



MR. RAVI VARMA.

Ravi Varma Family Series Book I.

Ravi Varma and His Art.



EDITED BY

S. A. PILLAI B. A & B. L.



With a Foreword by

Hon'ble. Dewan Bahadur

M. KRISHNAN NAIR A.V.L., B. A & B. L.

LAW MEMBER, MADRAS.

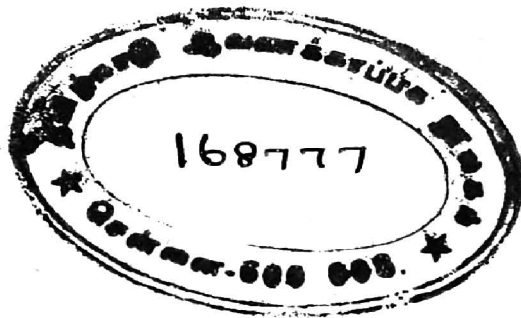


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Dedicated To
The Noble Family of Kilimanoor.

R aphael and Rubens of the artistic West
 A nd Angelo, with will creative blest,
 J ust raised the cosmic veil where slumbered Past
 A nd touched its lids, with living colours fast.
 R enowned for beauty, Venad bore a son,
 A n equal who inspired from self hath won,
 V oluble praise from those that arts adore,
 I n all her shapes, nor caring race nor shore.
 V eiled deep in times remote, eternal lies
 A nd shines the Ideal — Truth — the painter's prize.
 A roused by this light, thou took'st thy wooing brush,
 R idst scenes of splendours' soul-enticing hush,
 M nd brought to earth, in waves of light and shade
 A rchaic supernal feats, old India played.
 A re gift is thine mankind to please and teach,
 R o raise them high through tints that sermons preach.
 T n thee the world hath lost a glorious soul
 I et firm, through brush and hues to attain thy goal,
 S hough beams thy name in Venad's glowing scroll.
 T

C. S. P. P.

Foreword.

I have been requested by Mr. S. A. Pillai to write this Foreword to his book "Ravi Varma and his Art" and I do so with pleasure.

Ravi Varma was an artist of world-wide reputation. He was one of the greatest painters that India ever produced and probably the greatest painter in modern India. He painted many scenes and personages from the great Indian Epics—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—and by painting these pictures in his oleographic press in Bombay, made them available for sale to the public in large numbers and at comparatively small prices. These pictures now adorn the walls of many homes in Southern India. Ravi Varma's pictures have contributed largely to a revival of religious feelings amongst the Hindus. Paintings like "Ekadesi Mahatmyam" and "Seeta Vanavasa" stir the religious emotions of the pious Hindu to their very depths. Ravi Varma excelled in delineation of woman's beauty and some of his works like "Mohini" and "Sakuntala" are master-pieces. "All his heroines are of the slim elegant type bristling with vitality and vigour."

Ravi Varma was patronised by Viceroys, Governors and Maha Rajas. His paintings which were exhibited

in Europe and America were admired and won gold medals. He also amassed wealth by his art which is a rare occurrence in the life of an Indian Artist.

Ravi Varma's name and fame will live for ever. And Mr. S. A. Pillai has done well in writing and publishing this brief history of his life and works.

Madras }
13-11-28. }

M. Krishnan Nair.

P r e f a c e .

The present volume is the first of the series—Ravi Varma Family Series—proposed to be published by me about the careers of the famous artists of the Kilimanoor House. This family is well-known for the artistic talents displayed by some of its members from the time they settled in Travancore. The great personality that towered among this group and brought fame and glory to the family in India is certainly Raja Ravi Varma whose life I have attempted to present herein with an essay on his art.

The other members of the House whose lives I propose to chronicle in succeeding volumes are Mr. C. Raja Raja Varma, Mangala Bai Thampuratti, Messrs. Rama Varma Raja of Mavelikara and K. R. Ravi Varma, the brother, sister, son and nephew of Raja Ravi Varma respectively. The public may well be able to judge from the few illustrative pictures I have given in the present publication what great painters are Mr. C. Raja Raja Varma and his sister. Messrs. Rama Varma Raja and K. R. Ravi Varma are truly chips of the old block as evinced by their artistic productions.

Here, I beg to acknowledge my indebtedness and express my thanks to Her Gracious Highness the Maha

Rani Regent, Houble. Dewan Bahadur M. Krishnan Nair, the Law Member of the Madras Government, the Chief of Kilimanoor, M. E. Watts Esquire, the Dewan of Travancore, Messrs. Rama Varma Raja of Mavelikara, K. R. Ravi Varma, Thrivikraman Thampi B. A. E. Masilamoney B. A., B. Sc., C. V. Ramaswami Pillai of Quilon and C. S. Padmanabha Pillai of Trivandrum for the help I have derived in various directions. Mr. K. G. Sankar of the S. R. V. Press who is solely responsible for the neat printing and get-up of the book deserves my warm thanks.

Quilon,

S. A. Pillai.

22nd Nov. 1928.

Ravi Varma and His Art.

Ravi Varma.

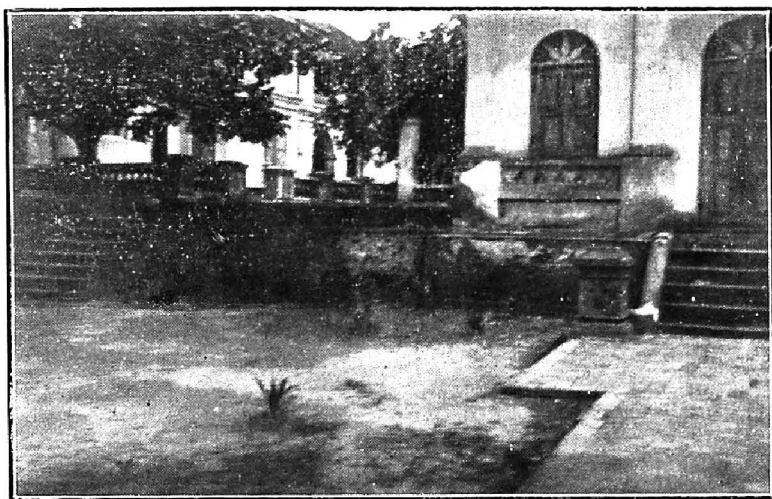
“He is a portion of the loveliness,
Which once he made more lovely”.

Shelley.

History has shown that the Fine Arts flourish in an atmosphere of peace and prosperity. Times surcharged with warring passions are uncongenial for their growth. In all ages, the patrons of music, painting, and poetry, have been those noble souls who, free from the turmoils and vicissitudes of life, have had ample leisure and resources at their command to develop them. Can one think of dignified pastimes when the cannon's mouth is pointed at one's breast! Travancore in common with other countries similarly situated has witnessed such times, but the curtain of unrest may be said to have fallen with the demise of the young Maha Raja Bala Rama Varma. The turning point in the history of the country is the year 1858 when Mr. T. Madhava Row, (afterwards Sir. T. Madhava Row), became the Dewan of the State. For a period of fourteen years, this eminent statesman filled the ministerial chair. The administration in the capable hands of Sir Madhava Row,

became so progressive and enlightened that before he quitted the state he had the unique honour and privilege of securing for it the proud appellation of "Model State". Peace and plenty reigned in the land. A new energy and a new spirit vitalised the nation. A spontaneous manifestation of new life characterised all branches of human activities. This period saw the blossoming into full efflorescence of two kindred talents—a great painter in the person of Mr. Ravi Varma Koil Thampuran of Kilimanoor and a great poet, aptly called the Kalidasa of Kerala, in the person of Mr. Kerala Varma Valia Koil Thampuran C. S. I. We propose to pursue the fortunes of the great artist in the following pages.

Ravi Varma, the Prince of Artists, was born on the 29th of April 1848 in his ancestral palace at Kilimanoor. His father was Ezhumavil Bhattathiri, an orthodox and learned Namboodiri Brahmin of a highly respectable and well-to-do family. His mother Uma Amba Bai was a gifted lady. She had a very refined ear for music and surpassed all the other members of the family in this line. She was a bit a poetess also and had composed certain poems in Malayalam. Ravi Varma was the eldest of three brothers and a sister, one of his brothers Mr. C. Raja Raja Varma, being a great painter like himself. The sister Mangala Bai is still living and is gifted with artistic and musical tastes in a remarkable degree. She has not laid down the brush yet, though past sixty



KILIMANOOR PALACE.



KILIMANOOR PALACE.

two and at times gives lessons to such of the junior members as have artistic tastes.

Kilimanoor, the birth place of the Artist, literally means the land of the parrot and the deer. It is situated nearly seven miles to the north-east of Attingal and twenty-seven miles to the north of Trivandrum. It has an area of seventeen square miles with a population of eight thousand souls. Kilimanoor was, in 1729, granted to the family in perpetuity with all the revenues including royalties in recognition of the heroic services rendered to the Travancore Royal House by Kerala Varma, an ancestor of the Kilimanoor House.

In those early days, Travancore was in a state of unrest due to frequent rebellions. There was no government worth the name. The central authority was ridden rough shod over by powerful feudal barons. Even the Royal Household was not free from the attacks of these recalcitrants. In one of such risings, it was found necessary to send away the Rani, the sister of the reigning Maha Raja, and her infant son from Trivandrum to Attingal for their better safety. Kerala Varma, the consort of the Rani, led the little band of Nair sepoy who formed the escort. The royal party was surprised and attacked by the rebels who were lying in ambush near Kazzhakuttam. It would have been absolutely impossible to save the Rani and the prince but for the bravery and

resourcefulness of Kerala Varma, her husband. He held the enemy at bay for some time and contrived to send by stealth his royal spouse and son to Attingal by a bye-path. The handful of sepoys, inspired by his courage and gallantry, rose equal to the occasion and fought so bravely that the rebels were routed completely. The day was won, but the hero was lost. He received a fatal sword-cut across his belly and had to be taken to his disconsolate wife at Attingal to take his last farewell of her. It was in grateful recognition of this act of supreme and heroic self-sacrifice that the estate was granted to the Kilimanoor family.

The Kilimanoor Koil Thampurans were originally natives of Beypur in Malabar. Their northern home is known as "Thattarikovilakam". It appears that the ancestors of this family were invited to come and settle in Travancore for the sole purpose of marrying the ladies of the Royal house and for assisting the Maha Rajas in suppressing rebellions then rife in the country. All the sovereigns of the state from Unni Kerala Varma to the present Maha Rani Regent are descendants of the Koil Thampurans of Kilimanoor. It may be mentioned here that Her Highness the Maha Rani Regent is a grand daughter and His Highness the present Maha Raja is the son of a nephew, of the Artist. The Kilimanoor House has been loyally and honourably connected with the Travancore Royal family for well-nigh two centuries



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M. Kerala Varma C. S. I. By Ravi Varma.

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The Artist's education commenced under the family Sanskrit tutor who gave him lessons as was the wont in that family. The Artist did not make much progress in this direction. He was born to shine in another sphere. He took greater delight in acquiring the rudiments of drawing and painting than in mastering the classics. He made drawings with charcoal on the walls and floors of his mansion and was even considered a nuisance. His uncle Raja Raja Varma was a painter of considerable merits. Maha Raja Swathi Thirunal who died in 1022 had once invited to his court one Alagiri Naidu, a native of Madura, considered to be the best painter of the day in India. A European artist also visited the court at this time and painted some pictures for the Maha Raja. Raja Raja Varma was a pupil of Alagiri Naidu, but the pupil in due course excelled the tutor. The Uncle-Artist watched with pleasure and appreciated the inherent genius and taste displayed by the boy-artist untutored by any body. He made arrangements for rearing this rare plant and initiating him into the mysteries of painting. European colours and brushes were not available then in this remote corner of Travancore and Raja Raja Varma had to make his own colours and brushes from flowers, leaves &c. Ravi Varma soon learnt the elements of painting from his uncle.

Raja Raja Varma visited Trivandrum with his nephew and pupil who was barely thirteen and presented

the budding artist to His Highness the Maha Raja with some of his productions. His Highness was much pleased with the works and found great promise in the boy. Royal patronage was extended to the royal protege right royally. At about this time, one Theodore Jenson, an eminent English portrait painter visited Travancore. His Highness introduced the young artist to the European painter and requested him to give some lessons to Ravi Varma. Mr. Jenson allowed Ravi Varma to be present when he painted his pictures. The latter was struck with the combinations of colours made by the foreign artist and the effect produced by him so subtly. Ravi Varma followed the methods and directions chalked out by this great painter.

After a long course of persevering preparation and experiment, Ravi Varma made his debut in the Fine Arts Exhibition at Madras in 1873 with the picture of a Nair Lady at her Toilette. The picture won for him the Governor's Gold Medal. Ravi Varma had a powerful rival in one Ramaswamy Naidu of the Madura Naicks. This man was a protege of His Highness the late Visakam Thirunal Maha Raja, then the First Prince. Ravi Varma had none to turn to for guidance or for clearing a doubt. Doubts and difficulties in the mixture and use of the new colours were daily occuring. Ramaswamy Naidu was already jealous of the rise of the Artist and would give no help at all. Once in a weak moment he approached Naidu for some guidance, but



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H. H. The Senior Rani C. I. by Ravi Varma.

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Naidu only curtly refused. Ravi Varma was touched to the quick by the flat refusal, and resolved to exert himself to excel Naidu at any cost. Indeed he did excel his rival and eclipsed him in a short time.

In January 1873, the Artist married a lady of the Mavelikara Royal family, a younger sister of the late Senior Rani C. I. He thus became more closely attached to the Maha Raja with this marital tie and came under the influence of Mr Kerala Varma C. S. I., the Consort of Her Highness the Senior Rani, we have already referred to. Ravi Varma was allowed to have a studio in the Palace and became a confidential friend and companion of His Highness the Maha Raja. His Highness encouraged the rising Artist in all possible ways and advised him that he should himself go to Madras for the Exhibition. The Artist accordingly visited Madras for the first time. He had an interview with Lord Hobart, the Governor, who eulogised him for his works and advised him to persevere and make a name for himself. The picture that won for him the Gold Medal was subsequently sent to the Great International Exhibition at Vienna where it fetched a Gold Medal and a certificate.

Ravi Varma again won the Gold Medal in the next year's Exhibition at Madras for the painting of a Tamil lady playing on a Sarbat. This picture with two other paintings was presented to His Majesty the King

Emperor when, as the Prince of Wales, His Majesty visited India in 1875. His Majesty expressed his admiration of the works and said that for an Artist who had no European training, the paintings were highly creditable.

The first classical picture of interest the Artist painted was that of Sakuntala's Love-letter to King Dushyanta (1878) which won the Governor's Gold Medal. It was immediately purchased by the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, the then Governor. The Sanskrit education he had received enabled him to find congenial subjects in the great epics and dramas of India, which no Artist had attempted yet to depict on canvas. He had the honour of painting a life-size portrait of the Duke from life at the Government House next year. It was one of his most successful works and compares very favourably with the portraits painted by European Artists of note hanging side by side. The Duke was particularly struck with the rapidity of the Artist's work and once observed that though he had given no less than eighteen sittings to an eminent continental Artist, he had not produced half so faithful a likeness as the Indian Artist had done. The work enhanced his reputation as a first class portrait painter all over India.

A month or two later, his patron the Maha Raja died and was succeeded by His Highness the Visakom Thirunal Maha Raja. The deceased Maha Raja was a



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DRAUPADI & SIMHIKA.
BY RAVI VARMA.

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sincere friend, admirer, and patron of the Artist. It was an open secret in those days that there was no love lost between the Maha Raja and the First Prince. The Artist was unfortunately not in the good books of the First Prince. Nevertheless His Highness being a person who recognised worth and genius in whom-so-ever found encouraged him, though not in the same degree as before. The Artist painted Sita's ordeal of banishment by Rama at the suggestion of the new Maha Raja. Raja Sir T. Madhava Row, who happened to visit Travancore then, saw the picture and purchased it immediately. It was exhibited in the Poona Fine Arts Exhibition of 1880 and gained the Gaekwar's Gold Medal and attracted much notice. Sir James Fergusson, the Governor of Bombay, who was highly pleased with the work, finding that it belonged to Sir. T. Madhava Row and was not available for sale, ordered the Artist to produce a replica which was duly executed and presented to the Governor. Sir James sent him a costly album of the photographs of the English Royal Family as a mark of appreciation of the Artist's worth and ability. Ravi Varma gained reputation as a painter of Indian Puranic and mythological subjects and he was invited to Baroda to undertake some important works.

The next tour he undertook was in 1885 to Mysore at the invitation of His Highness the late Maha Raja Sir. Chama Rajendra Wodeyar, who was passion-

ately fond of music and painting. The portraits of His Highness and children were executed during his stay of three months in Mysore.

In 1888, the Artist was commissioned by His Highness the Gaekwar to paint for adorning his new palace a set of fourteen pictures, representing chosen scenes from the Ramayana and the Maha Barata. He found it necessary to pay a visit to North India with a view to study, if possible, the ancient costume worn by Hindu princes and princesses from old paintings or statues. He visited Malwa, Raiaputana, Delhi, Agra, Lahore, Benares, Allahabad, Calcutta and other places but the visit was not useful to him in this direction.

On return from the tour he began to execute the order and finished the fourteen pictures in the course of two years. The pictures were taken to Bombay en-route to Baroda and were exhibited for the public. Here he received the sad news of the sudden death of his wife at Mavelikara. It was some time before he recovered from the rude and sudden shock he experienced from this calamity. The Artist then proceeded to Baroda with the pictures and presented them to his Highness. Sir. T. Madhava Row suggested to the Artist that if he established an oleographic press and printed his pictures, there would be a large demand for the prints. Accordingly he set up an oleographic press at



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RADHA & KRISHNA. BY RAVI VARMA.

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PRINCESS & THE FOWLER BY RAVI VARMA.
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MR. K. R. RAVI VARMA, ARTIST.

Bombay and most of his pictures have been printed from this press.

The Artist contributed a set of ten pictures to the Chicago exhibition in 1892 and gained two medals and diplomas. The American papers spoke very highly of these pictures.

In 1894, the Artist had to undertake a second tour to North India as the guardian and cicerone of late H. H. Martanda Varma B. A. the enlightened First Prince of Travancore.

Their Excellencies Lord and Lady Curzon visited Travancore in 1900. The Artist and his brother had an interview with their Excellencies at Trivandrum and showed some of their pictures. The Viceroy was much impressed with the pictures and expressed his pleasure at finding such advanced art. He also observed that the pictures compared favourably with the best professional work in as much as they were characterised by a grace and freedom from stiffness, rarely found in Indian art. Lady Curzon was presented with two pictures as a memento of their visit.

The Artist was invited to Udaipur by His Highness the Maha Rana to get the portraits of himself and four of his renowned ancestors painted by the Artist

from old paintings preserved at his court, the most prominent of them being Maha Rana Pratap Singh, the greatest hero Rajaputana has ever produced and a contemporary of Akbar.

Ravi Varma sold his rights over his press and settled in his palace at Kilimanoor permanently. He had won his laurels and established his name as a great painter in three continents. He had amassed a fortune from his profession.

He was commissioned to paint a portrait of Sir Arthur Havelock, the predecessor of Lord Ampthill for the Government House at Madras in 1904. Lord Ampthill in unveiling the portrait paid a warm tribute to the skill and daring of the artist who had painted it from memory, aided only by a photograph. His Excellency said "there are few artists of the eminence of Raja Ravi Varma who could perform such a feat so successfully or who would even dare to attempt it".

Ravi Varma had the unique honor of getting the Kaiseri Hind Gold Medal among the recipients of Birthday Honours in 1904. Mr. C. Raja Raja Varma in referring to it recorded in his diary as follows:—
"The honor bestowed on my brother by Government has come unsought. We have never spoken about it to any body, nor have we made any serious efforts in



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SAKUNTALA'S LOVE LETTER. BY RAVI VARMA.

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FLOWER WOMAN.
BY C. RAJA RAJA VARMA.

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securing it. It is the first time in the history of India that an artist's merits have been thus rewarded. The distinction bestowed on my brother cannot fail to conduce to the progress of art in India".

Ravi Varma was again invited to Mysore to execute some work for the newly built palace there. Both the brothers went. As however Raja Raja Varma was affected with some kidney disease at Mysore, they had to return to Madras for immediate treatment. In spite of the best medical aid, he succumbed to the disease. Besides being a brother, he was the right hand man in the professional work of the Artist. By consanguinity, affinity, taste, temperament, profession &c., they were inseparable companions and were like twin flowers on a single stock. It was an irreparable loss which he was not able to bear and he returned to Kilimanoor immediately.

The next year he spent in executing the work entrusted by His Highness the Maha Raja of Mysore. His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales (His Majesty the present King Emperor) visited Madras this year. His Excellency, Lord Ampthill invited the Artist to Madras where he was introduced to His Royal Highness. He was invited again to Mysore in connection with the visit of His Royal Highness and he accompanied the royal party as the "court-artist" in all shikkari expeditions. He painted scenes from elephant hunts and the

camp life in the Mysore forests. The European Artists who accompanied the royal party were amazed at the rapidity and originality of execution displayed by Ravi Varma in sketching the scenes and painting them as it were in the twinkling of an eye.

He returned from Mysore with all honours. His over-work, his long journeys, and the domestic calamities he had to sustain one after other told upon his health. He fell a victim to diabetis. He gave up all idea of travel and practically retired from his profession. Since his return from Mysore the only important function in which he took any active part was the marriage of his grand-daughter, Her Highness the Maha Rani Regent with Mr. Rama Varma, a nephew of Mr. Kerala Varma C. S. I. the late Valia Coil Thampuran of Travancore, He began to lose his health by degrees. At last a diabetis carbuncle made its appearance to which he succumbed on 9th October 1906 at Kilimanoor.

The news of his death spread like wild fire through out the length and breadth of the country. It was a shock to many of his friends. It was a serious loss to Travancore and the Royal House. The most brilliant star in the Artistic firmament disappeared leaving a vacuum which still remains unfilled to this day. Centuries may roll on in dim oblivion of the past, but the name of Ravi Varma will remain enshrined in fame as a great Painter of India.



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INDIAN GYPSIES BY RAVI VARMA.

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VEGETABLE SELLER.
BY C. RAJA RAJA VARMA.

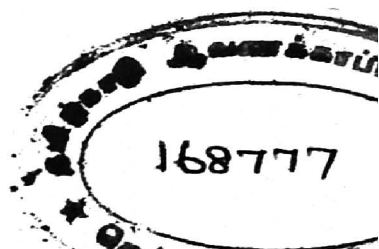
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By nature he was of a mild and gentle disposition, very kind and liberal hearted ever ready to help the needy and the poor. He was never proud of the name he had made, but admitted that as his knowledge increased he was able to realise how little he knew of the great secrets of nature which lie hidden from human ken. He was a true prince and a prince among Artists.

He had a commanding appearance and was every inch a gentleman and a prince in the true acceptation of the phrase. The sweetness of his temper as well as the myriad virtues that adorn his inner self endeared him to every one. In his case it was not indeed distance that lent enchantment to the view. The more one knew him, the greater became one's appreciation of the artist, the scholar, and the gentleman.

"Till the future dares
Forget the past, his fate and fame shall be
An echo and a light unto eternity."

—:0:—





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REVIRIE. BY RAVI VARMA.

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PART II.

The Art of Ravi Varma.

Ravi Varma is best known as a painter in oil colours. In his later days he practised water colour painting too and acquired considerable skill and mastery in this branch of the art. The Kilimanoor family possesses some of his works, which being the best of the kind, would challenge comparison with those of any other professional artist.

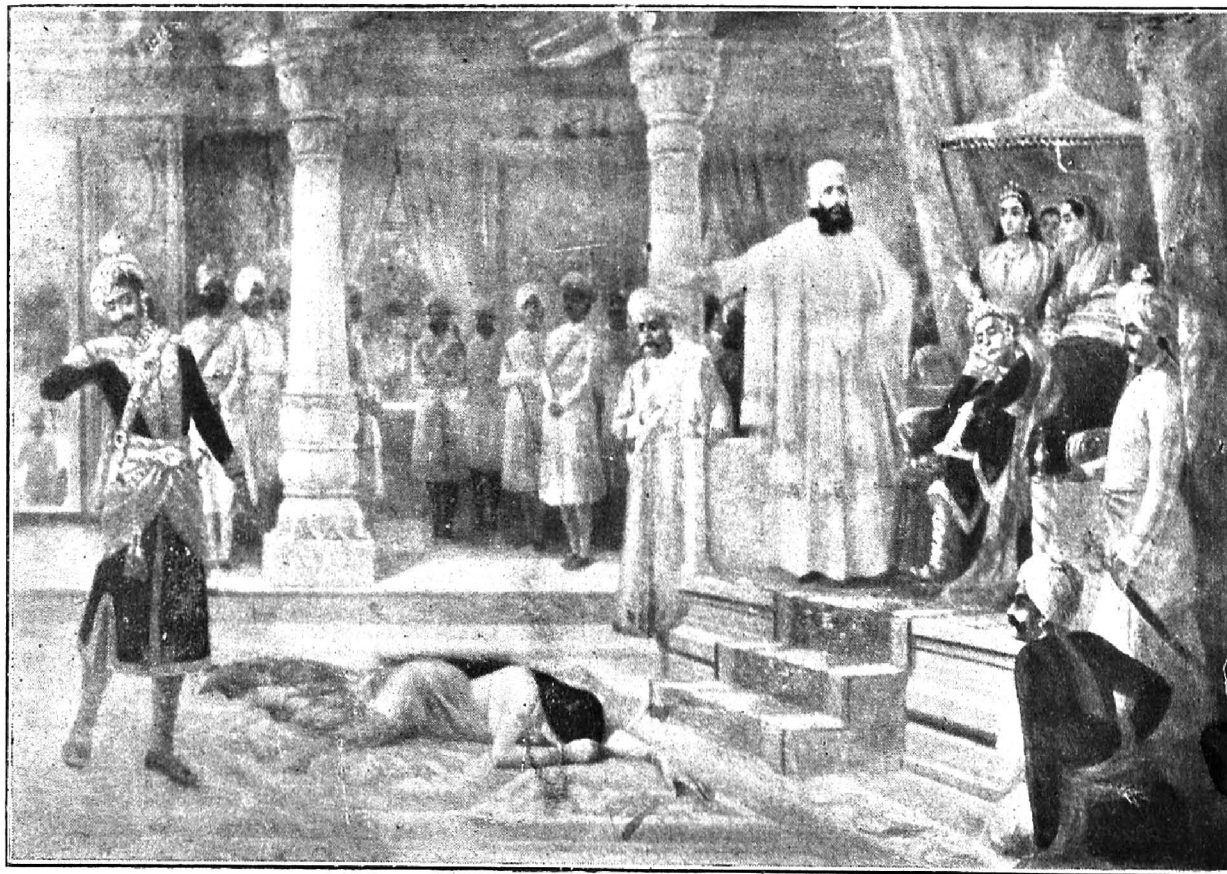
The works of Ravi Varma fall under two main divisions: i. portraits including studies from contemporary life and ii. mythological or Puranic representations. His ability in portrait painting has never been questioned. That his achievement in this line were true to life and of brilliant execution was acknowledged by both professionals and connoisseurs. Indeed he was the foremost Indian Portrait painter of the day.

Gifted with an extra-ordinary imagination and a true insight into human nature, he gave his portraits a brilliant setting which produced magnificent effects. The picture of Sivaji is a typical example of this group. A contemporary of the great painter has recorded the following opinion about this picture.

“The present work has more than fulfilled the

public expectations and carries one back to historical events of the seventeenth century. In the picture the Great Sivaji is represented as seated on a fair black charger with his drawn sword, Bhawani, in his hand, and accompanied by three of his trusted followers ready to start on an expedition. His sharp eyes his aquiline nose, the firmly set lips, and the fair but sun-burnt complexion which according to the historians, characterised the great hero, who found an extensive empire. are portrayed in a most natural and admirable manner reflecting great credit on the artist. A long white muslin-coat conceals the coat of mail which he always wore. In the back ground rises the Fort of Partapgarh, which is so nicely portrayed that it can at once be recognised by those who have visited Satara. Sivaji has descended from the hill, evidently with the object of routing an army of whose advance he has heard. Down on the sides of the hill, which looks grand and majestic, is seen a band of Mowalis, the sturdy and war-like race of whom his army was composed, proudly lifting their spears. The whole scene is full of life and spirit and reminds one of the war like days of Sivaji. The drawing, composition and colouring are admirably done and Mr. Ravi Varma is to be congratulated on his success in producing such a faithful representation of the Great Ruler.

There has been a great deal of criticism for and against Ravi Varma's mythological works. He appears to have derived the cue for choosing scenes from mytho-



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PANCHALI VASTRAKSHEPA. BY RAVI VARMA.

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LADY WITH THE PARROT.
BY C. RAJA RAJA VARMA.

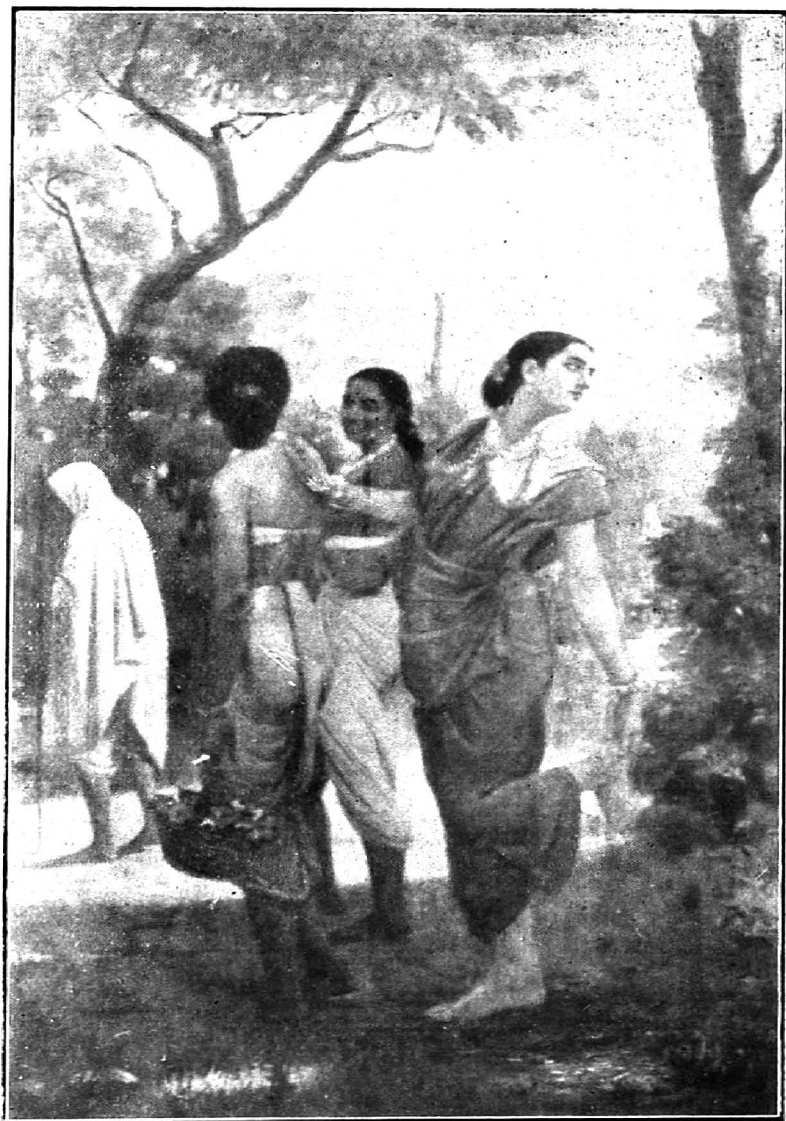
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logy from a notable speech made by lord Napier while he was the Governor of Madras. His excellency said "in all schools of painting there is a style which deals with the ideal and the allegorical. In this method..... the virtues, the graces, the sciences, the arts, the powers of nature, the heavenly bodies and other abstract conceptions and agencies are clothed in human forms which owe their majesty or their terrors to the Artist, and which are employed in actions and offices proper to their characters. The painters of Europe in compositions of this nature, have largely employed the apparatus of the Greek mythology; but Greece itself cannot supply ideal figures more calculated to enchant or awe the mind than those which adorn the mythology of the Vedic Period of India. In that primitive Pantheon, the powers of nature appear either as separate Divinities or as attributes of one. The waters which embrace the world, the rain which refreshes and nourishes mankind, the fire which vivifies or consumes, Death who opens his dark mansion to all living beings, the Earth, the Sky, the Seasons, Day, Night, and Dawn are all personified and glorified with their proper attributes and functions. In the portraiture of these powers with their appropriate accessories and duties how vast a field is opened for an Indian Pencil. The form of Indra, with his attendant breezes hovering over the famished plains of Hindustan, might surely more than rival the triumphant flight of the Italian Aurora with her galaxy of Hours'.

“Next to the Vedic mythology as a source of Artistic inspiration, come the two legendary Epics, the Mahabharatha and the Ramayana containing the most inexhaustible and diversified stores of pictorial representation which any country possesses. Transfused in detached and episodical forms from the classic original into the vernacular languages of India these forms have become the popular Currency of festivity and fancy, of learning and of faith. They are sounded by every musician, they are recited by every school boy, they are sculptured on every temple, they pass before the Raja in his diversions, they are coned by the Brahmin in his books, they are married to the measured labour of the fountain, they are chanted to the cadence of the oar. All that is needed to promulgate their beauty and complete their fame is that in their purer and nobler passages and with the powers of European Art, they should engage the service of the national pencil as they have fastened on the national memory and animated the national voice”.

Ravi Varma realised this ardent wish of the speaker with the mastery of the European Art that he had at his command.

Life at its intensest form made irresistible appeal to Ravi Varma and in his portraiture of woman his genius found fullest expression. All his heroines are of the slim elegant type brisling with vitality and vigour. He is not the orthodox apostle of the conventional art of the East.

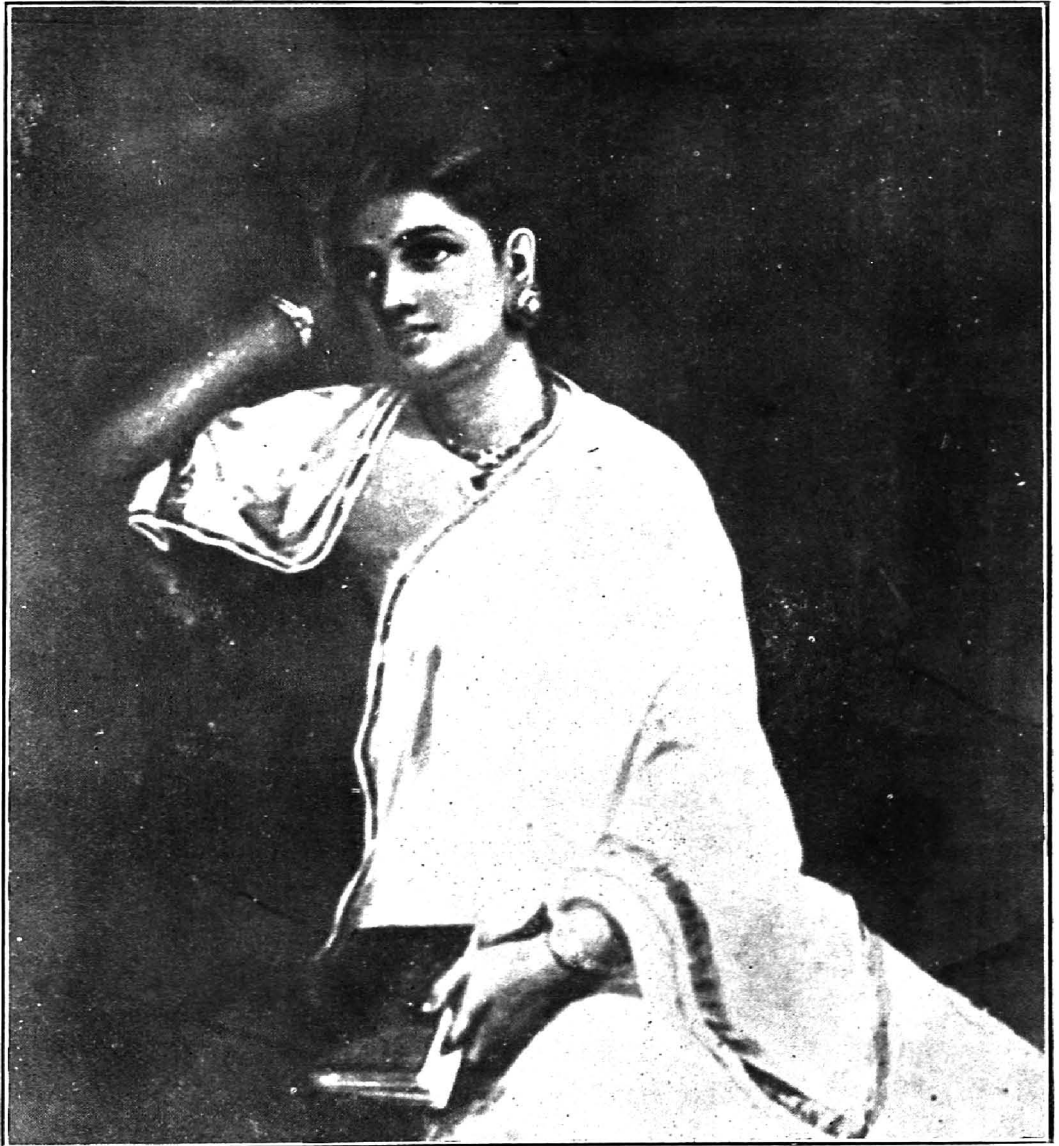


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SAKUNTALA LOOKING AT DUSHYANTA.
BY RAVI VARMA.

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REVERIE.

BY RAVI VARMA.

He is a departure from the tradition of the Indian art. The medium he chose was purely Western but his women are Indian to the depths of their very soul.

To him Beauty was Religion. The few specimens of indigenous art with which he came into contact in South India failed to inspire him. Emotion is the life-breath of art. This was expressed fully in these pictures. Artist and Apostle of Beauty himself he wanted the expressive combination of emotion and beauty in his works. He therefore went against tradition and convention with almost the spirit of a rebel in this respect.

The possibility of not only human beings, but also of animals and birds, of rivers and lakes, rocks and trees, of waves and clouds, breathing the intensest emotions was already established beyond the faintest shadow of a doubt by the great masters of the West. Freedom from the bondage of dead convention on the one hand and the glorious prospect of a life of ever lasting companionship with all that is lovely on the other, were temptations too strong for him. In happy forgetfulness of race and creed Ravi Varma sought the Muse that inspired the West, embraced her, and made her his own.

Now, we shall turn to some of his famous pictures and study them.

Usha-Anirudha. Soft as dawn on an unruffled lake, there beams a smile on Usha's face. Lo, it creeps along her limbs, along the folds of her garment. The smile is there on the velvet rest, it fills the air with golden pink and in the smile a dream is afloat. Anirudha, the one she loves, is bending low to steal a kiss, the kiss for which she shed the smile!

Damayanti and the Swan. To Damayanti, the nonpareil, the message of the swan is as a gentle tilt to a budding flower just wafting the sweetest scent. A bashful maiden in her teens, lovely and heavenly beyond compare, Damayanti who knew not love so long, stands fixed to the thought of her Nala.

Keechaka—Panchali. In the court of Virata hangs a cloud of despair and heated agony and down on the floor falls Panchali, face down—hiding it in shame—while rushing in to escape from the atrocious Keechaka. To the left, abruptly checked stands Keechaka, brother to the Queen, decked like a Prince, daring like a devil, chuckling like a Villain, and shameless like a brute. The mighty Pandavas, tall and grim and more Kingly than the King himself, stand still, dead to the mid-day crime. In exile and in disguise their lot is to serve the King. How hard the struggle to curb within the righteous indignation bursting into flame million-tongued.

Ekadesi Mahalmiyam. Rugmangatha is to be



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REAPER GIRL.
BY C. RAJA RAJA VARMA.

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butchered. He takes leave of his mother, lying on the lap of an old lady, abandoned, pale, cold senseless, nay more than dead! He offers prayers to the Deity in the temple. Turning aside and raising his finger to his throat, he summons his father to do the deed:— "Father grieve not for me. Keep your word. You have to do it. Yes, to maintain Truth you have to do it. Kill me, Father, I am willing to die!" The tall king stands singled out in the group. His muscles have lost all strength. His left hand resting on his breast, his face lifted upwards, weeping, he sends up his prayers in abject despair. Of the group, Mohini alone, the King's second wife, is all gay and lively. Mohini feared that the King loved Rugnangadha more than herself and that is why she chose to "wreak vengeance on him. Once when the King fell ill, she tended him so well that he volunteered to grant her two requests whatever they might be. Time passed. On a religious day of fast-Ekadesi she asks for the boon and demands "either break your fast this day or kill your son" to remove the object of her jealousy and to wreak her vengeance on the King for loving his son more than herself—aye two birds with one shot. The King hesitates to steep his hands in the blood of his best beloved, his only son and heir to the throne, but the fiend she is invites him to his meal of cakes and fruits on that holy day of fast!!

"*Sita-Vanavasa*" may be classed with the best of those priceless treasures produced by the masters of

the Italian Renaissance. An indefinable something moves on the delicately wrought skin of the face. In the gloom of the forest Sita is seated on a rock by the foot of a Palmyra palm. In the distance is seen a sage, probably Valmiki, suggesting the vicinity of an Asraman where she is to be a treasured guest. The picture is a marvellous study of conflicting emotions. Red-hot agony is scorching her very soul. But she suppresses it lest it react upon Rama. She had resisted Ravana's advances and by walking through fire she had proved her chastity. Nevertheless Rama divorced her for fear of scandal. Suicide she would not commit, for that would deprive Rama of progeny. Big with issue and deserted by Rama, for no fault of hers, she is brooding over the past.

In *Satyavati-Santanu* the King is in love with a girl, who exquisite as she is, still reveals the fisherwoman that she really is.

Tara Devi is a brilliant work of art. It is one of those pictures which gives us an insight into the conception of feminine beauty.

Lakshmi is the goddess of prosperity and her face beams with that effulgence which is the key note of her character.

Mohini is a temptress on the swing. It is



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another of his divine creations, faultless and perfect.

The Indian girl as conceived by him is the very soul of ecstasy. The face, the hands, the feet, he works to an exquisite finish and in the cream of loveliness he sets his precious damsels. Pathos he weaves into the shades, music he weaves into the gradations, heaven he weaves into the tints, and the life of our lives he weaves into the high lights.

The emotion invariably creeps out of the figure and gives colour to the atmosphere around. Usha floats in her own smile. The tragedy of Rugmangadha is written on the very walls and pillars of the temple. At the court of Virata, we read Panchaly's misery in every face that beholds her. In the gloom of the forest sits Sita, her very soul dipped in the darkest gloom. Mohini tempts us, the grandeur around drives us mad. The emotion—grief, anger, despair, hope, love—is seen in the eyes and lips, in the lineaments of the face, in the very limbs, in the folds of the garment, in the stones, the trees, the clouds of the back ground, nay in the very air itself.

The Creations of Ravi Varma, stand for emotions eternal and universal. Priceless in themselves they are but vehicles of the mysterious passions that govern life. *Satyavathi—Santanu* is a triumph of love easily won. In '*Lala-Rukh*' in the disguise of a musician, a

Prince wins the lady of his love. In *Sakunthala-Pathralekana*, a lady destined to be queen of the world, but born and brought up in a forest by Kanva, sees for the first time in her life, Dushayanta. Instinct works havoc. Love burns her very soul and she writes to the king:—

“I know not wise and noble one
If aught thou carest for me or us.
But O my Lord! my flesh, my blood,
My life is soaked in the love for thee
And Cupid aye doth burn my soul
For thou art hard and loveth me not.”

Usha falls in love in a dream not knowing it would vanish in the twinkling of an eye. And Damayanti's love is for a lover she has never seen. Like a canker, the absence of Urvashi was eating into the vitals of the Devas. Poor Purooravas has to pay the penalty. Urvashi deserts him—his entreaties are in vain. Sita the chaste, stolen from her Lord, is a picture of grief in the Asoka forest, expecting deliverance every moment of her life. Damayanti forsaken by Nala whom she preferred to the Gods and followed braving storm and thorn, is a picture of agony personified. *Sitha-Vanavasa* is worse still. Fire won't burn her for she is pure and bears the progeny of Rama in her womb. Still as a glimmer behind a mist, hope, pale and feeble, survives. And Savitri! still, cold, dead lies her lord on her own lap and she hopes against hope to get him back to life.



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DAMAYANTI & MESSAGE OF THE SWAN.
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GIVING OIL TO A BEGGAR WOMAN.

By Mangala Bai.

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In "*Sita's Ordeal*", wedded as a child to Rama, imprisoned by Ravana for some time, reunited to her lord for four short months and then exiled to the forest for a scandal, Sita can brook the misery no longer. She avows "in all my life not a man have I ever thought of other than my lord, mine own wedded Lord. Bear me witness O mother Earth." And the Earth splits in twain, Bhoomi-Devi appears and with lightning speed mother and daughter sink into the Earth. *Panchali-Vastrakshepa* depicts malice and villainy outraging the modesty and honor of a virtuous woman. At the court of Virata, (*Keechaka-Panchali* picture), Panchali is driven to distraction by the infatuated Kheechaka who is dead to all sense of shame. Virata's wife, Keechaka's sister, induces Panchali to take food to her brother which she does with great detestation, for where honour is at stake the pangs are intensest and nothing magnifies the dread of loss of honour as apprehension.

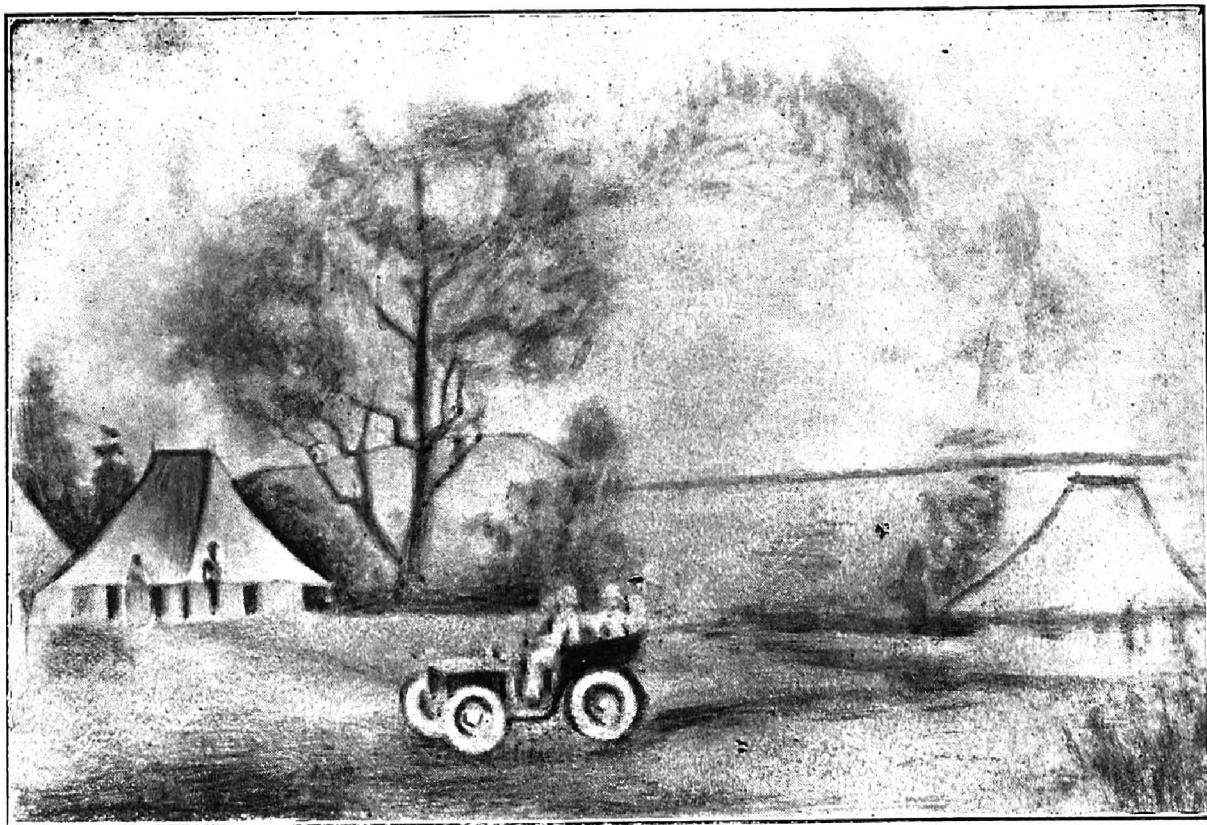
This is the world of Ravi Varma, this is where he lived and had his being. Life appealed to him in all its intensity, in all its strength. Beauty, love, despair, agony were stern realities. To him life was full, real, and earnest

Let us now turn to the other side of the picture. Ravi Varma worked to please the millions of devotees of India without caring for the pure technique of the art. The average Indian has a craze for colours and tints and

flamboyant settings of the various descriptions he is familiar with in his holy writ. Ravi Varma fully satisfied them. In works like *Vinayaka*, *Sesha Narayana*, *Sakthi* &c. neither context nor emotion is depicted and we are prone to doubt whether they were ever painted by the great Ravi Varma and whether the great Artist understood the elements of proportion, perspective and the like.

In his miscellaneous pictures such as the *Parsi Lady*, *Malabar Belle*, *Modesty* &c. there is nothing particularly fascinating. In depicting contemporary life, it was the aristocratic bent that influenced him more. He was more concerned with kings and queens, palaces and parks than with low life. He had not much love for Nature. He has not attempted landscapes and sceneries except as a back ground for some picture to fill up space. Some critics are of opinion that his female characters do not possess "the innocent purity of the unsipped blossom".

Notwithstanding these limitations, Ravi Varma is the Father of Modern Indian Art. By sheer force of genius he mastered the alien methods of the art and adapted it to the life and literature with which he was familiar. Indian art was lulled to sleep for a considerable period after the shocks it suffered from the last of the Moghul kings and it was he who woke it up from lethargy. He was the pioneer who gave material shape to the aspira-



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H. R. H. The Prince of Wales & H. H. The Maha Raja of Mysore driving together in a car in the
Shooting Camp at Mysore. By Ravi Varma.

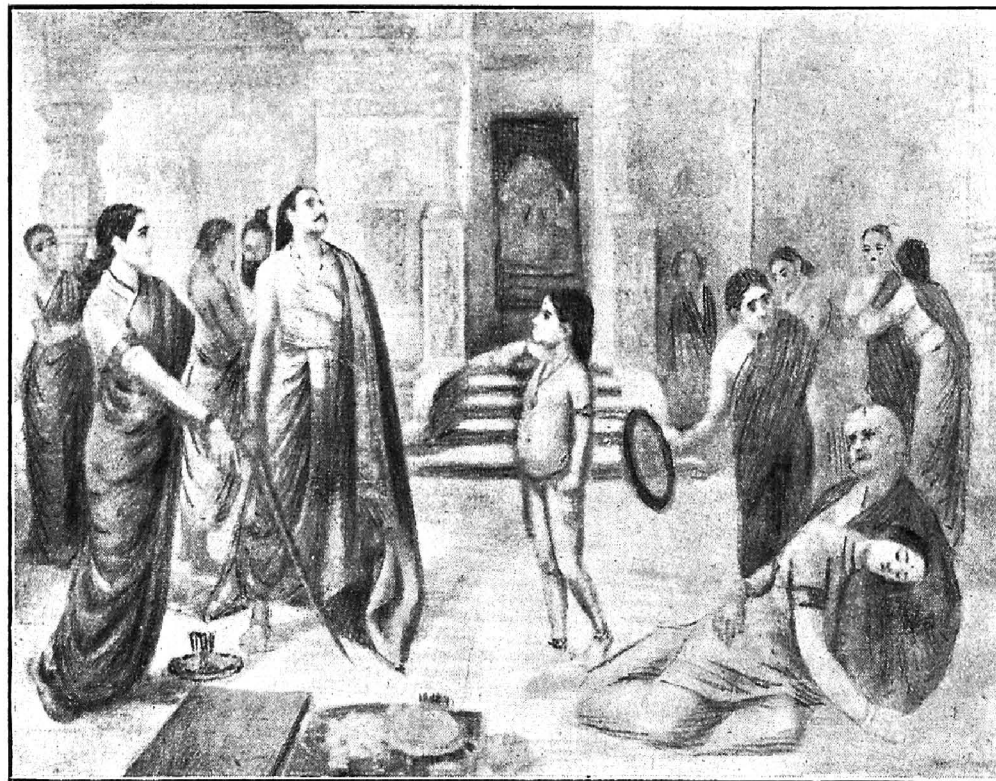
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BY RAVI VARMA.

Shooting Camp of H. R. H. the Prince of Wales at Mysore from an unfinished painting.

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RUGMANGADHA.

BY RAVI VARMA.

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tions and thoughts that arose among the masses in those days of life and activity. He is the exponent of the grand aristocratical style as against the simple back-to-nature style of modern Bengal. The history of the modern Indian Art begins with him and in the galaxy of the artists of our Motherland his place is the first. His shall be the glory of having regenerated the Hindu religious spirit in India. His shall be the pride of having diffused a taste in the arts through the length and breadth of the Land of Bharata. To him shall belong the honour of having sown the seeds of aesthetic faculty even in lay unappreciative minds. His shall be the rare fortune of having lived a thousand lives in one, for he still lives and shall ever live in his pictures.

