



## RAJA RAVI VARMA : ASPECTS OF HIS ART AND IDEOLOGY

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The debate on Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) and his art began almost a century ago, and proves to be a long term preoccupation of Indian art historians and connoisseurs. It surfaced again when an exhibition of his paintings was organised in 1993 at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. The late-twentieth-century detractors of Ravi Varma do not seem to have anything new to add to what was said at the turn of the century by E.B.Havell (1861-1934) and A.K.Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and others who took the cue from them. However, a number of new historians and critics who wished to revise the stereotypes of Havell and Coomaraswamy have produced fresh ideas and insights on the subject. Among them are K.G.Subramonyan (The Living Tradition, 1987), Asok Mitra (The Four Painters), Gita Kapur (Journal of Arts and Ideas, June 1989) and E.M.J.Venniyur (Raja Ravi Varma, 1981) deserve special mention. There is a perceptible revival of interest in the works of this nineteenth century master. The vicissitudes of Ravi Varma's reputation may be briefly traced. With the consolidation of British power, our traditional system of education

and arts also declined. In their place English education and new forms of industry began to flourish. With the advent of emigre painters from the West, who began to take over the trade and art of painting, the great traditions of Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahady mural and miniature paintings began to disappear. These "Company painters", (so called because they were mainly patronised by the East India Company) were mainly portraitists, who used canvas and oil paints, which were new to India. At this juncture, Ravi Varma, a scion of the Travancore royal family, equipped with only his genius and no formal training, entered the scene.

His style and material were borrowed from the Company painters and though his themes were heavily drawn from Indian puranic lore the school that he inaugurated in Indian painting may be condemned as a pale replica of contemporary western style. His paintings appeal to western eyes and to India's new elite, who were fast being converted to a western ethos. Ravi Varma was honoured and lionised in India and abroad. Tens of thousands of oleograph copies of Ravi Varma's paintings were sold and almost every middle class

household and even some places of worship were decorated with them. These paintings were not a monopoly and luxury of feudal barons and temple walls; they came to the possession of every one who cared to buy these cheap oleographs.

At the close of the nineteenth century, a new wave of nationalism and revivalism ran through Asia - through India, China and Japan. This wind affected westernised intellectuals in India and some westerners who were favourably inclined to Asian lore, persons such as Max Mueller (1823-1900) and E.B.Havell, who came to India to head the government schools of Arts and Crafts in Madras and Calcutta. The new trend was strengthened by A.K.Coomaraswamy, a Sri Lankan working in the United States as a museum curator, and Okakura Kakuzo (1863-1913), a Japanese visiting philosopher, who was much influenced by the expansive ambitions of his rising nation.

These orientalist condemned Ravi Varma as a pale imitator of the western style, alienated from Indian traditions. The immediate outcome of this denigration was the rise of the so called Bengal School of painting, initiated by Abanindranath Tagore, whose mentor was Havell. Though there was all round condemnation of Abanindranath as merely a revivalist continuator of medieval Mughal and Rajput miniature tradition, now there is general agreement among historians on the hasty christening of the school as the only authentic Indian

style.

The limitations of Abanindranath were later overcome by his uncle Rabindranath, and by the members of a number of new schools and painters like Amrita Sher-gil, Jamini Roy, Nandalal Bose and many others. But the old stereotypes of Havell and Coomaraswamy still persist with all the undying stamina of superstition.

A number of historic and intellectual developments have helped late-twentieth-century critics to reject Havell's and Coomaraswamy's stereotypes. One among them was independence, which restored Indian self-confidence and helped Indians look at the past dispassionately. Orientalist attitudes are rightly rejected by new scholars as an ideological construct that perpetuates western overlordship (see E.Said, Orientalism). No longer bamboozled by the claims of the western "civilizing mission" we have begun to assess the impact of the west on Indian society in a detached manner. Here is what Asok Mitra, a pioneer in the movement for reassessing Ravi Varma, has to say :

"The modern movement in painting received its most powerful stimulus not from the urge to see differently but from the urge to feel and act patriotically and bring painting to the service of Swadeshi and Nationalism. The path was laid not through a reconstruction of the contemporary way of seeing but through a patriotic revivalist drill. For if the age demanded the breaking of new ground in

painting, it should have started with, not by rejecting, Ravi Varma. It is unfortunate that E.B.Havell and A.K.Coomaraswamy's crusade at the turn of the century reduced the great painter's name to anathema. For, in retrospect, it is time to realise that Ravi Varma was trying to achieve in Indian painting what the new learning of Europe achieved in Indian literature and philosophy".

Gita Kapoor says:

"In defence of Ravi Varma let it be said that there is perhaps no other way in which the golden past survives in modern age except in pastiche and farce. The Bengal school and even Santiniketan could scarcely do anything to lessen the absurdity of such invocations"

Such peaks and troughs and peaks again are not unknown in the history of art and literature.