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27-6-93

The genius of Ravi Varma

BARODA played a crucial role in the career of Raja Ravi Varma. The rare honour of being a state guest at the investiture ceremony of Maharaja Sayaji Rao III in 1881 must have given a sense of recognition to the artist who faced virtual banishment from his home state, Travancore. In Baroda he was given a studio in the palace complex and his paintings were acquired by the state and the nobility. Indeed, some of his most important pictures were painted in Baroda. If these paintings, and the events that followed, marked a turning point in the artist's career, they also influenced the course of contemporary Indian art in no small measure.

The large oils of Lakshmi and Saraswati (the latter based on a convention of painting lady musicians seated on thrones) were painted during his first visit to Baroda. These became prototypes of the many versions produced thereafter, replacing all icons of these goddesses known till then.

When he was commissioned to paint 14 Pauranic pictures for the Lakshmi Vilas Palace, then under construction, the artist decided to tour the country and devise a costume which would satisfy every class equally. This initiative indicates the quest for a nationalist identity, and of understanding the importance of visual iconography. The subsequent use of the sari endowed the female figure with sublime propensity and widened the appeal of his pictures on a national scale: he was perhaps the first artist to achieve this distinction.

Then, the famous letter of the Diwan of Baroda, T. Madhav Rao, bidding Ravi Varma to have his paintings oleographed was catalytic in initiating mythological reproductions. This eventually generated a spate of such ephemera which haunt the Indian street and average home even today.

Baroda's blend of progressive outlook and conformity to traditional values made the state a model for Ravi Varma, who saw it as an analogy for 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 civilisations — Western progress and Indian tradition. This position was, however, not unique; it was the response of every educated urban elite to the socio-cultural changes in 19th century India. In fact, Ravi Varma's choice of the medium — oil — may be compared to the adoption of English as a language of literary expression: these were the most effective instruments to articulate the simultaneous belonging to the twin worlds that colonialism had brought into focus.

What Ravi Varma painted was neither wholly Indian nor Western, neither wholly realistic nor fictitious. It was patently electric in intent and import. He was offering mythical figures in believable garbs and settings, as was the contemporary Parsi theatre. His paintings were meticulously planned as theatric tableaux on a proscenium stage, and the characters clearly positioned to achieve a dramatic effect. The heroic gesture of Krishna As Envoy as he looks out at the audience or the heraldic posture of Bhishma's declaration in Matsyagandha are clearly meant to elicit applause. Climactic moments in the stories of virtuous characters, victims of fate facing death, doom or sacrifice of their dear ones, are chosen for their tear-wrenching potential as in popular urban theatre. Consider Harishchandra Taramati, Mohini Rukmangad, Ravana Jatayu, Nala Damayanti, Draupadi Vastraharan.

For the new iconography of his divinities Ravi Varma chose props and costumes simple enough to be recognised even by the lay. Classical columns and drooping curtains would conjure up palace interior. A tall muscular moustachioed youth was the image of the valorous male. And a fair, well-endowed young woman, often bare-breasted, enacted the role of a mythical beauty. The female figure in The Court of Indrajit, for instance, simulates in her figure and posture a classical Venus. She wears her sari uncharacteristically, baring her breast, like a neo-classical drape. It may be noted that Ravi Varma highlighted the costumes and jewellery to such an extent that they glittered brighter than the sitters they adorned. At a time when economic strife was growing, the seductive exposition of personal possessions and tantalizing props met with instant success. So did the portrayal of suggestive sexuality in the taboo-ridden India of late 19th century. What Polynter and Tadema had achieved in Victorian England, Ravi Varma accomplished here with equal success.

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Ravi Varma had no formal training in art and evolved his own brand of academic realism. He accomplished his technique and form by sheer dint of effort. So, what he 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. There were glaring inaccuracies in his handling of foreshortening and depth. 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. T. Madhav Rao in the portrait at Lakshmi Vilas Palace is dwarf-like because, carried away by his relish in handling the drapery of the costume, the artist left the inner body-contours undefined. Used to drawing static models in indoor studios, he had problems in relating moving figures to a perspectival space and in depicting outdoor scenes. His landscapes, mostly flat props set behind posed models, were painted separately, as is conspicuous in Vishwamitra Menaka and Bharat and the Lion Cub. The posture of child Bharat against a painted cub is rendered quaint, even comic.

Yet this very naivete gives him an edge over his more competent contemporaries in evolving a personal rather than a purely professional but colourless mode. His shortcomings made him turn to devices other than the naturalistic. The over-darkening of contours, heavy modelling and obsessions of highlighting gold or gems from his Tanjore training added an extra bit of 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, Shakuntala, 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. This triggered off varied repercussions including on the ensuing movements in cinema. The pioneer filmmaker Dadasaheb Phalke (who had later studied at Kalabhavan in Baroda) began 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, from the *oeuvre* of Ravi Varma.

In effect what he 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 which was further shaped by the socio-political vicissitudes of his times, Ravi Varma embarked upon a review or reinterpretation of his culture. This he did with remarkable adventurousness, and at a pace which earned him steady patronage so important for a freelance artist. He must have been surprised, in fact, that the ideas he posited in his massive oils, met with approbation sooner than could be expected in a period of considerable conservatism and dwindling patronage of art.

That he was eulogised in his own lifetime speaks of a lacunae, even of unfulfilled desire, that his audience may have felt in the identification of their own needs. ■

(The writer is a distinguished painter)