuable insights into the social economic and cultural dynamics of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in India.

Moreover, Dhurandhar's art played an important role in elevating the status of Indian art on the global stage. His fusion of Western techniques with Indian themes challenged the prevailing notions of what constituted authentic Indian art. By blending the best of both worlds he created a unique artistic language that resonated with audiences both in India and abroad.

## 6. IMPACT ON INDIAN ART

Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar experienced the fast transformations in colonial India and utilized his deep observation and cultural understanding to produce a compassionate and amusing record of that period. His artworks offer a distinct portrayal of Indian life from a native viewpoint, capturing the genuineness of substance and style. Although skilled in European naturalism, he also adapted to colonial aesthetic norms to create innovative expressive techniques. Dhurandhar's talent in depicting eternal deities and his re-indigenized Indian naturalism as a response to Western ideals have gained him acclaim. Eminent art historian Partha Mitter notes that 'Dhurandhar's practice deviates from the established convention of the romantic outsider artist in the modernist imagination of that time'. (Mitter, - 1995)

Dhurandhar's illustrations stand out from his contemporaries due to their deep understanding of the world and their realistic portrayal. His close connections with famous theatre performers and the thriving Marathi and Parsi theatre industry in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Mumbai are visible in his artwork. His illustrations go beyond mere scientific studies, capturing lifelike qualities. In his biography, Dhurandhar



emphasizes the significance of upholding moral values and traditions, as well as approaching art to achieve success. Despite being a master of the academic realist style, Dhurandhar remained rooted in tradition in his personal life, showcasing a paradoxical blend of modernity and tradition.

M.V. Dhurandhar, an esteemed Indian artist, acted significantly in influencing the direction of Indian art. His realistic portrayal of everyday life in his paintings profoundly impacted the development of modern Indian art. Dhurandhar's formal art education at the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art in Mumbai led to his prominence as a member of the Bombay Art Society. His paintings primarily focused on capturing scenes from various social strata, including bustling streets, traditional festivals, and everyday activities of the common people. One of the defining characteristics of Dhurandhar's works was his commitment to realism and attention to detail. His keen observation and meticulous brushwork allowed him to capture the nuances of human expressions, clothing, and architecture, thus lending an authentic touch to his artworks.

Dhurandhar's paintings served as a visual documentation of Indian life and culture during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, showcasing the transition from traditional to modern ways of life and preserving a significant part of Indian cultural heritage for future generations. His influence on contemporary Indian art is undeniable. His realistic style, attention to detail, and documentation of Indian life and culture continue to inspire artists today. Many modern Indian artists draw inspiration from his ability to capture the essence of everyday life, infusing their own artworks with a similar sense of realism. His legacy also extends to the use of vibrant colours and the incorporation of Indian cultural elements in contemporary art.

The lasting impact of M.V. Dhurandhar's paintings on the trajectory of Indian art is evident in the way modern Indian artists approach their craft. His influence can be seen in the works of countless artists who continue to draw inspiration from his techniques and subject matter, shaping the present and future of Indian art.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar witnessed numerous transformations during his time in colonial India. With his sharp observation skills and deep cultural knowledge, he created a sympathetic and amusing portrayal of the era. His paintings truly capture the essence of the subject matter and offer a unique perspective on life in India from a local standpoint. Dhurandhar received great recognition for his mastery of European realism and actively experimented with innovative techniques while adhering to colonial aesthetic standards. Art historian Partha Mitter highlights how Dhurandhar's approach deviated from the traditional modernist concept of the artist as an outsider driven by romanticism. (Mitter, - 1995) Unlike his contemporaries, Dhurandhar's artworks display a striking realism and a discerning viewpoint. His association with renowned theatre performer Balgandharva influenced the dramatic angles and poignant expressions depicted in his paintings. This sheds light on Dhurandhar's role as a chronicler of the rapidly changing times in the bustling city, emphasizing his dedication to traditions, ethics, and his craft. In his biography, *'Kalamandiratilekk echalis varshe'* (41 years at Sir J.J. School of Art), Dhurandhar emphasizes the importance of maintaining moral integrity and treating art with respect in order to succeed in the industry. The importance of purity of character and reverence in the pursuit of success, he wrote in his biography for young artists ... *'To achieve success in this field should maintain purity of character and they should practice their art with a sense of reverence; this alone will raise their*

*art to new heights'* (Dhurandhar, - 2018) Despite being a master of academic realism, Dhurandhar led a fundamentally conventional personal life, which contradicts the principles of modernism.

The British Empire gave titles such as '*Rao Bahadur*' to Indians who were loyal to them. However, nationalists saw these individuals as being supportive of the British. During British rule in India, those with the title of *Rao Bahadur* were seen as loyal to the Empire, but they also had a strong desire for the nation's progress. Respected figures like '*Lokahitwadi*', '*Nyaymurti*', '*Mahatma*', and '*Lokamanya*' were known for their contributions to the country and its people. These individuals advocated for progressive ideas, social-cultural justice, and the elimination of the caste system and other societal problems.

Dhurandhar's contemporary, '*Lokahitwadi*' Deshmukh, advocated for progressive thinking brought by British rule for a better future. He opposed the outdated traditional mind set and fought for social-cultural justice for the underprivileged class. Jyotiba Phule, a supporter of British rule, founded the '*Satyashodhak Samaj*' to bust religious myths oppressing the underprivileged class. Shahu Maharaj, ruler of Kolhapur, was referred to as '*Rajashri*', saviour of the underprivileged class. Mahadeo Govind Ranade, the Honorable Justice of the court, dedicated his life to uplifting and reforming the Indian people. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, known as '*Lokamanya*', was recognized for his social and political selflessness and became a world figure. In Maharashtra, people honoured Prabodhankar Thakarey for his social reforms. Jayprakash Narayan, who spent his life for freedom of expression, was given the title '*Lokanayak*' by the people.

All the titles above discussed here are because of a myth that '*Rao Bahadur*', the title given by the British Empire to artist M. V. Dhurandhar, proves that he was against his own country, completely ignoring his valuable contribution to the art of India. This overlooks his significant contributions to Indian art. Unfortunately, his work has been wrongly labelled as Pro-British. After fifty years of Dhurandhar's passing, artist Prof. Dinkar Kawshik wrote an article stating that the British favoured Dhurandhar, which undermined his talent. However, Kawshik's biased perspective did acknowledge Dhurandhar's greatness. These biases have overshadowed the legacy of M. V. Dhurandhar. (Joshi, - 2020)

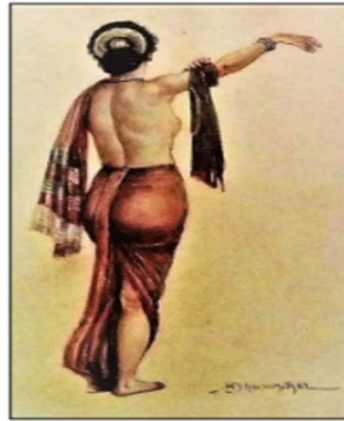
Anthropologists engage in the study of humans, wild animals, nature, and their activities in order to gain insights into the process of evolution. In a similar vein, M.V. Dhurandhar's temperament and commitment to the nationalist spirit are evident in the '*Romantic Realist*' exhibition held at NGMA-Mumbai (National Gallery of Modern Art – Mumbai). This exhibition, which took place on September 10th, 2018, with the support of DAG (Delhi Art Gallery), showcased Dhurandhar's ability to keenly observe and meticulously document the intricate aspects of life through a series of sketches and drawings. Dhurandhar's works reflect the significance of possessing a pure character and reverence in his field of practice, thereby embodying his inner nationalism. Among the visual examples presented, the first portrays a traditional middle-class woman serving sweets (Fig - 9), symbolizing Indian hospitality and culture. The second depicts a woman wearing a blouse (Fig - 10), while the last captures a mundane morning moment of bowel cleaning (Fig - 11). Dhurandhar's artistic postcards serve as visual records of the behavioural patterns and relationships between men and women, offering a rare socio-cultural insight. These sketches also draw attention to the subtle distinction between nudity and nakedness, reminiscent of Desmond Morris' book on body language, '*Man-Watching*'.

**Figure 9**



**Figure 9** 'A Traditional Middle-class Woman Serving Sweets'. M.V. Dhurandhar. Retrieved from: <https://www.slideshare.net/joranjana/4-dhurandhar-and-applied-art-final-article-229482751>

**Figure 10**



**Figure 10** A woman wearing a blouse. M.V. Dhurandhar. Retrieved from: <https://www.slideshare.net/joranjana/4-dhurandhar-and-applied-art-final-article-229482751>

**Figure 11**



**Figure 11** A mundane morning moment of bowel cleaning. M.V. Dhurandhar. Retrieved from: <https://www.slideshare.net/joranjana/4-dhurandhar-and-applied-art-final-article-229482751>

Dhurandhar's exploration of human body language a century ago continues to hold immense value and enduring significance in the realm of modern Indian art. This research not only remains relevant in contemporary times but also possesses the potential to shape the future practices of artists. By building upon Dhurandhar's legacy, present-day artists can further strengthen and enhance the traditions of modern Indian art.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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