

# Ravi Varma was neither fish nor fowl

27.6.93

*Reacting sharply to the suggestion that Raja Ravi Varma was the 'first Indian modernist', J. Swaminathan argues that bazaar popularity cannot become a criterion for artistic evaluation*

## ART

At the outset, let me make it clear that I'm not opposed to projecting the works of Ravi Varma as a painter. But the thrust of the exhibition is what I find disturbing. To start off with, the event was given unprecedented publicity. Over the radio, on television, in the print medium. The show, perhaps the first one of its kind at the National Museum, was inaugurated by the Prime Minister and the valedictory function was presided over by the Vice President. Point out another exhibition that has got this kind of attention? Not the Four Pioneers, now showing at the National Gallery of Modern Art. Not even that of Rabindranath Tagore's works, held in April.

This build-up could be aimed at hiking the price of Ravi Varma in the international market. After all, the response to his work was very lukewarm, at the Sotheby's sales. Or it could be simply a 're-appraisal' of Ravi Varma, as the organisers have said. To me it seems an attempt to project him as the father figure of what is known as modern Indian art. And this is what I strongly object to.

As yet no serious attempt has been made to write the history of the modern art movement in India. Or, for that matter, about the collapse of feudalism with the coming of the British. Because Ravi Varma was the one of the first few to paint in oil, all crypto-historians date the modern movement from him.

I can say, on behalf of all serious artists on the scene, that we don't treat ourselves as by-products of history. I as a painter will not place myself in a certain point of time in history and then try to defend myself or what I do. Nor do I expect any of my forebears to do that.

In fact, what is central to the modern movement in art inter-

nationally is that it opened up the world in many directions - including the past. An artist could move about not only in his own times but in other times too. For example, the primitive African sculpture which Picasso saw at the Trocadaro Museum of Ethnocity in 1906, opened up a world for him. "At last I know what art really is," he is known to have said. The work he completed after that borrowed heavily from those African sculptures - and in its turn it marked a fundamental break from the Greco-Roman tradition of European art.

Great things were happening in Europe when Ravi Varma was born. The year, 1858, saw the publication of the Communist Manifesto. Painters like Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh were happening to art at the time. Ravi Varma possibly did not know about the impressionist movement. But a person's ignorance cannot be his justification for doing something. Nothing stopped him from doing things on his own. To restate an example, Picasso did not feel obliged to repeat the prevailing tradition. Instead, he challenged it. In Calcutta, Havel (the principal of the art school set up by the British) told Abanindranath Tagore not to paint in the western manner but to look at the great Indian tradition.

Neither can the medium he used - oil - be the decisive factor in acknowledging him as the progenitor of the modern times in Indian art. The medium is incidental, I would say. For here I am, in 1993, using earth colour - mud - to paint on canvas. The decisive factor is the outlook. It should be a new way of looking at things. And that is where Ravi Varma signally failed.

All the time we artists are struggling to enlarge the creative vision. For any artist, in any medium, that is important. But not for Ravi Varma, nor for those who teach in the art schools of the country. They still follow the teaching method introduced by the English.



Portrait of Raja Ravi Varma by his sister, Mangala Bai Thampuratti

Therefore they study anatomy as understood by the western mind - in the naturalistic-realistic manner. One can see the great damage done in the USSR where, after the Revolution, they insisted on socialist realism, forgetting the contribution of some of the greatest (pre-revolution) names of this century, like Chagall.

It is not as if you graduate step by step into a contemporary sensibility. It's like saying we must keep our eyes shut to Einstein unless we've gone through the entire gamut of Newtonian experience. I personally consider Pierre De' Francisca a far greater painter than Leonardo da Vinci. He belonged to the early Renaissance, while da Vinci lived in the high renaissance period when the so-called linear

perspective - and the vanishing point - was introduced in European art. Now a pseudo-Marxist like Asoka Mitra says, in the catalogue for the exhibition, that Ravi Varma was making a "progressive contribution" to Indian art by introducing linear perspective in painting. If Ravi Varma was making a progressive contribution to modern movement at the turn of the century, what was Van Gogh doing. I'd like to know? Was he, in Asoka Mitra's opinion, an aberration?

The modern masters in the west, in fact, threw out the linear perspective. For the simple reason that the vanishing point was an illusion. You see, when the renaissance artists simulated the fact that an object looks smaller and

smaller as it recedes towards the horizon, it was hailed as an achievement in realism. But then an object only looks smaller, it does not become smaller. The modern masters therefore treated the illusion as illusion and rejected it in painting. And subsequently, in recent times, many more perspectives have opened up to us. The terrestrial perspective, the aerial perspective - so many more! And yet, personally speaking, I feel closer to the Pahari miniature painter who died a decade before Ravi Varma came on the scene. Pahari Mularam's paintings contain elements of magical realism which western painting has yet to discover.

It's one thing to learn a manner and quite another to achieve a

certain amount of proficiency. Ramchandran, somewhere in the same catalogue, compares Ravi Varma with Rembrandt. This, I think, is almost criminal. For Ravi Varma was extremely tawdry in his application of oil; his drawing was weak, to put it mildly; he had no concept of foreshortening, which made his heads look disproportionately large...

We mustn't forget, it was the urban intelligentsia brought up in the cities and towns of India in the light of Macaulay's teachings who developed this ersatz culture. Now that we are learning to look at the folk and tribal traditions, we are becoming aware of the richness of the composite culture of the sub-continent. An artist looks all around him - not only to the west but anywhere and everywhere - and appropriates what suits his genius. That is why we get a Jamini Roy inspired by Kalighat *patachitra*. Or we get a Rabindranath who, though painting in Santiniketan, does not take to the Indianness of Abanindranath nor the vulgar naturalism of Ravi Varma. The key word, then, is genius. And Ravi Varma did not have any of it.

And most certainly Ravi Varma offered the greatest insult to Indian mythology and iconography by reducing our gods and goddesses to naturalistic proportions. How can you show a four-armed goddess in a naturalistic manner? It looks so silly! The only reason these became so popular in the urban areas and percolated down to the *bania* shops was because of the power of the duplicating medium. In those oleographs, produced at a cheap price and distributed widely, we have the genesis of the calendar art.

It won't do to forget that the popularity of an artist is never the true measure of his art. The most popular works of Ravi Varma were the deities. And it is not the quality of his art that made people acquire them. Don't people bow before a Ganesha even when it is a bad depiction? You don't become authentic just because you are prolific. Ravi Varma just kept on doing bad paintings. What he did, in my opinion, cannot be ranked with any Academy painter in Europe of his time.

Mine is not a militant attitude. All I'm trying to say is that the National Museum's is a very superficial attempt to reassess Ravi Varma. If the idea is to show how relevant his art was in the context of his times, they should have shown more deeply what was happening at various levels of society at the time. In urban art. In rural art. What others were doing, and what Ravi Varma was doing. As matters stand now, Ravi Varma is neither fish nor fowl. He's a red herring, and not a link between the past and the present.

As told to  
Ratnottama Sengupta



## Stock market: Thoroughly confused

*Harshad's disclosure of his alleged pay-off to the PM has sent the stock market into a tail-spin, writes Sucheta Dalal.*

THE Harshad Mehta bombshell last week threw the capital market into a state of depression. Stock prices which were barely beginning to look up nose-dived on the day he held his now well-known press conference.

It was almost like budget-day says a broker, "we were desperate to get any little morsel of information on what he planned to say, and when the news hit the market share prices went into a tail-spin. Ever since prices have been moving steadily southwards in the belief that at the least there will be a major political shake-up and at the worst the Parliament would be dissolved.

Privately several brokers express irritation at Harshad Mehta's disclosures — "the entire period starting from May 1992 has already been a disaster thanks first to the scam, then Ayodhya, then the riots — after that the bomb blasts and now this blast" says one broker. "We've all invested heavily in infrastructure in order to cope with boom conditions, and now we are barely able to manage expenses", he adds.

**MOUNTING PRESSURE:** There is also the constant pressure of competition, foreign institutional brokers threatening to set up shop, the National stock exchange coming up rapidly and except for a few enlightened brokers the rest are either unaware or plainly unprepared for the changes to come".

The head of a leading financial institution echoes a similar view, when asked why companies have postponed their Euro-issues. "On what basis can we ask foreigners to invest?" he asks "when every bit of de-regulation is accompanied by some form of upheaval".

But what does this have to do with Mr Harshad Mehta's disclosures? According to a broker, it is mainly the fear that political instability or the threat of elections would keep the market low until a clear picture emerges.

THE world has lauded Dr Manmohan Singh as the most dynamic, alert finance minister India has had in decades. But some members of the Joint Parliamentary Committee looking into the bank scam think Dr Singh is excessively sleepy. The second draft of the JPC quotes the finance minister as saying that he need not lose sleep every time the stock market goes up or down, and then adds: "It is good to have a finance

Brokers say that the confusing articles in different sections of the media have added to the confusion and multiplied the uncertainty.

**CONGRESS OFFENSIVE:** The Congress party which has rallied behind the Prime Minister has launched a big media offensive in its fight for survival. The main defence of the ruling party seems to be to prove that the Prime Minister could not have met the broker on November 4.

Curiously, the debate in Bombay, the commercial capital is on entirely different lines. Despite all the efforts of the ruling party, the business community in Bombay does not seem to have a shred of doubt that money changed hands.

"I don't want to get into a discussion about whether there was one suitcase or two, or whether the money was handed to the Prime Minister personally or to some 'fixer', but we all know that nothing moves without paying money. Surely that cannot be the subject of debate".

**CEAR CLOUT:** Why this certainty? According to him and others, all the actions of Mr Mehta in late 1991 and 1992 point to his clout. Even when the scam broke out, Mehta, say sources, has been known to brag that he had clout at the highest level and nobody could touch him.

His meeting with top bureaucrats apart, his actions during the budget of 1992 are considered most revealing. Brokers are willing to swear that he knew the budget proposals before-hand. They claim, that basic prudence demands that a broker hedge his bets even when he is confident of a market-friendly budget, but the all out buying by the Mehta camp pointed to certainty about the budget proposals, not tips, rumours or intelligent guesswork.

The worry for businessmen is at two levels — the first, is purely business. The depressed markets

make it difficult for them to raise funds, political uncertainty makes it difficult for them to capitalise on liberalisation for instance — tapping the Euro market or even being in a bargaining position when it comes to working out collaborations or joint-ventures.

**FALL OUT:** The second is the issue of what would be the fall out of one of them (businessmen)

spoken Harshad Mehta will never be trusted again".

To them the quick filing of the charge-sheet against United Commercial Bank is an indication of the state moving against the broker. It is further pointed out that the threat to bring Mr Niranjan Shah (a friend of the Mehtas who is reportedly arrested in Dubai and is allegedly involved in the drug business. Mr Shah escaped arrest

Shah to further kill his credibility. The Central Bureau of Investigation, it may be recalled has claimed to the Joint Parliamentary Committee that Mr Shah holds the key to possible bank accounts of Mr Mehta.

**RETURN DIFFICULT:** He and others in the market believe, that though the broker may have had his compulsions, some even see it

cannot speak because you can't fight the might of the state. The point out that the code of silence exists because political forces use the state agencies to unleash terror to destroy those who threaten to squeal or sometimes even self-defence.

To them the victimisation of certain ex-bureaucrats and bank officials is an example.

One industrialist points out that the major banks involved in the scam have almost stopped functioning after the scam. Bank officials are going to be the big scapegoats of the scam along with the brokers, while politicians write their death warrant through demands of investigation.

**BANKS' AUTONOMY:** "It is not ironical that a bunch of politicians is indicting and castigating people, but the draft report does not even suggest that banks and financial institutions should be kept free from political interference. That alone would be about a quantum improvement in their performance".

Senior bank executives also demoralised after the scam have received a further body blow yesterday's dismissal of Mr Mahadevan, managing director of State Bank of India.

Says one banker, "I'm just waiting to retire and get out, after nearly 40 years of service, I'm thoroughly thrashed by the scam".

Businessmen are also worried about what happens to their system of bribes, favours and favours which greased the way to growth and profitability for them. As they stand there is more uncertainty. Mr Harshad Mehta is expected to release the Mittal tape transcripts tomorrow.

redrafted.

There was an earlier stock market boom in 1985 and 1986 when share prices doubled. Why has JPC not gone into it and drawn lessons? Was there any scam at the time? If so, surely Mr V.P. Singh who was then finance minister should be indicted? And if surely it shows that finance ministers should not lose sleep every time the markets go up and down.



The new trading ring of Bombay Stock Exchange: Bad start?

breaking the code of silence. A businessman with well known political connections says — "Harshad has broken the code of silence and in the process destroyed himself". He says, quite simply there is no escaping political payments, and having once

in India by fleeing to Dubai via Kathmandu after an Income-tax raid at his residence) is another example.

They say that the government would try and establish links between the Mehtas and Niranjan

as another example of his seeking publicity, but businessmen are unanimous in their view that he will find it difficult to get back into business, no matter what his political deal".

According to businessmen you

## A cavalcade of Kumbhakarans

the joke on them.

The JPC says that the finance minister must accept overall responsibility for all bank scandals. I agree entirely. But, we must ask, who then is responsible for all the irregularities, fraud and shoddy supervision from 1986 onwards

belonging to several parties, all snoring at their posts, see hee, while the financial system goes to rack and ruin.

**CABINET RESPONSIBILITY:** Since the JPC has humourists as draftsmen, I suggest they expand their little idea. Cabinet responsi-

to me that Mr Sinha should resign as a member of the JPC, since murky events during his own tenure are under investigation. This may not have been clear when the JPC was first constituted, but the committee itself has established the fact and implications

Fairgrowth's transactions were with government banks like Andhra Bank, National Housing Bank and Bank of India. Again, the securities transactions of SBI Caps, which have been castigated by the JPC, totalled Rs 13,930 crore in 1990. The Union Bank asked to