

Ravi Varma in Baroda

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Baroda appears to have played a crucial role in the career of Raja Ravi Varma. The rare honour of being invited as a state guest to attend the investiture ceremony of Maharaja Sayaji Rao III in 1881 must have given the artist, who had faced virtual banishment from his home state of Travancore¹, a gratifying sense of recognition. On arrival in Baroda, he was treated with great respect, given a studio in the palace complex and the paintings he produced were prominently displayed in the palace and acquired by the state and the nobility. Indeed there would be little exaggeration in the contention that some of his most important pictures were painted in or for Baroda.² And the retrospect, these paintings and the events that followed marked a turning point in the artist's career, their impact was felt substantially on the course of contemporary Indian art – which he influenced in no small measure. Large oil paintings of the figures of Lakshmi and Saraswati (the latter was based on a convention of painting lady musicians seated on thrones of chairs) were painted during his first visit to Baroda. These became prototypes of the innumerable versions produced thenceforth, replacing for the most, all traditional icons of these goddesses in the popular mind. The artist's decision to embark upon a tour of the country with the express purpose of devising a common costume which would satisfy every class equally³ was necessitated when he received a commission from Sayaji Rao to paint fourteen *Pauranic* pictures for the Lakshmi Vilas Palace under construction. This initiative indicates the quest for a nationalist identity, and of understanding the importance of visual iconography in recognizing it. The subsequent use of the sari endowed the female figure with heroic and sublime propensity and widened the appeal of his pictures on a national scale: he was perhaps the first individual artist to have achieved the distinction of a pan-Indian approbation.⁴ The famous letter of the Diwan of Baroda, T Madhav Rao, bidding Ravi Varma to have his paintings oleographed⁵ was catalytic in initiating what turned out to be the origin of the mythological reproductions. This initiative eventually generated a spate of such ephemera which continues to haunt the Indian street and average home even today.

Ravi Varma saw in the blend of the progressive outlook of the Baroda state and the conformity to traditional values a model kingdom analogical to the site posited in his paintings. Perhaps he identified his quest for a 'modern' pictorial language in portraying 'ancient' themes with Sayaji Rao finding himself standing in a gap between two civilizations – Western progress and the Indian tradition. Ravi Varma's position was, however, not unique: it reflected the response of the educated urban elite to the socio-cultural changes in nineteenth century India. One might venture, in fact, that Ravi Varma's choice of the medium of oil painting is comparable to the adoption of English as a language of literary expression: these being the most effective instruments to render visible the reality of a binary vision, or to articulate the simultaneous belonging to the twin worlds and times that colonialism had brought into focus. The combined impact of 'illusionism' in painting and 'realism' in literature heralding easel painting and the new literary forms of the novella and the short story, left the traditional artist/narrator in a

state of limbo. In not too distant a past, painters at the court of Avadh or Kishengarh had tried to absorb aspects of Western art into their oeuvre – but on their terms. The world they portrayed, including European imagery, appeared as an indigenous eye saw it from within an age-old tradition. Moulding illusionism into pliant, resilient naturalism, they were able to relegate the effects of *chiaroscuro* and foreshortening to a secondary function. Their predecessors, too, had resisted fullscale illusionism despite opportunities of that kind in the past.⁶ Ravi Varma embraced not only the technique of oil painting but also aspects of illusionism that came in its trail.⁷ His detractors saw in this an unabashed conversion to Westernisation whereas his admirers found in him a true 'Indian' projecting virtues of ancient culture. His immediate patrons, the princely elite, idolised him for having seized the weapon of 'realism' from the 'perennial power of the superior race' to be wielded against it with equal ease. The evocation of the 'golden age' of ancient India in his painted mythologicals must have aroused a nostalgia for their past glories in the days of decline. Interestingly, the content of his paintings was paramount in the eyes of his admirers, whereas his critics identified him more with the form and style he used.

What Ravi Varma painted was neither wholly 'Indian' nor 'Western', neither was it realistic nor fictitious as was claimed variously by admirers, critics and antagonists. It was patently electric in intent and import. He was offering the means to clothe mythical figures in believable garbs and settings, as was the case in the contemporary Parsi theatre. Most of his paintings are meticulously planned as theatric tableaux on a proscenium stage with the positions and postures of principal and subordinate characters clearly defined to achieve the desired dramatic effects. The heroic gesture of the protagonist looking out at the audience in 'Krishna As Envoy' or the heraldic posture of Bhishma's declaration in 'Matsyagandha' are clearly meant to elicit applause. Climatic moments in the stories of 'virtuous' characters – victims of fate-facing death, doom or the sacrifice of their dear ones are chosen for their tear-wrenching potential as in popular urban theatre: consider 'Harishchandra Taramati', 'Mohini Rukmangada', 'Ravana and Jatayu', 'Nala Damayanti' and 'Draupadi Vastraharana'.

He was indeed as much obsessed with theatre as his traditional counterpart but the means he used were considerably different. The traditional artist had portrayed the theatre of life in a continuum – using devices of continuous narration, open-ended structures, and free, metaphoric, rather than local, associations of colours. The language of painting he had evolved over the centuries did not deal with the polemics of the 'real' and its opposite. For instance, naturalistic equation is not the purpose of a blue-bodied Krishna in a Mewar painting. The correspondence is with the associations of a divine *svarupa* of *Ghanshyama*, whereas a 'real' Krishna of Ravi Varma looked every inch an actor with blue paint smeared on his skin. Significantly, Ravi Varma usually avoided attributes of multiple limbs of even stereotypical mythical characters probably for the sake of adherence to theatric realism. Conversely what traditional painting shared with the art of theatre were multiple inputs that provided the nucleus for the basic creative impulse. The alternative Ravi Varma offered externalised the forming nucleus to focus on physical appearances. Using illusionistic effects in the representation of retinal experience he claimed to 'materialise' or 'bring to life', as a magician might, what was in the realm of

myth, memory or imagination. The dramatic impersonation he induced in his models to assume the roles of Lakshmi or Saraswati conjured the illusion of flesh and blood divinities. The recipe proved to be hypnotic. The new 'realistic' *avatars* of the goddesses met with such an overwhelming response that their earlier forms disappeared from public memory. From the archetypal at Ellora to the stereotypical Tanjore, the images of the earlier goddesses became a thing of the past. This theatric illusion of materiality served all purposes: religious and secular. For the 'new' iconography of his divinities he chose props and costumes dramatic and simple enough to be recognised even by the lay. With 'classical' columns and drooping heavy curtains he would conjure up palace interiors and the grandiose legacy of the Kshatriya clan. He used a tall, muscular moustachioed youthful type with heroic postures to fit the image of the valorous male. And a fair and well-endowed young woman, often bare-breasted, enacted the role of a mythical beauty. Take for instance, the female figure on the left in 'The Court of Indrajit'. Her figure and posture simulates a classical 'Venus', she wears her sari, uncharacteristically baring her breast, like a neo-classical drape. In his portraits Ravi Varma highlighted the costumes and jewellery to such an extent that they glittered brighter than the sitters they adorned. Under the circumstances of growing economic strife the seductive exposition of personal possessions and tantalizing props as commodities⁸ met with instant success; as did the portrayal of suggestive sexuality in the taboo-ridden late nineteenth century colonial India. What Polynter and Tadema had achieved in Victorian England, Ravi Varma accomplished here with equal success.

Yet the role Ravi Varma played as an artist of immense influence is not as simple as it might appear to be. In his eagerness to overcome conventional modes and methods of painting he dared to tread into forbidden territories. The 'realism' he tried to appropriate was available to his contemporary and former traditional counterparts but it was rarely, if at all, embraced with whole-hearted conviction as he did. In effect he was breaking barriers between the East and the West and thrusting open a frontal dialogue, - a meeting of the twain. This single act makes him a precursor of the 'modern' in attitude, if not in his art. Besides the brief coaching he received from Theodore Jenson, a visiting artist, he had no opportunity of any formal training in an art school and evolved his own brand of academic realism more or less single-handedly. He negotiated risks in accomplishing his technique and form by sheer dint of personal effort. He fell short of his aspirations but his mistakes and failures signalled directions for others to follow.⁹ These trials and tribulations of the pioneer makes him touchingly human - who did not feel shame or guilt in revealing his weaknesses. Perhaps this endearing vulnerability of Ravi Varma earned him adulation and rapport with his equality vulnerable viewers, that which his more competent yet conservative and safe contemporaries could rarely elicit.

What Ravi Varma achieved was not always an outcome of his intent but often a byproduct of his limitations. He was short of the mastery he is credited with in rendering 'realism'. A look around of the galleries of Ravi Varma and his European contemporaries in the Fateh Singh Museum would reveal quite glaring inaccuracies in the handling of foreshortening and depth. For instance, with characteristic naivete he would conceal or make smaller, extremities like hands and feet, or leave a mass of depth ambiguous beneath the veneer of surface modulations. The portrait of T. Madhav Rao in the Lakshmi

Vilas Palace collection makes the figure dwarf-like due to problems with foreshortening as he is carried away by the relish in handling the drapery of the heavy costume leaving inner body-contours undefined. He had problem with relating moving figures to a perspectival space and in depicting outdoor scenes, probably on account of the practice of drawing static models in indoor studios. In 'Rama Vanquishing the Ocean' and 'Ganga and Shantanu' the gaze of distant and proximate figures does not meet on account of erroneous rendering of positions in linear perspective. His 'landscapes' are mostly flat props set behind posed models, painted separately, conspicuously in 'Vishwamitra Menaka' and 'Bharat and the Lion Cub'. The figures illuminated by the indoor lighting are mounted on to the outdoor colour palette of the scenery and appear as a collage of tangential sources. Besides, the posture of child Bharat against a 'painted' cub is thus rendered quaint, and even comic. Yet it is this very naivete that gives him an edge over his more competent contemporaries in evolving a personal rather than a purely 'professional' but colourless mode. The shortcomings he felt made him turn to devices other than the naturalistic. The over-darkening of contours, heavy modelling and obsessions of highlighting of gold or gems from his Tanjore training enabled him to add extra bit of delectable sensuality that his Victorian counterparts lacked.

His most interesting innovation lies in the choice of his themes. He virtually invented the visualisation of the legends of Harishchandra-Taramati, Shakuntala,¹⁰ Vishwamitra-Menaka amongst others, as there are hardly, if any, traditional prototypes of these. With a bias towards theatric tableau and the physical freezing of scene, he was adding a new dimension to portrayals of traditional narrative. Traditionally, continuous narration had avoided the projection of a climactic moment. In looking for new themes to paint, he seems to have unearthed from the ancient and medieval storehouse many with a vast potential for the nostalgic sentimentalism the Indian middle class seems to crave for. This triggered off varied repercussions of the ensuing movements in cinema. The pioneer film maker Dadasaheb Phalke (who had later studied at Kalabhavan in Baroda) began the ferris wheel of a new cinema from where Ravi Varma left off, and the incredibly popular Hindi cinema of today gained several of its tricks and recipes for mass appeal, including the conflation of the sentimental and the theatric from the oeuvre of the persuasive artist-conjurer.

In effect, what Ravi Varma attempted was a retrospective view of a whole tradition of Indian, especially Hindu, culture. He could not have observed its contours from the inside: European naturalism gave him an external vantage-point. With this overview shaped by the socio-political vicissitudes of his times, Ravi Varma embarked upon a review or a reinterpretation of his culture. This he did with remarkable adventurousness; with diligence besides, and at a measured pace which earned him steady patronage so important for a free lance artist. He must have been surprised, in fact, that the ideas he posited shrouded in his massive oils, met with their target sooner than could be expected in a period of considerable conservatism and dwindling patronage of art. That he was eulogised in his own life time speaks of a lacunae, even of unfulfilled desire, that his audience may have felt in the identification of their own needs.

There is a curious, if somewhat perfunctory, parallel between Ravi Varma and Sayaji Rao in their measured modernism and eclectic Indianism, the outcome of their approaches notwithstanding and despite their dissimilar ideas. Both marked a disjuncture with their tradition even if they maintained some adherence to it. Baroda attained an expressly Gaekwadi character with Sayaji Rao at the helm of affairs, and the story of contemporary Indian art was never the same after Ravi Varma had entered it. He had left his imprint on almost every aspect of it.

References

1. Detailed account is given in *Raja Ravi Varma* by E.M.J. Venniyoor, Government of Kerala, 1981.
2. Besides the vastly influential 'Lakshmi' and 'Saraswati', 'Sita Bhoopravesham', 'Nala Damayanti', 'Ganga and Shantanu', 'Vishwamitra Maneka' and portraits of Maharaja Sayaji Rao in investiture robes, Maharani Chimnabai I., Diwan T. Madhav Rao, etc., can be considered to be among his most ambitious works (Some of these were assisted by his brother C. Raja Raja Varma and sister Mangalabai Tampuratty). These and many other paintings are in the collection of the Lakshmi Vilas Palace and the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum, Baroda. See *Catalogue of Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum* by Hermann and Annamarie Goetz, Baroda. 1969.
3. E.M.J. Venniyoor, *op.cit.*
4. The appeal of Bengali painters, Annoda Prasad Bagchi, Bamapada Banerjee or Shashi Kumar Hesh, who painted mythological pictures in naturalistic modes at the same time or even earlier than Ravi Varma, remained limited to Bengal in comparison to his pan-Indian influence.
5. 'There are many of my friends who are desirous of possessing your works. It would be hardly possible for you, with only a pair of hands, to meet such a large demand. Send, therefore, a few of your select works to Europe and have them oleographed. You will thereby not only extend your reputation, but will be doing a real service to the country.' Letter of Sir T. Madhav Rao, Raja Ravi Varma, *op.cit.*
6. The illusionism of Flemish prints was broadly assimilated in the indigenous qalam by the Mughal painters.
7. John Berger and Claude Levi-Strauss associate the effects of illusionism achieved by oil painting with 'a desire to take possession of the object for the benefit of the owner or even the spectator'. *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger, London, 1972.
8. 'He paints the brocade and zari sares and the pearls and diamonds with as much as ado as they must have been worn. He sought to depict with reality the weighty

regality of the Indian princely states and dressed up princes and princesses sitting precariously on gilded chairs, sporting their swords and poodles, draped in the voluminous folds of drapery'. Significance and Relevance of Early Modern Indian Painters to the Contemporary Indian Art, Dissertation for M.A. (Fine) by Nilima Dhanda (Sheikh), Baroda 1970 (partly published).

9. As a belated fall out one can take the example of 'Sati' by Nandalal Bose. The ground for a free appropriation of naturalism had then been laid for some decades. Nandalal used water colour, a technique common to naturalistic (European) landscapes rather than gouache and accompanying a-naturalistic manipulations of Indian miniatures – to portray an 'ancient' theme in a 'modern' mode. Indeed in the eventual 'meaning' 'Sati' displays greater conformity to conventional values than many a mythological painting of Ravi Varma.
10. Perhaps the Deniell's 'Shakuntala' was not unknown to him, but he devised more personal ways of illustrating it.