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## Contribution of Raja Ravi Varma in retelling the religious and mythological themes through paintings

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### Abstract

Raja Ravi Varma one of the celebrated artist during 19<sup>th</sup> century and not just during colonial period but also till date we celebrate him. His contribution is considered as an asset to the Indian society. Raja Ravi Varma was the first Indian artist during Colonial India who brought significant changes to the Indian society through his art works. Raja Raja Varma was the uncle of Raja Ravi Varma who noticed the talent of Raja Ravi Varma. Raja Ravi Varma was the first one to understand the European painting by watching the painters who practiced at the family court. Raja Raja Varma initiated Ravi Varma to pursue his interest in arts and supported him. To execute his brilliant talent, Raja Raja Varma arranged a stay at King Ayilyam Thirunal's palace in Thiruvananthapuram.

**Keywords:** mahabharata, ramayana, texts hindu mythology, oraltradition, thiruvananthapuram, manasayatra, phenomenon, shakuntala, tinspiration, beautiful painting

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### Introduction

Raja Ravi Varma one of the celebrated artist during 19<sup>th</sup> century and not just during colonial period but also till date we celebrate him. His contribution is considered as an asset to the Indian society. Raja Ravi Varma was the first Indian artist during Colonial India who brought significant changes to the Indian society through his art works.

Raja Ravi Varma was born in April 29, 1848, at Kilimanoor Palace in Kerala, Travancore. He grew up seeing scholars around him, he belongs to an aristocratic family, where he saw aristocratic supporters of arts and culture. His father was a Sanskrit scholar and his mother Umayamba Thampuratti was a poet and a writer, she re-told the epics and mythological stories of Hinduism to her son, which later reflects on his works later. He was influenced and built interest in Indian mythologies. Since he grew up with Hindu orthodox family and education, he was fluent with Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana and other religious texts and, Hindu mythology and oral tradition was appreciated and were very much initiated in the court of Travancore, since these traditional cultures were the foundation of Kerala.

Raja Raja Varma was the uncle of Raja Ravi Varma who noticed the talent of Raja Ravi Varma. Raja Ravi Varma was the first one to understand the European painting by watching the painters who practiced at the family court. Raja Raja Varma initiated Ravi Varma to pursue his interest in arts and supported him. To execute his brilliant talent, Raja Raja Varma arranged a stay at King Ayilyam Thirunal's palace in Thiruvananthapuram<sup>[1]</sup>. There, Ayilyam Thirunal permitted Raja Ravi Varma to see and observe the French and Italian paintings. In fact he was allowed to sit and watch at the artists in their studios. Dutch artist Theodore Jenson allowed Ravi Varma to watch him working, but he refused to teach Ravi Varma the techniques, yet Rami Varma learnt through watching Theodore working. Even the court artist of Travancore court, Ramaswamy Naidu refused to teach Ravi Varma as well, but Ramaswamy's pupil secretly helped Ravi Varma. Raja Ravi Varma began his career in 1862, he was 14 years then as Ravi Varma got an informal education in art, he was initiated by the King as well as the Minister of Travancore Sir Madhava Rao as a mentor. As he moved around the palace and watched the court painters working, he was eager to work and understand the new medium of oil painting, but then again the artists didn't wanted to reveal the secret of mixing the colour and the techniques used by the artists, this led him disappoint again. Ravi Varma as a struggling artist is considered to be a self-thought artist, by struggling at self-instruction for nine years (1862-70) it seems like he had certain issues with mixing the colours and harmonising the colour tones on the canvas After a lot of dedication spent on learning the new methods and techniques, Ravi Varma got his first commission work in 1870 to paint a group portrait of the family of Kizhakkepat Krishna Menon who was a Sub-judge of the Calicut court



**Fig 1:** The Kizhakkepat Krishna Menon Family, 1870, Oil on Canvas

This work can be considered as the turning point of Ravi Varma's career. Ravi Varma was awarded as the Vira Shringkhala which means Bangle of Honour by the King Ayilyam Thirunal in 1870-71, after the portrait of Ayilyam Thirunal and the Maharani was done. This gave a new platform for Ravi Varma and was appointed as a palace artist at Trivandrum. The years between 1876 and 1878 were dedicated primarily for portraiture. The most important and influential patron for Ravi Varma was Sir T. Madhava Rao, Maharaja of Travancore, Gaekwad of Baroda and Wodeyar of Mysore.

Ravi Varma admired and accepted western values and was fascinated with European painting since Ravi Varma who is considered to be one of the most famous and renowned artists who adopted European values and implemented them for depicting Hindu mythological paintings gained more popularity and paintings were then mass produced. His works mainly focused and emphasised on the idea of pan India which reflected strongly in his works.

### **of Religious and Mythological Themes in Raja Ravi Varma's Paintings**

One could see the impact of Ravi Varma's childhood teachings through his paintings which reflect the Hindu religious and mythological subjects present in his paintings. Ravi Varma had a strong cultural and traditional upbringing and his influence of Tanjore tradition are the major source to understand his mythological paintings. Before doing the oil paintings on canvases, Ravi Varma did Kerala traditional mural paintings on the walls of temples and palaces, he also painted small Hindu deities and he sculpted ivory statues of Hindu Gods. It suggests that Ravi Varma's usage of colours and medium were still traditional for the fact that during the 1830s and 1840s European colours and brushes were still unknown in Travancore. Before starting to do paintings with the new medium, Ravi Varma had to understand and have the experience to deal with the new style and the oil colours. Yet with the first commission work (Fig.1) he got fame and was well appreciated and Ravi Varma is sort of trying to understand the new medium. Still Ravi Varma was a phenomenon during his time, who was considered as one of the famous Indian painters then and still.

Ravi Varma created new styles of paintings which reflected the elements of photo-illusionistic paintings, and with his skilful handling of the new medium, which were elements taken from the Western paintings in nineteenth century India. As mentioned in the introduction that between 1876 to 1878 Ravi Varma devoted primarily for portraiture, it was well and good enough also he was commissioned for more royal portraits but Ravi Varma's most important turning point took when he shifted from the portraits to the new style of approach implemented in his works. The real fame got through when the new kind of religious and mythological paintings were started painted by Ravi Varma where the paintings were very much of Indian and for the first time ever the Hindu Gods and Goddesses were given human faces. These new Indian mythological paintings attracted patronage and gained popularity across the Nation and these paintings sort of brought tangibility through Hindu deities. Apart from photo-realism in these mythological paintings these paintings were educative for those who were unable to read epics, puranas and through these religious paintings it not only educated illiterates but also reintroduced the forgotten Hindu epics and puranas. They became familiar to the middle class people and were popular enough. It is fascinating to notice the European academism implemented in the Indian theme based painting. These paintings later were available and were circulated in India through prints and magazines. As Tapati Guha Thakurta mentions in her article that, "Ravi Varma was himself a poet and also have composed his own shlokas in Malayalam on Hindu Gods and Goddesses as an inspiration to mythological paintings and also he

have composed one Sanskrit based Mahakavya called '*Manasayatra*'. Ravi Varma remained as an inspiration throughout his career for the reason that he chose to work on Hindu mythology, the subject matter he chose remains an important aspect. his paintings looked photo realism because he used photography when the live models were not available, this allowed his work appear photo realistic.

He painted mythological subjects taking scenes from Indian epics like, Ramayana, Mahabharata and puranas, he tried to capture those mythological scenes in his paintings. With that, he not only portrayed mythological paintings but also his paintings had a strong pan-Indian impact on the society through the paintings. For example the painting Lakshmi (Fig.2) where he has made the Goddess Lakshmi stand on a lotus flower where she is wearing beautiful saree which represents the culture of Indian typical dress code of a women, here he chose to paint a national saree which represents the entire India rather specifying the saree to a specific region or state.



**Fig 2:** Lakshmi

Raja Ravi Varma gained more popularity through painting the Indian epics and Mythology which was a turning point in his career in response to fame and success, his first two award winning paintings gave him a new path to paint further more mythological paintings.

Ravi Varma was well known for his depiction of female figures in his paintings, taking one such beautiful painting is that, Shakuntala removing thorn from her foot (fig.3), gives us an idea of how Ravi Varma was passionate about dealing feminine beauty. In this painting we can see how Ravi Varma has captured the moment and composed it beautifully, where Shakuntala is posed in such a way that she is removing thorn from her foot, but one interesting thing is, to connect the situation with the composition of the painting where Shakuntala wants to see king Dushyant whom she just met in the forest and she pretends as if she got pricked by a thorn and as she tries to remove the thorn from her foot she looks back and tries to see Dushyant, here she is unable to take her eyes off him. is trying to look at king Dushyant and when she can't take her eyes of him and that makes such a beautiful composition in Ravi Varma's canvas. Also the composition is composed in a way that the two women's are busy talking to each other, where Shakuntala rests her hand on her friend's shoulder. The landscape is dealt with a pleasant light blue which enhances the emotion to the situation. Her simple plane saffron attire and flower jewelleryes her as a forest maiden from the Kalidasa epic The pose of Shakuntala is highly influenced from the theatre, according to Rupika Chawla and other scholars states that such pose can be understood and analysed and can be painted only those who knows dance.

Ravi Varma's way of approach in his paintings can be more understood by the way he treats the female figures, female figures are prominent in his works that his female subjects are inspired by not just the aristocratic ladies who posed for him but also those Victorian and French women of Neo-classical paintings. Ravi Varma's female figures are idealized figures which are represented regionally and nationally, those women's who posed for Varma's painting became ideal and national prototypes and continuously representing pan-Indian approach. In the painting Hamsa and Damayanti (Fig.4), in this painting Damayanti is perfect prototype of gorgeously attired like a south Indian lady. This particular painting is unique in



**Fig 3:** Shakuntala removing thorn from foot, 1898



**Fig 4:** Damayanti and Hamsa

a way that the elements of European methods which has been used in his mythological scenes which satisfies public attention. This painting depicts a scene from the Vana Parva book from Mahabharata, where Damayanti is informed about accomplishments of Nala by the swan. According to Tapati Guha Thakurta, she states that, Damayanti's expression completely transforms her into an idealised symbol of women hood, and swan creates a romantic mood and a mythical character of Damayanti. The marble columns and marble steps in the painting suggests a luxurious palatial setting and also shows European influence as well. Damayanti's beauty in this painting comes from the radiance of her gold and red south Indian sari wrapped around her body gives a beautiful effect. Raja Ravi Varma painted different series of Damayanti's story, but this depiction of Damayanti is one of the best and well admired by the public.

Raja Ravi Varma also painted lot of Krishna paintings, one of the most striking painting is the "Krishna freeing his imprisoned parents" (fig.5), where Krishna is freeing his imprisoned parents. Here if see the composition, Krishna is hugged by his mother Devaki and he is standing like a child on the other hand he has done everything he has to do for his parents and at the same time Krishna is giving order by pointing out at the blacksmith to remove the chain quickly.

One of the most important aspect in this painting is that, usually we see the absence of light in Raja Ravi Varma's works, but this painting one of the best example to show the depiction of light coming from the outside source and which creates shadow everywhere inside. There is a cloth which kept on the table which is brought by Krishna to his mother to wear before they leave the prison, this something which interests the composition. Rupika Chawla states that there is a western influence in the painting, through the depiction of Devika and Krishna which resembles to the Virgin Mary and the Jesus.



**Fig 5:** Krishna Freeing His Imprisoned Parents after Killing Kamsa 1905-08

Ravi Varma was excellent in composing the mythological scene in his painting with connection to the real life, because when we see the painting Jatayu Vadham (fig.6), Ravi Varma has captured the most beautiful scene in his painting from Ramayana which emphasis the *Bhibatsa rasa* this particular scene marks an important scene which has taken from Ramayana, where Sita is been abducted by Ravana. When Ravi Varma was making this painting, he was in his home at Kilimanoor, he had to choose models to paint Jatayu Vadham and for the character Ravana he selected a strong, tall, healthy and stocky man which perfectly suited the character and for Sita he decided to paint on of Varma's niece who was young and a beautiful girl, as soon she was called her friends and other cousins started giggling at her and that made her feel shy and started blushing, as she felt shy she covered her face with her hands and that made Ravi Varma stop her at that moment and Varma then captured that moment in his canvas and decided that this is how Sita will be depicted. This painting is beautifully depicted, where it clearly shows that how brilliant was Ravi Varma at capturing the moments in his work. in the composition, Ravi Varma's crown has fallen down and Jatayu's wing is been cut off where the feathers are shattered around, Ravana's necklace is broken and these detailed work shows the fight between Jatayu and Ravana, Ravana's facial expression is perfectly depicted in the painting. The background is less greenery and more of dry where it relates and connect with situation. Ravi Varma is very good at depicting facial expression and bringing different emotions within the painting.



**Fig 6: Jatayu Vadham 1906**

In the painting titled Rama threatens the ocean God Varuna on his not making way for him (fig.7) in this painting Ravi Varma has treated the landscape and the atmosphere in such a way that, it evokes the mood of the action which is perfectly seen in the painting. Rama is angry and his anger is reflected in the elements, in the turbulence of surging sea and dark sky by lightening. His feet is placed firmly on the solid rock, the treatment of drapery is swept back by the wind all these depiction in the painting is presented in a nice manner just beyond appreciation. According to Partha Mitter, it is said that when Varma was struggling with the problem of capturing the effect of lighting for this painting, real lightening flashed across the sky which gave him the inspiration and solved the problem and hence he created such a beautiful painting.



**Fig 7: Rama Threatens the Ocean God Varuna on His not Making Way for Him 1906-08**

In the painting Krishna's Embassy to Duryodhana (fig.8), this painting is of court interior, here, Krishna is sited with great comfort by resting his foot on small footstool here Krishna is beautifully painted by showing calmness in his face and this painting is about the conversation between Shri Krishna and Dhritarashtra, where at the court of Kaurava told to Dhritarashtra that, "The Pandavas are prepared for the war but they desire peace. They wish to live in happiness under you. Treat them also as your sons and devise a honourable solution, but Dhritarashtra did not agree. In the painting as Dhritarashtra was not convinced by Krishna's advice, Krishna stops on of his attendant holding his right hand and his attendant with sword in his right hand is ready to attack over, but the Krishna stops him. In this painting all the figures in the composition are dressed in a royal attire. Shri Krishna is wearing a yellow dhoti with a red and golden bordered cloth over his shoulder. Here what is interesting in this painting is that, when Raja Ravi Varma just left Mysore he was presented with a beautiful nine-yard cloth by the Maharaja of Mysuru. And same decorated cloth has been placed on the Krishna's shoulder in the painting indicating that worth of the gift by the Maharaja.



**Fig 8:** Krishna's Embassy to Duryodhana 1906

Overall what one can see in Ravi Varma's painting is that, the understanding of romanticism, symbolism and sensuality from European Academic implemented in his paintings strongly appears. What Tapati Guha states is that, "The patronage of the Indian elite, however, proved to be the more vital and continuous stimulus to Ravi Varma's output of 'puranic paintings'. Ravi Varma's strength was in bringing the deities and mythological characters into the earthly realm, painting them in settings and clothing from the world he knew. He gave human faces to the Gods and Goddesses for the first time and paintings which are highly Indian in the concepts. He paid attention to the aesthetic elements of Indians in different regions, including physiognomy, costume and jewellery that he thought to be most appropriate for grounding subjects in reality.

Hence, Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was a self-thought artist from an aristocratic family from Kerala, is a celebrated artists during colonial rule who was master in newly introduced medium of oil paintings during colonial period in India and its natural techniques. Started with portraiture and genre paintings, he achieved and got recognised through his mythological paintings addressing the whole nation, through bringing the harmony within the castes in India and believing in unity. Ravi Varma's works was wildly popular and his works expressed the emotion. He was commissioned by various rulers of India, most often were by the Gayakwads of Baroda and Wodeyars of Mysore. His contribution to the Mysore palace has left an remarkable memories. Hence Ravi Varma's contribution as a modern Indian artist was recognised as an independent professional artist, who got commissions from elite and received, several awards in art exhibitions, became famous through his mythological paintings and gained popularity through a commercial mass-marketing of art through illustrations, advertisements, calendar pictures and cheap prints.

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