

# Nationalism through the Spectrum of Visual Art

## Abstract

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a strong connection was established between art and nationalism. The paper would try to explore how the visual culture – painting during the Colonial period was associated with the wider history of imperialism and nationalism. Imperial art forms, style and technique were creatively adapted by artists like Raja Ravi Varma with indigenous themes from Indian mythology. This was utilized for local patrons and markets, encompassing both elite and popular circles. The mechanical production of historical cum mythological themes in paintings created mental picture and aroused nationalist passion against colonialism; emanating all India consciousness in the late nineteenth century. However, during the *Swadeshi* era, a different vision of national art developed by the nationalist Neo- Bengal school of Abanindranath Tagore which rejected Raja Ravi Varma's work and branded them of western influence. This further aroused debate on the value of cultural nationalism.

**Keywords:** Cultural Nationalism, Mythological Themes, History Painting, Oleographs, Portrait Painting, Ethnographical Value.

## Introduction

Nehru, reflecting on the cultural heritage stated that "Indian Art is intimately associated with Indian Religion and Philosophy"<sup>1</sup>. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century cultural Nationalists devoted themselves in exploring Indian Cultural uniqueness rather than the acquisition of Political power. The distinct unique Indian culture was frequently attributed to its spirituality and idealism. The wider use of the terms spirituality and idealism was part of an increasingly well-established discourse constructed by many but the most prominent among them was Vivekananda who contrasted these Indian qualities with western materialism. In the sphere of art - painting was expressed through extra naturalistic symbolism.<sup>2</sup>

From eighteenth century, the British painters in India with their new technique of realism which was not very much in practice and in familiarity with Indian artists, produced paintings which became widely popular in Europe and in some way tried to shape the western perception of India. The imperial art though with the diverse themes invariably tried to depict and emphasize the cultural superiority of Britain. The British artists such as Daniells in the late eighteenth century powerfully projected the British civilizing efforts in India. However, this perspective of superiority was set aside by the Indian artists through their indigenous themes which became widely popular.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to understand the relationship between politics and culture and how the cultural sphere mediates in the political processes. The national liberation movement was not confined only to the political sphere but was also a cultural struggle to dismantle the entire hegemonic edifice of the colonial culture. The study shows how the indigenous art combated and countered the Colonial culture and eventually created awareness for national consciousness by projecting the ideas of nationalism. Hence, it became a tool for much wider purpose rather than for mere aesthetics or entertainment.

This paper would explore the contributions of Raja Ravi Varma, known for Salon Art in India. His image was exalted as genius artist due to his popularity as painter of Hindu mythological figures. He became a cultural icon as his fame acquired a pan-India sweep in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

The Modern Review, in the year following his death (1906) described him as a greatest artist of Modern India, a nation builder, cultural icon, a painter who made God human. He was known internationally for his



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artistic talent. Ravindra Nath Tagore, while describing Varma's popularity in Bengal recalled how in his childhood he saw the replacement of European paintings on the walls by Varma's oleographs.<sup>4</sup>

Raja Ravi Verma, was born in 1848 in the aristocratic family of Kerala. The Varma's of *Kalimnoor* were allied by marriage with the rulers of Travancore. Though he had no art school training, was mostly a self taught artist in the technique of oil painting but got primary training by watching his uncle Raja Raja Varma, an artist himself. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the western Art circle, realism, naturalism was at its finest. The experience of mixed world of realism of western Art and traditional Indian Art during his youth provided the basic foundation for the ground work of Art for him.<sup>5</sup>

Though he began his career with painting portraits of distinguished personalities of English and Indian dignitaries, which confirmed his talent as an artist for capturing likeness. But what made mark was his series of impressive realistic depiction of Indian cultural religious life. His leap to fame began in 1873 when he received gold medal at the art exhibition organized by the Madras Art School. His reputation as a painter of studies of Indian women grew as his work was exhibited and appreciated internationally.<sup>6</sup>

In 1893, when he heard of the Columbia exposition to be held at Chicago, he felt 'As country's premier artist, it was his duty to represent India.' Though his religious beliefs prevented him from crossing the sea, he represented India by sending series of ten canvases on women of different localities representing the life of India, where he highlighted through his art work the rich cultural diversity and its underlying unity. His paintings were displayed in the ethnographical section. (not in fine arts pavilion).<sup>7</sup>

These paintings got special commendation for their ethnological value, of carefully dealing with costumes and articles used in social and ceremonial life of India. This was his representation of growing perception of India as one nation at that time when India was in the process of making a nation. However, his real fame along with patronage from number of princes started with his portrayal of a new kind of religious and illustrative paintings of scenes from India's literary traditions. In 1881, he got his first assignment by the Gaekwad of Baroda to produce five paintings on religious and *Puranic* themes. After its successful completion, he again got in 1888 the another larger commission for fourteen paintings from the scenes from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* which would be displayed in the Durbar Hall of the Gaekwad's new palace *Lakshmi Vilas*.<sup>8</sup> They were displayed later on at Trivandrum and then taken by the artist in 1891 via Bombay where they were again exhibited and then finally reached its destination - Baroda.

The brief public display of these painted pictures aroused popular interest so much that it convinced Varma that there was a desperation in India for religious pictures. This idea prompted him to establish his own Oleographic press for their production.<sup>9</sup>

A more advanced technique for reproducing images, termed as lithography was invented in Munich in 1798 in which mass production of painted images could be taken. Later on with the subsequent development of the techniques of chromolithography and then oliography, enabled the mass reproduction of color full images from late nineteenth century.

Raja Ravi Varma with the help of German expert established his own press near Bombay where he began mass reproduction of his paintings thereby commercializing the mythological and religious prints art forms. He produced glossy copies of the oils signed under his name by mastering the new techniques of oil painting.<sup>10</sup>

Further, Indian studios specialized in mass printing were set up as Calcutta Art studio which specialized in Hindu Mytho pictures and another one was Poona *Chitrashala* press founded in 1878, emerged with Hindu nationalist tone in art thereby, creating a base for extremism in Maharashtra. It was started by *Vishnu Krishna Chipulanker*. The Poona *Chitrashala* combined Hindu- mytho pictures with valorization for the grand history of *Marathas*. It had an implicit anti-Colonial stand with overt exclusive Hindu communitarian tinge of the past.<sup>11</sup>

Along with the Calcutta Art Studio, and Poona *Chitrashala* press, Ravi verma's oleograph press with German technical assistance from 1894 instantly wiped out the established elite popular divide prevalent in the cultural discourse of India. As the creative individualized art and the work of artists was only within the reach of the elites .The rapid development of the new techniques of mechanical reproduction led to the repeated breakdown of such distinctions. Hence success in creating an all India market for Varma's devotional prints, accessible for both elite and commoners alike created widespread popularity for the prints carrying his name, thereby created a loss of elitism in the world of art.<sup>12</sup>

Earlier till 1870s to 1880s, religious and mythological pictures were available in the form of cheap handmade *kalighat* paintings and the woodcuts of *Battala*. These were produced by the low caste *patuas* who migrated and settled around the *kaighat* temple in Calcutta. Their Art developed a remarkable genre of paintings. These artists migrated from villages in South -West Bengal for pursuing their cast occupation. They were the pioneers among the Indian artists for producing entirely for open market and not like at the behest of orders of certain patrons.<sup>13</sup>

The *patua* scroll-painters of West Bengal became well known as the creators of *Kalighat* paintings. They produced bold dynamic, and not inert and labored paintings. But from 1880s these indigenous art began to lose control over the art market to the newly emerged lethographs, oleographs and chromolithographs of the elite world.<sup>14</sup>

Varma created in India, the image of a professional painter, who fulfilled commissions, by breaking the monopoly of European painters. No other Indian Artist ever matched his pan India network.

The technique of Realism had been deployed in the West to penetrate and highlight

hidden dimensions of the real. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century India this was a technology which was used for better depiction of conventional themes.<sup>15</sup> The realist method was generally used for depiction of fairly traditional themes, especially the mythological themes. Ravi Varma used the western technique of realism for his paintings. Hence, modeled on the Victorian Art, he produced the uniform images of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses with realistic features – and emerged as the leading Indian artist. Later these printing imagery techniques also inspired the calendar art in India.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the predominance of historical cum mythological themes in his paintings created the mental picture for an average Indian about their popular deities. Through his recreation of the ancient world of myths and legends enshrined in *Puranas* made him popular throughout India. Varma's portrayal of *Saraswati* and *lakshmi* became the most popular prints ever produced.<sup>17</sup>

What brought Ravi Varma to his height of popularity was his historical paintings for the Nation. As a well versed in Sanskrit classics, he evolved a new language of powerful narrative art – which became a vehicle for story- telling, with moral lessons. Though it was a Western invention, but found full measures in his work. He used Victorian influence for re-creation of the classical world of romantic past from the epics of *Ramayana Mahabharata*, *puranas* and the plays of *Kalidas* and other Sanskrit literatures.<sup>18</sup> Using the classics, he carefully selected the stories that pierced the beholders heart unlike miniatures which could never stir the soul.

His appeal of female characters was not iconographic types but palpable desirable human beings. His first public story of such a tender episode was *Shakuntala's* Love Epistle to *Dushyanta*, and later *Arjun and Shubhadra*. The Heroines of Ravi Varma were known for their beauty, were personification of passions whose lives were filled with romance, love and tragedy. These paintings are considered among the best examples of art that fuses- Indian tradition with European techniques. Before his art work Indian paintings depicted flat subjects where bodies and spaces had no depth. He glorified the body and painted beautiful fabrics and materials with striking color contrast and brought about Indian Renaissance in the art discourse on his own.<sup>19</sup>

His commissions for Gaekwad of Baroda in 1888, acclaimed his standing as of a historical painter of National reputation. His fourteen epic paintings of Baroda were borrowed from the genres of European History paintings. *Sita Patal Pravesh*, depicting Hindu ideal of *Sati*, the self effacing wife, steadfast in her chastity.<sup>20</sup>

Further, the scenes of, *Nala and Damayanti*, the love for *Arjun* and *shubhadra*, the fall of Sage *Vishwamitra* through lust, the infatuation of *Shantmanu* with *Ganga* and so on were depicted with such fidelity that dazzled the people throughout India.<sup>21</sup>

These works gave insight to the whole spectrum of human emotions, misery, fear, surprise

remorse, pain and pleasure. No artist could match Varma's psychological approach to mythology. Ravi Varma's history painting epitomized the magic that was naturalism. His paintings not only made god human, but, elevated public taste, and replaced the wide circulation of German prints on erotic subjects.<sup>22</sup>

Following Baroda, the states of Mysore and Trivandrum as well commissioned Varma for large scale mythological works. It was Ravi Varma's effort that public as well aristocratic taste graduated from portraits to history painting. Moreover, it also transformed his regional identity in to Pan- India one.

What added impetus to Varma's narrative style religious illustrative paintings was the rise of Nationalist Passion against Colonialism among the educated which shifted regional consciousness to National all India consciousness in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He appeared at a historical time when for the bourgeoisie in the colonial context, the Nation was the convenient site at which to construct their own hegemonic projects in opposition to Colonialism.<sup>23</sup>

Varma's oleographs, which captured cultural specificities and something quintessentially Indian, coincided with the construction of this kind of hegemonic culture. Moreover, after 1896, in response to the upsurge of nationalism in Maharashtra, Ravi Varma's Press put out Oleographs of National heroes like *Shivaji, Tilak and Ranade*.<sup>24</sup>

In 1903, the Madras Session of the Congress had an exhibition of Varma's paintings. He was hailed by the Congress for promoting National unity through his art. His enormous popularity was due to the cheap prints through mechanical reproduction of mythological paintings which secured his National reputation .However, around the same time, the British awarded him with the little of *Kesar-i-Hind* (1904), the only Indian Artist to be thus recognized, appreciated and honoured.<sup>25</sup>

However, Ravi Varma's success and the National acclaim was somewhat offset by harsh criticism in the *Swadeshi* Extremist era, which imbued with the dominant strand of Hindu revivalist thinking against dominance of Western influence. His reputation as a National hero has since then risen and fallen with currents of ongoing debates on Nationalism. As till the starting of the *Swadeshi* Extremist era, the combination of Western artistic model with indigenous themes was regarded as an asset rather than anything otherwise.

Consequently, within a year of his death in 1906, the Nationalist Neo-Bengal school with the intensification of extreme nationalism during the *Swadeshi* era rejected Ravi Varma's work as unspiritual and hybrid and branded them as imitation of western influence and aroused debate on the value of cultural nationalism.<sup>26</sup>

The charge which was commonly made against Varma was of surrender to the Colonial power. The approach ignores the genuine appeal of artistic technique of oil and perspective. What was now demanded was truly indigenous technique and depiction of emotions of more valid Indian cultural uniqueness. Thus with the exaltation of spiritual over materialist Western culture during the *Swadeshi* era,

led to the sudden fall in the prestige of Ravi Varma and the other artists of the similar vain.<sup>27</sup>

The Colonial government established the school of art in Calcutta in 1854 to provide training for middle class artists. Initially, this school promoted Western style art but when the key figure of the Bengal School E.B Havell was appointment as principal in 1896, admired Indian craft and skill and Mughal Miniatures, adopted the policy of excluding the techniques of European art from the school.<sup>28</sup>

This policy was protested by the nationalists on pretext of non access of European technique to Indian art students and thus would impede the development of artistic endeavour in India. The political activists though wished to rid India of the British rule but not rejected western innovations.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, what stimulated and deeply influenced the rise of the Bengal school was a selective admiration from some of the influential Englishmen and high traditions of south Asian art along with the appreciation of the spiritual and philosophical content seen as heritage and praised for its superiority to the materialism of the Western culture.<sup>30</sup>

E.B.Havell, as head of the Calcutta school of art admired Indian craft skill and appreciated Mughal miniatures and Hindu heritage for its spiritual qualities. The Hindu elements deepened in his writings on '*Benaras the sacred city*' and '*The ideals of Indian art*'. Havell emphasized the Indian spiritualism in art, rather than mere technical aspect. The artists heading the Bengal School - Abnindranath and his disciples were under the influence of extravagant praise from some influential English men. Sister Nivedita insistence also added to this turn of Hindu revivalism that furthered in the art discourse. Moreover, there were also major inputs from Japan during this period. Japan was admired as an Asian country due to its victory over European power Russia in 1905.<sup>31</sup>

Japanese nihogana art movement led by Okajuru stressed on exclusive Japanese cultural identity against the prevalent hegemony of Westernized art and through this movement he wanted to unite Asia against the Western domination. Through this novel discourse of art he wanted to present Indian ancient culture in a prominent place in his ideals of the East. For this he met Abnindranath through sister Nivedita.<sup>32</sup>

The Bengal school of art influenced by theses accounts found true Indian value in ideal Hindu women which was depicted in the paintings of Abnindranath's *Bharatmata* as a true piece of India indigenous art. Other famous work of Abnindranath in this era was depiction of *Sita* in the captivity in Lanka. The other highly appreciated painting in the same vain was Nanda Lal Bose's *Sati* as the symbol of suffering, self sacrifice and devotion. Art during the *Swadeshi* period was influenced by the dominant strand of Hindu revivalist thinking.<sup>33</sup> Hence, painting of *Bharatmata* expressing the cultural values, feelings of Indian spiritual values became the leading instance of this period.

The precursors of extremism and Hindu nationalism go back to 1870s. Shyama Charan Srimani in 1874, who had called for the ancient heritage of art for the service of motherland and projected the chaste Hindu women as a true symbol of that heritage.<sup>34</sup>

This became the dominant discourse of Indian art. Ravi Varmas' depiction of women was often condemned as sensuous and voluptuous. It was contrasted with Abnindranath's vaguely defined female figure of *BharatMata*, thereby firmly excluding any hint of sexuality. Moreover, sister Neveditas' article in the Modern Review issue of 1907, reflected the changed mood. She condemned Varma's painting of *Arjun* and *shubhadra* for depiction of affection as too immodest to be regarded as cultural ideal. The charge of denationalized imitation of western art was interpreted as indicative of surrender to mighty powerful British colonial government.<sup>35</sup>

It was further argued that Ravi Varma's era had already taken many of its themes from Hindu religious traditions and literature. The use of realistic techniques, imported from the west, amounting to depict traditional Hindu religious divinities and its related narratives – which had only the other day ensured Ravi Varmas popularity and reputation as patriot- were no longer considered sufficient then.. What was now demanded was a more valid Indian emotions, its uniqueness for defining exclusive cultural identity equated as before mainly with Hindu themes and values. The key term became authentic *bhava*, indigenous spiritual emotions opposite of materialist western civilization and culture.<sup>36</sup>

The two prominent monthlies indicated the changing concepts in the discourse of art. The one was *Prabasi* and the other was The Modern Review. The features of the paintings of Ravi Varma and other realistic artists were highlighted in these issues. The Modern Review though hailed Ravi Varma as one of the greatest painter of modern India but the same issue also published an article by sister Nevedita - an associate of Vivekananda, characterizing the new mood dominating the further discourse of art in future. She out rightly condemned Varma's *Arjun and Shubhadra* for its un-Indian vulgarity and praised Abnindranath's *Bharatmata*.- a vaguely defined outline of female figure excluding the hint of sexuality. The overt change was the effort to elevate the true artist totally above the popular world of commercialized art.<sup>37</sup>

Partha Mitter notes that Bengal school, under Abindranath Tagore devoted themselves to exploring Indian cultural uniqueness rather than stress on acquisition of political power and focused on unique Indian philosophical content, superior to materialism of the West.<sup>38</sup>

Like Abnindranath Tagore, Ravi Varma was also held by Varma's admirers that he expressed something quintessentially Indian through his representation of India's past and utilized influences, techniques and materials in a thoroughly contemporary manner.<sup>39</sup>

However, the Bengal school of art and its turn towards Hindu nationalism remained prominent

characteristics only during the swadeshi era. It did not influence the entire world of Indian painting even during those days. Later the creative mood turned away from the Hindu nationalist model of Abanindranath cult towards folk art, and paradoxically in 1920s Abanindranath was attracted towards contemporary non-realistic but western art- cubism.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, later on Ravi Varma's work was also critiqued by some cultural theorists who were skeptical of his becoming a culture icon whose popularity acquired a pan-India sweep. They feared that Ravi Varma's vision of Hindu India is now being pushed towards a hardened vision displacing the plurality of Indian society. In 1910, an anonymous disciple of Ravi Varma had pointed out that the charge of denationalized sensuality against Varma was no more than a carryover of alien Victorian standards. Sexual and physical frankness of the women characters of Ravi Varma shocked many Christian Missionaries and those influenced by Victorian morality and values. Hence the opponents were merely advocating an European standpoint in the guise of indigenous values as Ravi Varma's art merely typified academic realism.<sup>41</sup>

Actually, what Varma depicted was the early vision of civilization of the classical times-the mythic Golden age. The critiques questioned- what was the nature of his enterprises within the larger construction of the Indian Nation. Geeta Kapoor argued that the depiction of classical past was set against the medieval foreign influences and psychology of subordination.

#### Conclusion

Hence, these indigenous artists' work presented the powerful cult figures which designed the cultural propaganda through which masses could be mobilized. This disjuncture with the past in the Colonial period was sought to overcome by the art work of Raja Ravi Varma.<sup>42</sup> These themes and forms were accorded a legitimate space as an important part of India's cultural heritage and established India's unique cultural identity in an unprecedented ways.

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