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## *Indian Landscapes*

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**Rajat Kumar**

MFA - II<sup>nd</sup> Year  
Painting Department  
NBCCFP, SVSU, Meerut.

Landscape art came in India through travelling European artists who brought the art of painting rivers, mountains, and trees against a horizon or a sky – nature as a subject in itself – to Indian art, where it was only a backdrop in mythological stories or lifetimes of gods.

Amongst the earliest European artists who visited India were John Zoffany, William Hodges, Tilly Kettle, William and Thomas Daniells, Emily Eden and others. From around 1760 till the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, these itinerant artist-travelers toured India working for local patrons making paintings and prints of monuments, landscapes as well as portraits. The artists worked in oils on canvas utilizing the western technique of academic realism with its emphasis on linear perspective. These European artists recorded the new colony in prints and paintings that explored the vast landscapes, the numerous historical edifices and monuments and the many communities that inhabited the land. Filtered through the ‘orientalist’ lens, these works imaged India as an exotic and mysterious land in paintings depicting the ghats of Benaras, dancing girls in princely courts, colourful caste costumes, portraits of local rulers and their courtiers, different native occupations and the local flora and fauna.

The genre remained popular throughout the nineteenth century with a great demand for Indian landscapes both in Europe and among the newly rich in India. Its popularity began to decrease with the arrival of modernism and a growing emphasis on the human figure, but several Indian artists, a significant name among them Gopal Ghose from West Bengal, continued to practice the form. Now absorbing a wide range of new artistic trends and influences. In 1943, he was one of the founders of the Calcutta Group, perhaps the first group of modernist painters in India.

Ghose was drawn to the pictorial vocabulary developed by European Expressionists and Cubists to depict nature. Ghose reworked the genre of landscape painting, investing it with expressionistic qualities. He travelled extensively within India to paint his landscapes. Ghose was adept with

several mediums, and known especially for his ingenious handling of watercolour. He also worked with tempera, pen and ink, and brush and pastel. His works can be seen at the Birla Academy of Art & Culture, Kolkata, and the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

Then we find realistic oil landscapes by masters like, J. P. Gangooly and Ravi Varma. J. P. Gangooly belonged to the extended Tagore family in Calcutta. Like many of his class of affluent gentlemen artists, Gangooly didn’t go to art school but was a product of private art training at home, initiated later into art by Abanindranath Tagore. Gangooly painted at the time of rise of new nationalist and modernist art movements. The skills he commanded in illusionist oil painting and landscapes were all part of the essential training that marked the formation of the new professional artist in colonial India. Over the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the artist demonstrated his flair in various genres, ranging from portraiture to neo-classical and mythological paintings. However, landscapes and riverscapes became his chosen genre where he developed his special style of densely mist-laden atmospheric effects of sunrise and sunsets on bathing ghats, river banks and mountain ranges. Gangooly especially surpassed himself in the picturesque views of the Himalayas, and in the village and river scenes of Bengal. He painted nearly a hundred oils of the sun setting on the river Padma, which earned him the sobriquet ‘Painter of Padma’.

Raja Ravi Varma (1848 - 1906, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala), Indian painter best known for uniting Hindu mythological subject matter with European realist historicist painting style. Ravi Varma was the first Indian to use Western techniques of perspective and composition and to adapt them to Indian subjects, styles, and themes. Varma adapted Western realism to pioneer a new movement in Indian art. In 1894 he set up a lithographic press in order to mass-produce copies of his paintings as oleographs, enabling ordinary people to afford them. That innovation resulted in the tremendous popularity of his images, which became an integral part of popular Indian culture thereafter.

We find Strong representation of academic Indian art school-trained artists from the 1920s-60s who specialised in landscapes – such as S. L. Haldankar, M. K. Parandekar, L. N. Taskar, D. C. Joglekar and S. G. Thakur Singh .

S. L. Haldankar was born in Savantwadi, then a State in the British-run Bombay Presidency. In 1903, he took his Diploma in Painting from the Sir J. J. School of Art, Bombay, where he received training under eminent artist-teachers like Cecil L Burns, Walter Robotham, Ganpatrao Kedari, A. X. Trindade, S. P. Agaskar and M. V. Dhurandhar.

Haldankar associated himself with many art activities and was a keen member of important art committees and societies – such as the Maharashtra Chitrakar Mandal and the Hansa Mehta Committee for Reorganisation of Art Education. His delicate handling of transparent watercolour landscapes received special recognition, with the Bombay critics coining the term ‘Open Air School’ for his technique in their art reviews.

Post 1920, the trend in the Bombay region inclined towards landscapes, prior to which it was paintings on historical and mythological subjects that dominated the annual shows of the art societies. Haldankar’s landscapes gave the genre visibility and zest, and his works influenced a generation of artists to come in their watercolour works. M.K. Parandekar (1877-1961, Maharashtra) in his school days, attended many landscape demonstrations by Kolhapur painter Abalall Rahiman and was deeply influenced by him. He graduated from Sir J.J. School of Art, Mumbai in 1905.

Parandekar was known for his landscape paintings. He mastered both the oil and watercolour medium, and excelled in portraits and figure drawings too. Parandekar’s biggest achievement was in 1917 when Lord Willingdon addressed him as Artist to the Governor of Bombay. He was also the first Founder member of ‘The Art Society of India’ in 1918. He served as Secretary of the Archaeological Survey of India for ten years in 1920. It was this experience that led him to paint sceneries and landscapes of Nasik, Benaras and Kashmir. He exhibited his works all over India, and many of his works are in private and public collections in India.

L. N. Taskar (1870 – 1937, Bombay) adopting the style of objective accuracy, formal order and an interest in narration, with objects and spaces modelled illusionistically, his paintings perform the social function of concentrating on everyday slices of life, generating attention on local imagery. When the artistic frame is constructed around places and events, it seems easier to

discover its distinct local flavour, and that is the message that Taskars paintings send across to the spectator. There is a strong local aesthetic in Taskars paintings, and inspite of the rigid academic discipline inherent in the art schools, the artist made several departures from his training in the transparent watercolour technique. One can clearly locate this in his painting, Market Place, where within the framework of measured form and proportion, use of aerial perspective and focal strategies, forms move back and forth in the visual field. The presence of pencil drawing enhances the formal construction of the work, with the outdoor atm.

D. C. Joglekar (1896 – 1952, Mumbai) while traveling all over India, was a water colourist whose compositions included panoramic landscapes and architectural facets and views of urban and rural situations. Joglekar was the recipients of several important awards, medals and prizes including the Bombay Art Society.

Translucent, light filled aquarelle landscapes distinguish D. C. Joglekar's work. Several of his water colours carry a spatial openness and a peculiar lightness in rendering structural quotients including rocky grounds and architectural elements that allow his compositions to carry a breath of prana, the inner life force. The elemental presence that permeates the monuments and architectural elements that dominate his landscapes is achieved by layering colour washes with great skill and sensitivity. Very often joglekar chooses to view akasha through perspectives from within towns and old vadas with their quaint balconies that are suspended over the street. The peculiar rich, stillness is the hallmark of Joglekar's finer works.

Another important facet of the artist's colour wash application is evident in his remarkable treatment of rock, stone and masonry brilliantly. The artist's manipulation of light within the colour washes and his creation of contrasts that modulate the translucence of solid grounds with dazzling light drenched elements in his compositions afford an ascetic starkness to his realism. Joglekar was rooted in the indigenous environment; his aesthetic vision was awash with its pulse and rhythm. Perhaps his work as a field and laboratory artist and photographer in the Royal Institute of Science alongside his evolution as artist, gave him an unusual insight into the topography and panorama of the great Indian hinterland. His formal training in art provided the matrix from which he grew to distinguish himself as a remarkably gifted water colourist, who was able to bring in the emotive essence of Indian aesthetics into his painterly vocabulary investing his best aquarelles with a meditative poetic vision.

Bengal School's Far East-inspired innovations seen in the works of Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Prosanto Roy, BenodeBehari Mukherjee and IndraDugar. Master printmaker Haren Das, known for his serene, rustic landscapes of rural Bengal, finds special and substantial representation.

Post-independent Indian art and modernism is represented by the landscapist GopalGhose, experiments in abstraction by F. N. Souza, K. S. Kulkarni, S. H. Raza, S. K. Bakre,

Ganesh Haloi, Akbar Padamsee, Ram Kumar, and a rare find – two landscapes by M. F. Husain, an artist not known to have painted landscapes. Other modernist Indian masters too find representation, many with their early works, artists such as BikashBhattacharjee and Sunil Das, early modernist landscapes and fantasyscapes of Avinash Chandra, those by Chittaprosad, Rabin Mondal and P. T. Reddy, and Himalayanscapes by Devyani and Kanwal Krishna, and the masterful Bireswar Sen.

