

ART AND
NATIONALISM IN
COLONIAL INDIA
1850-1922

Occidental orientations

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THE ARTIST AS 5 CHARISMATIC INDIVIDUAL: RAJA RAVI VARMA

I spent the entire morning looking at Ravi Varma's pictures. I must confess I find them really attractive. After all, these pictures prove to us how dear our own stories, our own images and expressions are to us. In some paintings, the figures are not quite in proportion. Never mind! The total effect is compelling.

Rabindranath Tagore, *Chhinnā Patrābali* 1893

The glittering career of Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) is a striking case study of salon art in India – the ‘artistic genius’ who embodied the virtues expected of an academic artist. In the year following his death, *Modern Review* described him as the greatest artist of modern India, a nation builder, who showed the moral courage of a gifted ‘high-born’ in taking up the ‘degrading profession of painting’.¹ It is curious in retrospect that the artist also hailed by the Raj as the finest in India, never crossed the threshold of an art school. Nor did he originate in an urban environment. Ravi Varma Koil Tampuran was born on 29 April 1848 into an aristocratic family in the remote province of Kerala. The Varmas of Killimanoor were allied by marriage with the rulers of Travancore.

Today it is hard to imagine the reputation enjoyed by Varma during his lifetime. The death of ‘the famous Indian artist’ was announced on 25 December 1906 in *The Times* of London.² He was courted as assiduously by the Raj as by the Indian maharajas, whilst cheap prints of his Hindu deities hung in every home. These prints, which are still an essential ingredient of popular culture, are derided by modern critics as bad art. To the untutored Indian, however, they have lost none of their charm. Ravi Varma’s spectacular canvases influenced the pioneers of the Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke and Baburao Painter, much as Victorian art inspired the Hollywood director D. W. Griffith. The opulent beauties of Indian cinema and calendars can lay a claim to their descent from Varma’s heroines.³

To be sure, the high compliments paid by the English rulers were often demanded by social etiquette. Yet official approval in some cases went

beyond the demands of *politesse*, or even *noblesse oblige*. Lord Curzon, the 'most superior' Viceroy, put the official seal of approval on Ravi Varma's works as a 'happy blend of Western technique and Indian subject and free from Oriental stiffness'.⁴ He recognised Varma as 'one who for the first time in the art history of India, commenced a new style of painting'.⁵ Curzon of course favoured the Indian nobility. The Prince of Wales on his visit to India in 1875-6 expressed 'great pleasure in [Varma's] works, [and] was presented with two of them by the Maharaja of Travancore'.⁶ The Duke of Buckingham, sometime Governor of Madras, enthusiastically acquired Varma's painting based on Kalidasa's *Śakuntalā*. A later Governor, Lord Amphill, wrote to Varma's son on his death: 'when I think that I would not see Ravi Varma in this world any more my heart is filled with sorrow'.⁷ There was a further bond here. Amphill, who was painted in masonic regalia by Varma, expressed his pleasure that the artist's son was part of the brotherhood. The Portuguese plenipotentiary at Goa was equally warm in praise of his own portrait: 'it did not belie the good reputation that you have earned in the Salon of Bombay . . . [for] the correctness of the design and the exactness of the touches'.⁸

Among all early academic artists, only Varma stood out as 'a legend in his own time'. Rabindranath spoke for the western-educated generation when he stated: 'In my childhood, when Ravi Varma's age arrived in Bengal, reproductions of European paintings on the walls were promptly replaced with oleographs of his works'.⁹ The age to which Varma belonged, and which he mirrored so faithfully in his work, is gone, and memory is dulled by the miasma of adulation and prejudice surrounding his reputation. One has to go back to history to grasp the revolutionary implications of his achievements. To nineteenth-century Indians Ravi Varma's history paintings epitomised the magic that was naturalism.

THE MAKING OF THE PRINCELY ARTIST

The man and his myths

Perhaps nothing brings home more vividly the exalted image of Varma than the corpus of myths which reinforced his charismatic appeal, creating the *topos* of the artist as genius. As he dealt with *Purāṇic* heroes, so his contemporaries saw him through the mists of legend, the hero who triumphed over obstacles. The anecdotes about his life remind us of similar legends about artists in other cultures. They are a universal human response to the mysterious powers of the artist as image-maker. These stories get recorded only when the name of the artist can be attached to a work of art, as in Varma's case. The reputation of the artist in this case depends not only on his works but also on the significance attached to artists in that society.¹⁰

A few of the legends about Varma are selected here to bring out colonial India's perception of its most successful artist. They possess a mythical quality, not in the sense of fiction, but as powerful tales that legitimise the artist as a hero and a magician. The earliest one is of Varma's pregnant mother being possessed by a spirit that prophesied the future child's greatness. This archaic motif of the divine birth of artists is common in the West, but the form it takes here is bound up with Indian lore about the birth of superhuman beings.¹¹ The common belief in the genius expressing his gifts in childhood and being 'discovered' was also applied to young Ravi. Contemplative by nature, he spent days watching the effects of light and shadow in nature. He drew on walls and sketched incessantly when he should have been memorising his Sanskrit conjugations. The prodigy was then duly 'discovered' by his uncle Raja Raja Varma, an artist himself. The child often watched him at work. Once in his uncle's absence, he even dared to complete the figure of a bird in his uncle's painting. The older man was so impressed with the work that he predicted his future greatness. The closest western parallel is Giotto, who drew on sand and stone, but there is no evidence that this legend was known to Varma's biographers.¹² It is likely that the child showed an early precocity; some children do, but they do not all become artists, while some artists are late developers. Ravi's younger brother was a more skilled landscape painter than he. Yet Ravi alone was credited with a rare sensitivity to nature. It is common for artists' biographers to single out elements from childhood to explain later success: the genius must have been a *Wunderkind*.

But above all it was the image of the romantic hero, pitted against hostile forces, that captured Indian imagination. Triumph over obstacles has figured in stories of 'self-taught' artists in the West since antiquity. The legend of the 'self-taught' Varma has a similarly universal ring to it. 'He had none to guide and instruct him in the technique and mysteries of oil painting . . . yet nothing daunted [him] . . . he worked till he overcame all difficulties', as one biographer put it.¹³ His career thus became an object lesson in the triumph of will and inherent talent that did not depend on traditional training. This story can be traced back to a small pamphlet, *Ravi Varma, The Hindu Artist of India*, issued in connection with the Chicago exhibition of 1893: 'Ravi Varma started painting for amusement, not expecting this to be his life's work. He had no one to instruct him or draw inspiration from when he started'.¹⁴ An oft-quoted story in this connection is the English artist Theodore Jensen's visit to the Travancore court in 1868 and his refusal to help him.¹⁵

The obstacles for the artistic genius to overcome include the ritual defeat of rivals, another favourite *topos* in artistic biographies. The court painter of Travancore, Ramaswamy Naidu, sensing Ravi as a possible rival, refused to help him. But if we are to credit the same tradition, Naidu's pupil helped Varma secretly, as acknowledged by the artist. Yet it

was Naidu's refusal that became a spur to his excellence. He remained Varma's celebrated 'rival' in the biographies, seeking to outpaint him at the Madras exhibition of 1873, where young Ravi made his *début*. A puzzling tradition grew up in this context. Later sources state that Varma's paintings won a prize at the Vienna exhibition of 1873. And yet none of the catalogues mentions him at all. On the other hand, they mention Naidu's participation in Vienna, though he is never mentioned by Varma's biographers. One strong reason for Varma's absence in Vienna in 1873 was that the unknown young man had just exhibited for the first time in Madras that year. The official selection for Vienna had taken place a year before. The inconsistency in the different accounts strongly suggests artistic rivalry, which is further confirmed by the fact that the story originated at a later stage of the artist's career. Ravi had another rival, the painter Kundan Lal of Rajasthan. Lal's biographer indeed claims that the Rajasthani painter outclassed Ravi Varma. In this case, the version from Varma's side is more reliable. His brother, who was not given to exaggeration, wrote in his private diary: 'Kundan Lal is awfully jealous of us and spoke disparagingly of our work . . . my nephew who heard him, challenged him to try his skill with ours. He was at once humbled and departed crestfallen'.¹⁶ Kundan Lal's work does not bear comparison with that of Ravi Varma.

Varma's mastery of western illusionism created his legendary reputation. The following two myths were meant to confirm him as an illusionist, a magician. The first is that, in order to depict a subject faithfully, the artist has to re-create the scene in real life. Once when Varma used a beautiful young princess to model as Rādhā, he was unable to make the girl assume a lovelorn expression, until the moment she fell in love with the artist. The story is not unlike the anecdote about the German artist, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt. He is said to have crucified his model in order to depict real agony. A related myth highlights the element of chance in the creation of a masterpiece. It is said that when Varma was grappling with the problem of capturing the effect of lightning in *Rāma Humbling the Seas* (Fig. 115), real lightning flashed across the sky which gave him the requisite inspiration.¹⁷

The final myth celebrates the artist's ability to produce a deceptive imitation of real objects. As Ravi Varma's descendant Indira Varma writes, when a European woman painter tried to deceive him with a *trompe-l'oeil* umbrella, the artist

invited the lady . . . to dinner. When she arrived, he led her inside. She found many other guests seated on either side of a long table in a large hall. The artist asked her to take her place. But when she tried to do so, she found that the door, the large room, the table and the guests, all formed part of one large canvas.¹⁸

The evolution of Ravi Varma's art

What was the basis for Ravi Varma's legendary reputation? His personal charm was attested by many including Amphill and the Congress leader, Gokhale. In hierarchical Indian society, Varma's social eminence supplied an added aura to this 'prince among painters and a painter among princes', as a critic called him.¹⁹ It is significant that his earliest biographer described him as the first 'gentleman artist'.²⁰ Born in 1848, Varma was a transitional



115 Ravi Varma: *Rāma Humbling the Seas*, oil

figure who reconciled in his person the differences between salon artists and the earlier oil painters. Like the earlier generation, Varma had no art school training. And yet, he was anything but traditional. Varma created in India the image of the fashionable painter, the travelling professional who fulfilled commissions by constantly being on the move, breaking in the process the monopoly of the European painters. Even though he had shown the way, no other Indian artist ever matched his pan-Indian network.

The legend of the self-taught genius was at the heart of his reputation. Yet Varma's importance rests not so much on being outside tradition as on his mastery of Tanjore court art and then transcending it in his unique style. Contrary to the myth of Ravi Varma's artistic isolation, the Varmas had a long history as amateur painters, even though they were of the warrior caste. His uncle and mentor, Raja Raja Varma, his younger brother, C. Raja Raja Varma, and his sister, Mangalabai Tampuratti, were all serious artists. Being a woman, Mangalabai was not allowed the latitude enjoyed by the two brothers but her portrait of Ravi Varma now in Trivandrum is ample proof of her skill. The family tradition continues.²¹

What were the essential ingredients in Varma's artistic education? His uncle Raja Raja, an amateur in ivory painting, had learnt his craft from the Tanjore painters at the court, possibly from Alagiri Naidu. He conducted informal art classes for the children of the family, among whom was Ravi, the only one to complete the exercises set by his uncle.²² Secondly, even though Ramaswami Naidu refused to train Ravi, the court painter's canvases were on view in the palace (Figs XIII, XIV). He was a well-respected 'traditional' oil painter. Naturalism had crept into other parts of traditional Kerala, as for instance in the murals of the Padmanabhanswami temple in Trivandrum. This mixed world of Varma's youth provided the groundwork of his art.²³

A more conscious influence on Varma was Theodore Jensen, who visited Travancore in 1868. The last of the dwindling band of artist-adventurers, Jensen was making the rounds of the princely courts, armed with an introduction from the Viceroy. Ravi was about twenty when he had this chance to observe the working methods of a western artist. One is not sure as to how much Ravi learned from him. One of his biographers, who prefers the self-taught image of the artist, contends that Jensen refused to reveal the 'secrets of colour mixing' to the Keralan. Admittedly, some European artists, including Reynolds, were secretive about their painting techniques.²⁴ But it is more likely that as a visitor, Jensen simply lacked the time to give lessons to the shy youth. On the other hand, he could not offend his patron, the Maharaja, and probably allowed his protégé to watch him at work, as suggested by contemporary accounts.²⁵

Ravi profited from the experience. Compare, for instance, the very similar treatment of the garment in two paintings in particular: Varma's accession portrait of the Gaekwad of Baroda and Jensen's likeness of a Maratha chief. Not only the techniques of oil painting, but his working

methods (see p. 189) also show a familiarity with the precepts and practices of academic art, which was not possible without some form of instruction. A voracious learner, when the English painter Frank Brooks was hired for his younger brother, Ravi took an active interest in the lessons. The result was the lighter palette of his later works.²⁶

These stages in his training still do not tell us how his art evolved. The 1870 portrait of the Khizhakkepat Palat Krishna Menon family (Fig. 116) is in the flat style of Varma's predecessors. Although the works at the Madras exhibition of 1873 show greater chiaroscuro, their sombre colours hark back to the past. It is only in Baroda in 1880-1 that we marvel at his evolution, where his earlier and later styles co-exist. The two key portraits completed within a few years suggest that, as in the case of late-medieval European painters, he moved between a more conventional flat style and a fully academic one with all the richness of illusionism.²⁷

The first portrait is of Princess Tara Bai (Fig. XV), treated in a flat manner with thin paint and a lavish use of gold. Not only do its muted tones remind us of the Khizhakkepat portrait, but in technique it is indistinguishable from the works of the earlier artists in Baroda. One argument is that Varma was asked to rework the painting of an earlier artist, as was often done. However, we may dismiss this, for the princess would have been too young to have sat for a previous painter. The other possibility is that Varma produced a tinted photograph, a common practice of the time. But the perspective in the picture and the shape of the table seem to preclude this.²⁸



116 Ravi Varma: *The Khizhakkepat Palat Family*, oil

the senior partner alone was entrusted with the face. The portraits confirm Ravi Varma's unusual gift of capturing likenesses. In the course of their career they received commissions from the leading princely states, and English and Indian dignitaries. The Duke of Buckingham is said to have remarked that he had once given eighteen sittings to a European painter, who was unable to do half as well as Ravi Varma with so few sittings. A portrait of King Edward VII, based on a photograph, was executed for the government. This was a common practice, since portraits of the British monarch were often required for ceremonial purposes. But many of the finest portraits by the Varmas were produced for Baroda.⁴¹

Part of the brothers' professional success owed to the network of friends and agents throughout India, as indicated for instance by the diary entry of 31 January 1901: 'Visited Sir Balachandra and spoke to him about securing us the orders for Ranade's portrait for the Elphinstone College. He has kindly promised to use his influence'. At Udaipur the brothers' intermediary was Fatehlal Mehta, a confidant of the Maharana, 'with whom we had a long correspondence on the subject of our visit to this state'. In Mysore they appointed an agent to look after their interests. There is evidence that their reputation was not created overnight, but through patience, enterprise and punctual fulfilling of contracts.⁴²

For the historian the fees charged by the Varmas are of considerable interest. Unfortunately, we are in the dark about their early period, but later they commanded higher prices than an average Indian painter. For instance, in 1899, their fee was Rs 1,500 for a full-length portrait, Rs 700 for a half-length one, and Rs 300 for a bust. By contrast, the highest charge for a life-size portrait by a Bengali painter was Rs 300. But how did the Varmas compare with their main rivals, the visiting Europeans? By the middle of the nineteenth century, the latter's numbers had dropped sharply. The state guest, Valentine Prinsep, who did the rounds of the princely courts in 1877, does not mention his charges. However we have the fees of earlier painters; Zoffany (in India: 1783-9), for instance, charged Rs 700 for a three-quarter portrait. Allowing for a rise in the cost of living and a fall in the exchange rate of rupees to the pound in the Varmas' period, Rs 1,500 for a full-length portrait was roughly comparable in real terms. But these were modest fees compared with those charged by Varma's British contemporaries, such as Edwin Long.⁴³

As with their business acumen, the brothers' social life and artistic outlook were a mixture of western and eastern elements. The *artistes pompiers* were their role model. As Raja confided about 'the great French artist' Meissonier: 'I am an admirer of his style and manner. How I wish I had seen some of his original works. His fidelity to nature, management of chiaroscuro and feeling for tone are admirable. His life is very instructive'.⁴⁴ Indeed, the Varmas' professionalism reminds us of Victorian painters. Throughout his career Ravi Varma adhered to a work ethic, which was alien to his semi-feudal milieu. He constantly exhorted his

nephews to enter the world of modern professions. Yet, his Hindu persona took him on pilgrimages and made him plan his retirement at sixty as prescribed by the sacred texts. His greatest desire was to go abroad to study western art, a wish thwarted by his fear of losing caste. Few Hindus of his time dared cross 'the black waters'. It is the peaceful co-existence of these two worlds in Varma that is so fascinating. He does not seem to have suffered an identity crisis, which is a reflection of the optimistic stage of colonial acculturation (there were exceptions of course as in Bengal and Maharashtra). But then it is only from today's perspective that we would expect such a crisis. A hundred years ago modern Hindu identity had yet to be clearly defined.⁴⁵

The life of society portraitists

A typical day of Ravi and Raja Varma gives us a vivid idea about their professional routine. In Bombay, it was a settled existence completing commissions. For Ravi, who was more orthodox than his brother, the day began with a ritual bath and prayer, followed by a long working period, punctuated by an afternoon siesta. The work was efficiently divided into portrait commissions with tight deadlines, and more leisurely production of works for competition. While Ravi concentrated on mythological pictures, Raja painted landscapes when not assisting his brother in 'more serious [portrait] work'. He also did the details in Ravi's mythological paintings, such as the pillar in *Hamsa Damayanti* (Fig. 119). Outside working hours, they browsed at the Taraporevala Bookshop, entertained friends and visited the theatre. On the evening of 6 August 1901, for instance, the Varmas saw a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in Hindustani. They spent summer and monsoon months in the city, going back to Kerala at the approach of autumn. During the monsoons the paint took longer to dry and the light was 'unsteady'. The problem of the light was solved in 1903 when the roof of their Bombay studio was glazed. There were complaints in the diary about dull Sundays, especially wet ones, when the newspaper was not delivered, which had become 'as indispensable as one's morning coffee or tea'.⁴⁶

The brothers often undertook several paintings at once, the studio resembling that of a European portraitist with three or four paintings at different stages of completion. While they negotiated for Ranade's memorial portrait, for instance, they worked on other commissions. As a portrait was delivered to one client, Raja wrote to another about a further commission. Some of their time was spent on altering or making copies of their own pictures, again something that was part of a European painter's daily routine. The Varmas often had to accede to even unreasonable demands of clients: Mrs Jagmohan Das and Mrs Bhaisheth insisted on alterations to their portraits, which led Raja to complain, 'It is difficult to



119 Ravi Varma: *Hamsa Damayanti*, oil

deal with women; they are never satisfied with their dress or ornaments. She insisted on wearing a sari which was most difficult to paint effectively. They think that the greater the labour they give the artist the better the picture becomes'. On framing, the Varma had a standing arrangement with a Bombay firm and the charge was added to the portrait. In 1903, for instance, an extra Rs 175 was added on to an official portrait.⁴⁷

In some ways, the most interesting entries in the diary are details of portrait work. 'We went this morning with Bapuji to the Fort to see a wealthy *bania* [merchant]', wrote Raja Varma in July 1901, 'a mill owner [Assur Virji] who wants his whole length portrait to be painted. He is an old man and readily agreed to our terms. We shall begin the work soon. His son is an intelligent young man and is an amateur photographer. We mean first to take a photo of the old gentleman in the position in which we intend to paint him'. On 22 July, they visited their client for a preliminary measurement of his face as they normally did with sitters. However, Virji was away and the artists commenced the actual portrait, continuing the next day. On the 25th, the drawing was corrected and the foreground started. On the 27th, they painted details of his dress, while in the evening they concentrated on a different portrait. On 5 August, the portrait was finished, even though the left hand was not totally satisfactory, and needed subsequent retouching.⁴⁸

In Madras also the brothers spent a considerable time painting high officials (2 September 1902–2 January 1903). Rs 3,000 was paid for life-size memorial portraits of Sir George Moore for the Municipal Hall and of the ex-Governor, Sir Arthur Havelock, for the elegant Banqueting Hall. This was the last year of their collaboration before Raja's early death, soon to be followed by that of Ravi Varma. They had many friends in the southern capital which was the scene of Ravi's triumphs at the Society of Fine Arts. Here they were guests of an influential friend, and painted his portrait in appreciation. As always on their tours, they brought a retinue of servants with them.⁴⁹

Moore was mainly painted by Raja, who was now given more responsible work. An hour and a half was spent each day, but even at the eighth sitting he felt that the face posed difficulties. Meanwhile they worked on the carpet 'of our own choosing of an intricate design' in the foreground of the picture. The finished work pleased the subject and Edgar Thurston, Secretary of the Fine Arts Society. The portrait of Havelock was based on a photograph, since he had already left India. Nonetheless, the artists succeeded in achieving the likeness, by modifying the picture on the advice of his friends. Havelock wrote from Tasmania:

You have given me an opportunity of repeating the admiration I feel for the artistic skill shown by yourself and your brother in . . . the memorial portrait of myself . . . His excellency the Governor and others who have

including the English Resident, met them and the retired Dewan Pannalal sat for them.⁵⁵

Once the sample was approved by the ruler, Fatehlal secured three further orders. The artists were astonished at the precise details about previous rulers furnished by the palace. Their most important assignment was Rana Pratap, the Rajput hero and nationalist idol. A *pandit* at the court was consulted on Pratap's accoutrements. The armoury supplied an appropriate helmet and chain-mail. A tall Rajput, 'a true knight of old', was sent to serve as a model. After his form was sketched, Pratap's face was copied from an old miniature and added on to it. The neighbouring hill provided the background. Finally all the elements were put together in the painting (Fig. 121).⁵⁶

Impressed with the work, the Maharana consented to sit for a full-length portrait. The brothers studied his features from a photograph. However, even after commissioning the portrait, the cautious prince demanded an initial sketch to check the likeness. This posed no special problem, for Raja was confident that 'the likeness [would] become exact at the next sitting'. Indeed the commission was clinched after the second sitting. Then the ruler's face and height were measured for the life-size picture. There were inevitable interruptions to the sittings because the princely subject tired readily and took off on hunting expeditions. While the work was in progress, the canvas was regularly despatched to the Palace for advice on alterations.⁵⁷

Raja Varma offers a candid appraisal of his regal sitter. The prince was too shrewd generally to volunteer an opinion, but maintained a tight rein over the work as it progressed, mostly approving but occasionally suggesting changes. He settled the financial details beforehand, in order to avoid subsequent disputes. 'He never speaks what he thinks of the picture', writes Raja Varma, 'but makes his favourites suggest improvements. As they are ignorant of art they say all sorts of nonsense. He is at the same time careful in telling us not to meddle with the picture unless we agree with the suggestions'. The last sitting found the Maharana in a relaxed mood, expressing his opinions more freely. His parting gifts were a pearl necklace and a robe. In return, the artists offered him a preparatory sketch for his portrait and a landscape by Raja Varma. The total remuneration received for the five portraits was Rs 5,500, a handsome fee for those days.⁵⁸

Less congenial was the trip (January–April 1902) to Hyderabad, at the invitation of Raja Deen Dayal, the Nizam's court photographer. Here too, they complained, their commission depended on a 'fancy' trial picture for the Nizam's approval. They were first asked to 'improve' a gloomy painting by an English artist in which 'the distance was so dark that it distorted the perspective'.⁵⁹ Raja made the darkness recede by a coat of delicate pink. While waiting for the Nizam's approval, the younger brother embarked on his landscapes with a sketch of the local Husayn Sagar Lake.⁶⁰

The diary throws light on an acute problem faced by early salon artists: the difficulty of finding models during this period, let alone nude ones. For Ravi's painting, *At the Bath*, which required a draped figure, Raja and his artist friends chose a Muslim girl 'with a charming face' from the local red light district. But she never turned up. 'These prostitutes', complained Raja bitterly, 'readily come if called for immoral purposes, but when



121 Ravi Varma: *Rana Pratap*, oil (smaller version of the main portrait in Udaipur)

required for posing they raise great objections'.⁶¹ The Varmas, keen on costume painting in the manner of the 'olympians', befriended an English photographer, Miss Sabina, who posed in Egyptian dress for them. She had been captivated by their work. Because respectable women did not appear in public, special 'zenana' studios were set up in this period by European women like Sabina. In 1882 Deen Dayal opened 'a zenana studio [and] placed an English lady of high photographic attainments . . . in charge of it'.⁶²

By the second month the brothers began to tire of trying to fathom the labyrinthine intricacies of the Nizam's court. In desperation they chose a Johnston and Hoffman photograph to begin a life-size portrait of the Nizam. Why did they not borrow one from their host Deen Dayal, who was Nizam's own photographer? This suggests worsening relations between the painter and the photographer. Though Dayal had initially invited Ravi Varma, professional jealousy had taken over. Despite the advent of the camera, painted portraits still carried greater prestige.⁶³

Doubting the honourable intentions of the court photographer, the Varmas moved out of his residence. They were now advised to take their works to the Nizam's minister's residence in the hope of catching the ruler's eye when he visited his minister. Before this elaborate charade could be put to the test, the brothers were summoned home for an urgent reason. The episode of the Nizam's portrait did not end there. In 1903, after protracted bickering, the Varmas let the portrait go for half its asked price. The experience made them wary of future princely commissions. When they were invited by the zamindar of Gondal, they insisted on settling the charge and return train fare to the state beforehand. But in the absence of a formal contract even famous artists were always at the mercy of their clients. Raja complained of the mean *banias* who always bargained over price. Whatever the fee, the actual payment depended on the artist's ability to coerce his client and sometimes even Ravi Varma's high reputation was of little avail.⁶⁴

FROM COLONIAL ARTIST TO NATIONAL IDOL

A painter for the Raj

In the second half of the nineteenth century, mammoth international expositions became the vogue, beginning with the Great Exhibition of 1851, with each country vying to outdo others in lavishness. The grandest show of them all was the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. It was appropriate that Varma represented India at Chicago. No artist in India had won so many prizes, as *The Times* obituary was to remind its readers.⁶⁵ The two awards he received at Chicago confirmed

his stature not only as a colonial artist, but as the non-European who had mastered academic art. His ten oils were displayed under the rubric, 'Institutions and Organisations for the Increase and Diffusion of Knowledge', the award in recognition of 'the progress of instruction in Art. They are true to nature in form and colour'.⁶⁶

Varma was ignored by the considerable fine arts pavilion in Chicago. His paintings and Lala Deen Dayal's photographs were relegated to the ethnographic section, underlining the European categorisation of non-western artists. The second award described his works as being of

much ethnological value; not only do the faces of the high caste ladies . . . give the various types of the localities, but the artist's careful attention to the details of costume and article used in the social and ceremonial life . . . renders the paintings worthy of special commendation.⁶⁷

Though Varma's own choice of beautiful women from different regions of India (Fig. XVIII) was dictated by his growing perception of India as one nation, the judges were more impressed with the ethnographic content of his works.

Grand history-painting for the nation

Yet it was not portraits but his historical paintings that brought him to public notice, as once again observed by *The Times*.⁶⁸ Narrative art was not new to India. But illusionist painting as a vehicle for story telling by presenting 'a frozen moment', was a western invention. Indians were moved by the melodramatic and the sentimental, a predilection to be found in full measure in Varma. Almost all his compositions, apart from formal portraits, bore sentimental captions in the salon tradition. In Bombay, he engaged 'a fine specimen of an old Jew' to model a picturesque subject for an exhibition. When finished, the canvas was named *The Miser* (Fig. 122), a title meant to evoke the stereotype of the mean Jew. In Varma's works the beholder completed the story suggested in the picture. His *Poverty*, for instance, was designed in the Victorian fashion to manipulate the beholder's feelings.⁶⁹

Of all narrative art, none was more admired by the Royal Academy than paintings with lofty moral lessons. The encouragement of history painting, the most 'dignified' branch of the art, followed the growth of 'civic humanism' because it was seen to promote public interest. For Reynolds, history painting, like Classical rhetoric, enabled us to recognise our true and universal nature and raised art above manual dexterity.⁷⁰ Unsurprisingly, the English rulers were keen to introduce the genre for the moral upliftment of their subjects, since Indian miniatures could never stir the soul. It is not recorded if Ravi Varma heard Lord Napier's address to Indian artists on the powers of history painting.⁷¹ At all events, the stage was already set for his *début* in this area.



122 Ravi Varma: *The Miser*,
oil

History painting was no less logical a choice for the Indian intelligentsia. Indian art of the period was steeped in historicism, the restoration of the past emerging as a sacred duty for the nationalist. Varma was the first Indian painter to evolve a new language of narrative art, aimed at what Reynolds called sending 'the imagination back to antiquity'. Yet, as someone raised on the Victorian mimetic canon, Varma saw nothing incongruous in using it for his 'authentic' re-creations of the Hindu past.⁷²

As with the 'olympians', so with Varma the line between history and myth was thinly drawn. In any case, *Purānas* still form some of the most important sources for Indian history. Varma was not the first Indian history painter; in 1871 Tinkari Mukherjee had submitted a work inspired by a Sanskrit classic to the nationalist fair in Bengal, some seven years before Varma's famous *Śakuntalā*. But Varma was unrivalled in his strategy for re-creating a romantic past, founded on Sanskrit classics. First, Varma was well versed in Sanskrit, his Brahmin father's legacy.⁷³ Secondly, his literary 'historicism' was in line with the ideals of high art in the West. We know that Meissonier and Bouguereau were admired by the Keralan. If the slightly 'fussy' reconstructions of Varma seem contrived to us, 'historicism' was the favourite pastime of history painters. David was the first artist to re-create the Classical world through meticulous 'archaeological' details.⁷⁴

Let us take Varma's quest for ancient India: after winning the important Baroda commission of history paintings, he went on a tour of India, excited by the prospect of discovering ancient costumes. Soon he was forced to conclude that Muslim rule had obliterated all traces of the ancient mode of dressing.⁷⁵ The failure of Varma's 'archaeological' enterprise had to do with his colonial outlook. In his youth, his knowledge of ancient art derived almost entirely from *The Hindu Pantheon* by Edward Moor, a pioneer work in the British 'discovery of Hinduism'. Varma, like many educated Indians of the time, was yet to discover ancient art, then coming to light through archaeological researches. On their visit to Karle, the brothers treated the scanty clothing of Buddhist figures as objects of mild curiosity, but not appropriate for Ravi Varma's 'proper' heroines from Sanskrit literature.⁷⁶ One can guess that Varma's reading of Kalidasa ignored the explicit passages as unsuited to his age.

Equally, the Varmas found Rajput and Mughal miniatures at Baroda alien to their taste. 'In some pictures there is such imagination but there are also decorative features', wrote Raja. While copying Udaipur miniatures, he noted that there was 'little of nature [in them], painted in the old conventional style, face, profile and the feet turned in the same direction'. By contrast, the brothers were thrilled to see a Rembrandt owned by a European, concluding shrewdly that it was a copy, for they had seen it reproduced elsewhere. While it is true that miniatures were not so

familiar in Kerala, the brothers' reaction reveals the influence of colonial aesthetics.⁷⁷

Ravi Varma's new iconographic programme drew copiously on the epics, the *Purāṇas* and the plays of Kalidasa and other Sanskrit authors. The painter even engaged a traditional narrator, whose photograph survives, to ransack the classics. This practice of consulting *pandits* for advice on iconography was common, especially among Pahari painters. However, even when using the classics, Varma carefully selected the stories that plucked the beholder's heartstrings. The appeal of his heroines, for instance, lay in the fact that they were not iconographic types, but palpable, desirable human beings. The British public too in this period preferred paintings that melted 'the soul into a tender participation of human miseries'.⁷⁸ Varma's first public showing of such a tender episode was a perennial favourite: *Śakuntalā's Love Epistle to Duśyanta* (Fig. 138).

This sentimentality went hand in hand with a new image of voluptuous women, a blend of Kerala and Guercino. Varma's outlook was different from the typology of romantic love in Rajput miniatures, where emotions were treated as literary conceits according to the moods they expressed. Varma's *Śakuntalā* was a pretty young Kerala girl lying on the ground, writing a love letter – a concrete situation as opposed to the generalised emotion of traditional painting. This lent a new conviction to the epic scenes to which the beholder could readily relate. Yet the paradox inherent in a contemporary scene in the guise of the past reminds us of the quip about the Victorian Alma-Tadema: whatever he painted, it was always four o'clock tea at the thermal springs. Convinced of the universality of his Victorian work, Varma did not see the need to turn to an Indian painting style. This 'Victorian-ness' was reinforced by his captions that quoted from English classics, such as from Byron for *Arjuna and Subhadrā* (Fig. 123). The 'universalism' was not necessarily alien to Indian sensibility, for both traditions favoured melodrama and sentimentality. Not only did the Duke of Buckingham acquire *Śakuntalā*, but the great demand for the picture led to several versions by Varma. Monier Williams used one for his translation of the Sanskrit play.⁷⁹

Fourteen paintings for the Gaekwad of Baroda

Varma's *Sītā Pātāla Praveśa*, a key painting in his evolution as a historicist painter, was on a lofty theme, the Hindu ideal of the *satī*, the self-effacing wife, steadfast in her chastity. In 1875, Tanjore Madhava Rao had moved from Trivandrum to Baroda, where his Dewanship achieved even more outstanding successes. Though ousted from the post in 1882 by his English rival, Rao continued to enjoy the young Gaekwad's confidence; he took



123 Ravi Varma: *Arjuna and Subhadra*, oil. Later nationalists considered its depiction of affection too immodest to be a cultural ideal

the painting of *Sitā* to Baroda and probably arranged the meeting between the Gaekwad and Varma. This meeting in the Niligiri Hills led to Varma's epic paintings for Baroda, a state where his major portraits were executed.³⁰

Another factor gave an added impetus to Varma's narrative cycle. As the century drew to a close, nationalist passions were rising among the western-educated. When Varma had begun his career, regional consciousness was the order of the day; he did not need to see beyond Kerala. But India was changing rapidly. Railways, telegraphs and printing technology brought the regions together as never before. The Indian Congress met in 1885 and claimed to speak for all India, ignoring regional differences. In Varma's case, journalism had been instrumental in spreading his reputation. In time the wide travels of the brothers took them to the main cultural centres in India. Varma met the Congress leaders, Surendranath Banerjea, Gokhale and Annie Besant, and visited the Tagores. For the Chicago exhibition he chose to highlight the rich cultural diversities in India.³¹

With the Gaekwad's commission, Varma's Kerala identity flowed into a pan-Indian one, a sentiment endorsed by his patron. When Varma failed to find an authentic dress for his ancient heroine, he did not hesitate to drape her in a sari as the appropriate national costume. After 1896, in response to the upsurge of nationalism in Maharashtra, the Ravi Varma Press put out oleographs of national heroes, Shivaji, Tilak and Ranade. A nationalist author in Bombay engaged the artist to paint a picture of Shivaji's coronation.³² The intelligentsia in their turn, and the journalist Ramananda Chatterjee in particular, acknowledged Varma's value to national unity. The Kerala master was offered the considerable sum of Rs 50,000 by Baroda, an indication of the importance of the project. Clearly success here was vital; in addition to his brother, he enlisted the services of their sister, Mangalabai. A paid assistant, Madhav Wadhiar, helped with the costumes.³³

The fourteen paintings combined melodrama with moral lessons in the manner of European history painters who, taking their cue from rhetoric, saw painting as 'embellishing, and impressing truths'.³⁴ Varma's typology of feeling, based on the polarity of noble and base sentiments, supplemented rather than supplanted Indian conventions: noble love contrasted with base lust; self-sacrifice with self-destructive obsession; Nala's decline through gambling and his desertion of Damayantī; the love of Arjuna and Subhadrā; the fall of the sage Viśvāmitra through lust; the infatuation of Sāntanu with Gaṅgā, and so on. These popular stories, depicted with such fidelity, dazzled the ordinary people in Trivandrum, Bombay and Baroda. Brahmin women, mentions Raja Varma, visited their studio in Bombay simply in order to gaze in wonder at these canvases.³⁵

The grammar of Ravi Varma's historicist works

Aristocratic taste graduated from portraits to history painting almost entirely through Ravi Varma's efforts. Following Baroda's lead, the states of Mysore and Trivandrum commissioned large-scale mythological works. The painter devised his own complex iconographic programme of literary inspiration by studying the Royal Academy Annuals, adapting a landscape here, modifying an architectural interior there, as backdrops to his epic characters, much in the fashion of Victorian high art. Vast canvases on grand themes, *nobles et sentimentales*, were the rage in Paris, London and Vienna.⁸⁶

Were Varma's works based on figure drawing, the *sine qua non* of European art in the last century? It is doubtful if the Varmas ever had the chance to practise it. Even in Indian art schools, figure drawing was not introduced in earnest until the 1920s. Ravi Varma owned a life-size 'articulated figure', which enabled him to check the proportions and fix the poses. But nude models, we know, were difficult to recruit; attempts to hire a draped model in Hyderabad had ended in a fiasco. Raja discusses the general topic of figure drawing and his unconventional method of studying the human form:

The row on the lake [Pichola] of a morning is interesting to an artist; the ghats or beautiful stone steps are filled with bathers of both sexes. The women who walk along the streets are so closely veiled, [yet they show] themselves almost naked and indulge in bathing or washing without any sign of modesty.⁸⁷

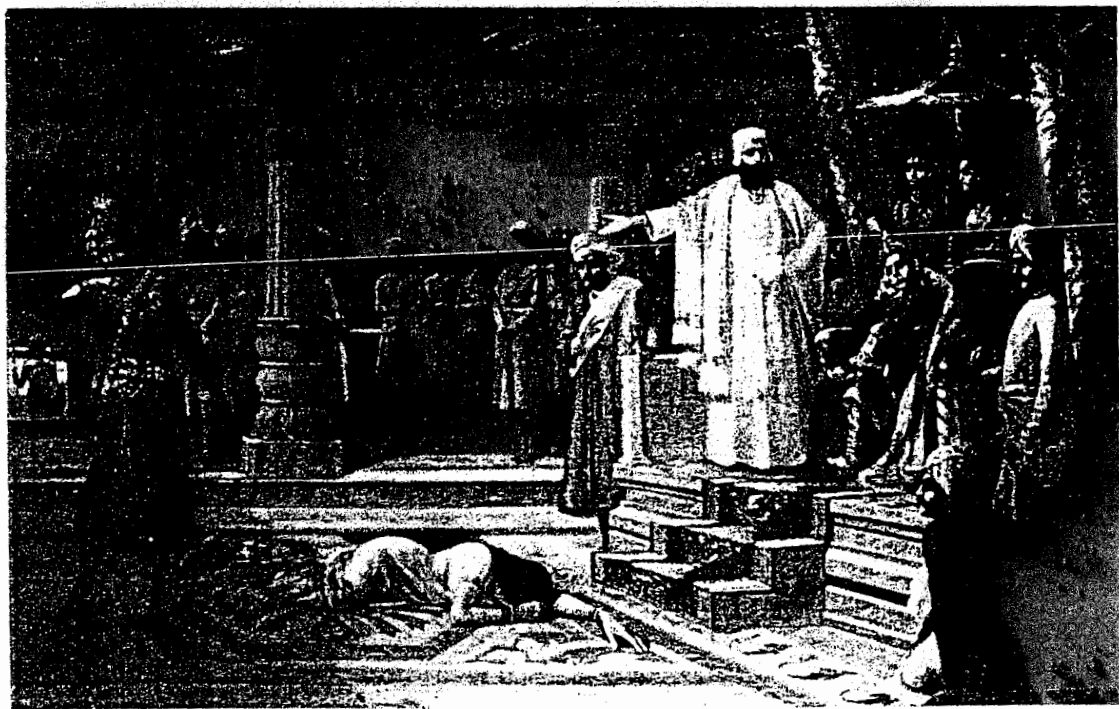
Of course, both brothers depicted semi-nude figures, but Ravi's partially-draped figures were not always convincing. Unlike his sure grasp of a draped model, the drawing of women's breasts shows weakness, as in the *Matsyagandhā* (Mysore). In the Baroda *Matsyagandhā* or in prints such as *Tilottamā* or *Pamini*, European Classical figures were adapted for the purpose. Varma's inexperience is surprising in view of the fact that even in Ravi Varma's time in Kerala, respectable Nair women appeared in public with uncovered breasts.⁸⁸

How were these paintings planned by Varma? *The Triumph of Indrajit* (Fig. XIX), to take a typical example, is an amalgam of indigenous and western elements: the rhetorical postures, the hyperbolic gestures, notably the enlarged pupils of the eyes, are none other than the mimetic conventions of the Kathakali dance-drama of Kerala.⁸⁹ Varma signals social hierarchy in his narrative by skin colour: the aristocratic protagonists are lighter, while the menials are various shades of black. The exceptions are demon kings, who, in the epic tradition, are non-Aryan aborigines. Of course, Sanskrit literature sanctions the depiction of lower orders as dark-skinned. But was Varma also inspired by European

Orientalists, whose paintings thrived on similar contrasts?²⁰ Social differences are even more pronounced in Varma's women, which suggests the encroaching new mores of Victorian evangelism. The aristocratic heroine is not only modestly covered in a sari but wears a blouse as well. In contrast, maidservants and aboriginal women are in various states of nudity. The attendants in these works, unlike the main actors, who hold the centre stage, are the silent chorus to the melodrama unfolding before them; they are the liveried retainers of the princely states.²¹

While Varma adopted nineteenth-century historicism, the cultural specificity of his paintings is equally significant. He chose the grammar of the salon, but the gloss he put on it was recognisably Indian. This 'pictorial' language gave him the power to represent a colonial experience: life in the princely courts as he knew it; past history imagined as present melodrama. Varma's elaborate interiors reproduced endlessly the pomp and circumstance of the courts of Trivandrum, Baroda, Mysore and others. *The Court of Virāta* (Fig. 124) is a successful work in this genre. The setting for the conflict between royal duty and fatherly love is a grand court held in a large pillared hall. It recalls Edwin Long, one of the highest-paid British painters, similarly engaged in recapturing the grandeur of past royal courts, exotic or otherwise.²² Sometimes Varma was

124 Ravi Varma: *The Court of Virāta*, oil in the manner of Edwin Long, the olympian



tempted to reproduce actual details of European paintings. In *The Triumph of Indrajit* (1903), the guard on the top right-hand corner reminds us of Ludwig Deutsch's *The Nubian Guard* (1895). The Orientalist connection is reinforced by the *deshabillée* Indrānī, the Indian Juno, who is being molested by a black menial, recalling the voyeuristic paintings of exotic slave markets.⁹³

Varma's images of the past are *tableaux vivants* in which great human dramas unfold; as such they betray the influence of the Parsi theatre in Bombay. The brothers were avid theatregoers, enjoying both English and indigenous productions. One of their admirers was the visiting American actor, Edmund Russell, who often invited them to the theatre. It was this influence of the stage that lent an air of fancy-dress parade to Varma's canvases. But then the pictorial language of salon art was anything but natural. We know that Victorian painters were similarly associated with the theatre.⁹⁴

AN ARTIST OF THE PEOPLE

The search for an art-loving public

By the end of the century, Ravi Varma had become a cult figure among the educated, with followers such as Sri Ram of Lahore (1876–1926), closely imitating his style.⁹⁵ Although he made an effective use of modern publicity, he was not yet totally satisfied. He had started as a court painter of Travancore; after 1873 he was able to join the Indian exhibition circuit. But this still did not free him from the Maharaja's control. Unlike earlier court artists, such patronage irked Varma, and he was determined to gain his independence. Varma's ambitions fitted in perfectly with the growth of public opinion in India. If the princely courts still enjoyed financial clout, the press gave a wide exposure to the artist's work. Above all, Varma's biography by his champion, Ramananda Chatterjee, introduced him to the English-educated.⁹⁶

However, as opposed to a permanent gallery, the impact of seasonal exhibitions was ephemeral. Varma spoke of European museums with wistful admiration; he must have known of the art gallery in Calcutta. In 1885, Varma first mooted the idea of a public gallery in Trivandrum, his home state, for displaying his art. But the Maharaja had other priorities before him. Not wishing to offend Varma, he temporised by offering the artist a commission of two narrative paintings per year. This did not satisfy Varma.⁹⁷

Though Varma failed in Travancore, an opportunity arose with the Baroda commission. He gave publicity to the project by inviting prominent critics to view the preliminary sketches. The exhibition of the works in Trivandrum, before being sent to Baroda, was the first of its

kind in the region. An informal count was taken of the attendance numbers, although disappointingly this was not recorded. En route to Baroda, the works were shown in Bombay. At the artist's request, the Laxmi Vilas Palace in Baroda was thrown open for their public viewing.⁹⁸

The Madras government had its own scheme that worked in Varma's favour; it was sympathetic to the proposal for a salon-art section in the state museum made by Edgar Thurston, its director. Thurston, also the Secretary to the Fine Arts Society and a friend of the Varmas, interested them in the idea, pointing out that their works would be a major attraction there. On 29 September 1902, Raja visited the museum, where he saw his and his brother's works prominently displayed. Ravi Varma had a further success in Mysore. In 1903, a new palace was planned and the artists' agent secured a commission for decorating the main hall with *Purānic* paintings. The brothers were invited to inspect the building-in-progress before deciding on the subjects. In July 1904, a portrait commission from the young Maharaja took them to Mysore, when they settled the details of the ambitious project.⁹⁹

Ravi Varma and popular prints

Varma's grasp of the modern means of publicity led him to take the final step to secure his national reputation. By common consent, his enormous popularity rests on the cheap prints of his mythological paintings. Varma had been preceded in printmaking by the Calcutta Art Studio, not to mention a host of other anonymous presses. But in his case, mechanical reproduction was used in India for the first time to popularise a leading artist (Figs 125, 126). The process had begun in the West in the late eighteenth century, when famous paintings were turned into prints to bring them within the reach of the ordinary people.¹⁰⁰ From the outset, Varma, as with other colonial artists, was aware of the potential of modern reproductive devices. He employed photographs and *cartes-de-visite* as a preliminary to his portraits and possibly to mythological canvases. The latter certainly owed a lot to reproductions of European art in magazines.¹⁰¹

The idea of oleographs may have emanated from Tanjore Madhava Rao in 1884:

many of my friends . . . 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.¹⁰²

The advice was not taken up until after Rao's death in 1892. When Varma entered the market he had to contend with the existing presses, and

especially with the virtual monopoly enjoyed by the Poona Chitrashala Press. As his son Rama Varma observed, Bombay was chosen not only because it was easier to import machinery, but also because 'people had to be weaned from the Poona pictures'.¹⁰³

There was another, less obvious, reason why the brothers decided to take up oleography. German prints of erotic subjects had a wide circulation at the end of the century. In 1895, Ravi and Raja closely followed the prosecution in Bombay of a seller of German oleographs. The judges, John Jardine and Mahadev Govind Ranade, gave their verdict that 'naked pictures of classical subjects were not obscene, in that the artists had higher ideals than those of merely exciting the sensual appetites of the spectators. The pictures in question might have been classed among them, had it not been for the introduction into them of modern silk umbrellas and apparel that divested them of their idealism'.¹⁰⁴ With their own oleographs, the Varmas resolved to elevate public taste by injecting the idealism they felt to be lacking in the bazaar works. They did not avoid erotic subjects. But apart from one print doubtfully attributed to them, they restricted themselves to coy eroticism, with the figure tantalisingly revealed by the semi-transparent sari.¹⁰⁵

Varma took up oleographs when the printmakers were struggling to

125 Leji Ravi Varma:
Śakuntalā, oil

126 Ravi Varma: *Śakuntalā*,
oleograph



keep their heads above water in combat with photography, with one another and with foreign competition. How did he succeed in a period of ruthless competition? Even today his name is synonymous with cheap prints in India. An analysis of his success by Balendranath Tagore, is highly suggestive. The Bengali critic, who bore witness to shifts in taste, contrasted Varma's strength with the limitations of the Calcutta Art Studio. The latter's prints failed to arouse aesthetic feelings in their distortions of ancient Sanskrit ideals. They were artistically inept in their use of 'a sickly yellow to depict the saint Chaitanya, an over-enthusiastic application of the blue pencil to capture Kṛṣṇa's skin, and a liberal amount of tar to represent the goddess Kālī'.¹⁰⁶

In accusing the Studio of taking Sanskrit metaphors literally, Balen was in fact proposing a radical mutation of Hindu iconography in the light of the new colonial canon. His interpretation of the term *bhāva* ('feeling and expression') should be seen against this aesthetics of feeling. Deliberately ignoring the convention that Kṛṣṇa should be 'blue skinned' (Fig. 127), he accused the 'semi-literate iconographers of misleading the artists. In short, by the standards of western naturalism, the Studio prints were deficient in anatomy and colour harmony, and were stilted in expression to boot. The *Kālī* was an ugly, expressionless effigy that only irritated rather than evoking feelings of religious awe.¹⁰⁷

Varma was infinitely preferable to the Calcutta Art Studio. The *Purāṇas* had never before been painted so appealingly. The quality Balendranath found in abundance in the artist was *bhāva*, interpreted by him as the naturalist treatment of inner feelings and emotions, rather than literal translations of the superhuman attributes of Hindu gods. He took *Sītā Pātāla Praveśa* to be a moving example of *bhāva*. Balendranath's concept gives us an insight into Varma's art which had introduced the whole spectrum of human emotions – grand tragedy, misery, fear, surprise, pathos, remorse, sadness, pain and pleasure.¹⁰⁸

Printmakers before Varma had modified Hindu iconography in the light of western ideas. For instance, they placed the deities in familiar, nineteenth-century Bengali settings and sometimes dispensed with their multiple arms. But in substance the iconographic conventions remained intact. The Studio anticipated Varma in the choice of literary themes, notably *Nala and Damayantī* (Fig. 128). But in this naturalistic lithograph, the sleeping Damayantī is an awkward version of a Classical nude, who has been hastily and somewhat clumsily covered in a sari, while the female companions of the heroine in *The Rescue of Sītā* display shapely muscular legs that could scarcely be Indian. The weakness of these prints is that the 'quotations' are never convincingly integrated into the composition.¹⁰⁹

Ravi Varma shrewdly and confidently fused European and Indian elements. Many of his oleographs were faithful versions of his paintings. As such, they were far more accomplished than the popular prints of

Bengal, because of his better grasp of the underlying principles of naturalism. The compositions were elaborate, the grammar more sophisticated. He did not generally need to lift figures from European sources, for he tended to use them from life. Even Annada Bagchi of the Calcutta Art Studio could not match Varma's psychological approach to mythology. Although it was Varma who created a new naturalist iconography for Hindu gods, in response to public demand, his oleographs occasionally reverted to conventional iconography.¹¹⁰



श्री कृष्ण राधा ।
कलकत्ता ।

127 Calcutta Art Studio:
Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, lithograph

The Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press

Unlike Bamapada Bandopadhaya, it is almost certain that Varma himself never sent his works to be printed abroad.¹¹¹ The remuneration for the Baroda cycle paved the way for a press, while the rest of the money was advanced by a business partner, Makhanji. A site at Girgaum near Bombay was chosen for the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press, which opened in 1894. Machinery for the steam press was imported from Germany; two German artists, Fritz Schleicher and B. Gerhardt, were engaged to help transfer Varma's drawings to stone. The brothers published numerous subjects: copies of their own paintings, their renderings of conventional icons, literary and historical figures and nationalist leaders. The press also printed Maratha primers for children and Raja wrote to the education department in Madras, offering to publish primers in Tamil and Malayalam.¹¹² In 1899 they supplied a local firm with Christmas cards and postcards. Later, playing cards were produced. In 1897, Raja purchased, from Ananta Shivaji Desai, a picture merchant of Bombay, popular German prints in order to discover the secret of their success. Soon Desai and A. K. Joshi were recruited as agents. The brothers' relationship with Joshi and Desai was close; Joshi even found them accommodation in Bombay. After Ravi Varma's death, Desai obtained permission to print his works from the Mysore and Baroda collections.¹¹³

'We were not a little pleased to see all of our oleographs exposed for sale [in a local shop]. They are popular', wrote Raja during their visit to



128 Calcutta Art Studio:
Nala and Damayanti,
lithograph

Visakhapatnam in 1902.¹¹⁴ Whilst the Varmas witnessed the growing popularity of their prints, why did they fail to benefit financially from them? An ambitious commercial venture, the press involved a great deal of organisation that was beyond their ability. This was made worse by their tight professional schedule which prevented them from giving wholehearted attention to it. They were often absent from Bombay for long periods. Early indications are of financial mismanagement and corruption among the employees.¹¹⁵

The unsettled conditions of the late 1890s in Bombay with the outbreak of the plague made labour recruitment difficult. The situation worsened with the harsh anti-plague measures and the ensuing civil unrest led by Tilak. At this critical juncture the death of their uncle Raja Varma forced the brothers to leave Bombay for two years. On their return, Makhanji decided to terminate the partnership, demanding the money lent by him. In 1899, a large stock of pictures was sold off to Joshi for a modest sum of Rs 22,000, as the press faced mounting debts. In 1901 it was moved to a new site in Lonavla near Poona. Meanwhile the plague intensified in Bombay. So when Schleicher made an offer for the press, an agreement was reached on 20 July 1901. As Raja confessed: 'considering the difficulties of properly managing the firm and losses the plague is inflicting year by year, there is no other alternative left. We are now at least free from anxieties'.¹¹⁶ Around 1901-2, the change was noticed in the markedly European figures of the prints, now designed by the two Germans, though still under the Ravi Varma imprimatur. Visiting the press on 12 October 1903, Raja noticed that Schleicher was trying to print the oleographs cheaply to oust the German prints from the Indian market. The formal handover took place on Saturday 7 November 1903. Raja records:

Today we have severed all connection with our press . . . selling it to Mr Schleicher for a consideration of Rs 25,000 over and above paying all the debts connected with the establishment amounting to Rs 5 or 6 thousand

. . .¹¹⁷

The financial failure of the Varmas demonstrates the hazards of the new technology. If the advantages of mass reproduction were great, so were its drawbacks. As Walter Benjamin put it succinctly, the capacity of the new processes to reproduce endlessly threatened the aura of originality associated with a work of art. In the cut-throat world of popular prints, especially when the prize was a vast all-India market, piracy was inevitable. Attempts by firms to capture the market by any available means are suggested by their use of multilingual legends on the prints. Initially, the Poona Press provided only *devanāgarī* captions for the local clients, but soon English was added with an eye to the expanding market. Not to be caught out, The Calcutta Art Studio furnished legends in Bengali, *devanāgarī* and English.¹¹⁸

Plagiarism was the most serious threat to Varma, undermining the uniqueness of his prints from the moment they appeared. So worried was the artist that he asked Gokhale to pass a bill at the Central Legislative Council against it.¹¹⁹ It was useless. Similar problems were faced by the Calcutta Art Studio, whose chromo-lithographs warned against the infringement of copyright; yet another press found little difficulty in plagiarising its *Kālī*. The Studio's profits fell when its lithographs were printed in Britain and sold at one tenth of the original price. The Poona



Ravi Varma: *The Death of Jatayu*, oil

Chitrashala Press took to numbering its oleographs to prevent plagiarism. But the press was guilty of the same practice, if one is correct in identifying the oleograph, *Kṛṣṇa and the Gopīs*, as belonging to the Ravi Varma Press. In short, the law proved to be powerless in this matter, which makes the task of identifying genuine Ravi Varma oleographs difficult.¹²⁰

While the Varma failed to make the press a profitable concern, their prints continued to grow in popularity. Postcards of their most famous prints started arriving in India from Saxony, which, along with Dhurandhar's, became a familiar aspect of colonial India. The oleographs featured regularly in advertisements; *The Death of Jaṭāyu* (Fig. 129) sold safety matches (Fig. 130); a famous English baby food used *The Birth of Śakuntalā*: while the sage Viśvāmitra is horrified by the consequences of a momentary indiscretion, the manufacturers shrewdly slip their nutritious baby product into the picture (Figs XX, 131). The popularity of the print reminds us of Landseer's *Monarch of the Glen*, used for a brand of whisky.¹²¹

No less interesting were the German porcelain figures for the Indian market, based on Ravi Varma, three of which are now in the Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay. The first, that of Śiva, was a free rendering of the oleograph, *Viśvāmitra and Menakā*. That print in its turn was based on the painting at Baroda. The second piece, *Dattatreya*, was inspired by an independent oleograph put out by the press. The third porcelain featured Varma's famous *Sarasvatī* (Figs 132, 133). The porcelain pieces testify to a long-standing import trade in Hindu deities from different parts of the world. German porcelain complemented Japanese ivory images of Hindu gods, the latter often sporting a garbled iconography and Samurai features. Even earlier to arrive were Chinese glass paintings on Indian themes. These objects, exported by China in the eighteenth century, became so popular that they were soon manufactured in India.¹²²

THE END OF AN ERA

By the end of his life, Ravi Varma had attained his goals as a national hero. Tacitly accepted as the painter to the Raj, he was the only artist to receive the ultimate imperial accolade, Kaiser-i-Hind. At the same time, Varma was feted by the Congress as the painter who helped in nation-building. In 1903 the brothers were invited to judge the fine arts section of the Industrial Exhibition of the Congress in Madras.¹²³

During Ravi Varma's lifetime patriotism and loyalty to the Empire had not yet become irreconcilable categories. Raja noted the subdued atmosphere in Bombay at Queen Victoria's death, a token of the affection in which 'the great white mother' was held in India.¹²⁴ When Curzon envisaged a national gallery of notable men as befitting the deceased Queen, he naturally thought of Varma. In April 1901, Varma wrote to

130 Ravi Varma: *The Death of Jaṭāyu*, print



Carzon from Udaipur, offering two portraits and two historical subjects, as well as a donation to the Imperial Fund. 'I shall spare no pains to collect authentic information [for the four paintings]. I came here a few days ago to make sketches and studies of local scenery, ancient arms and accoutrements', he added. The project never materialised, for the Varmas soon



131 Ravi Varma: *Birth of Sakuntalā*, oilgraph (compare with colour Fig. XX)

died and Curzon left India in disgrace after the Partition of Bengal. Only one of the portraits for the gallery, that of Tanjore Madhava Rao, is in the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta. Late in 1904, on a visit to Mysore, Raja became seriously ill with an abdominal complaint; he died on 4 January 1905. Ravi Varma died on 2 October 1906 aged fifty-eight, two years before his planned retirement in the Hindu fashion. The news of his death was in the evening edition of the *Times of India*. With Ravi Varma ended the optimistic phase of colonial art in India.¹²⁵

Today only the awards, the official commissions and the eulogies of



132 *Left* Ravi Varma: *Sarasvatī*, oleograph. Its use by a cartoonist (Fig. 95) demonstrates the popularity of Varma prints

133 German porcelain inspired by Varma: *Sarasvatī*



Ravi Varma are remembered. Time has effaced the memory of any setbacks he may have suffered, creating an impression of the relentless progress of a genius. Yet even at the height of his career, Varma did not always receive a favourable press.¹²⁶ It was not his easy success but his gifts, organisation, and the changing artistic situation in India that took him to the summit of colonial art. Unlike traditional painters, Varma showed a remarkable ability to improve upon received ideas, to grasp a situation clearly and to act upon it swiftly. His lively curiosity is evident with regard to languages, for instance. Varma began to learn English and German late in life after he had mastered Indian languages. In the last year of his life, in the midst of ill health and sadness, he could write to Ramananda asking for a Bengal primer.¹²⁷

Ravi Varma's example created an aura around the profession. He enjoyed a popularity transcending class, language and region that has not been equalled since.¹²⁸ The final word about this pioneer westerniser rests with Rabindranath, who spent a whole morning scrutinising his pictures:

The secret of their appeal is in reminding us how precious our own culture is to us, in restoring to us our inheritance. Our mind here acts as an ally of the artist. We can almost anticipate what he is about to say . . . It is all too easy to find fault with him. But we must remember that it is a lot easier to imagine a subject than to paint it. A mental image, after all, has the freedom to be imprecise. But if that mental image has to be turned into something as concrete as a picture, with concern for even the minute aspects of representation, then that task ceases to be facile.¹²⁹