

# Impact of art of Raja Ravi Varma in Pre Independence India

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## Abstract

This paper aims to study the impact of Raja Ravi Varma and his art in the Pre Independence India. Raja Ravi Varma started his career around 1870s as an individual artist. Raja Ravi Varma role as an artist is predominantly national in nature. He was born in Royal family of Travancore Kingdom, evinced interest in art at a early age and achieved his goal by his early 20s. Raja Ravi Varma approach to art was Euro centric in style rather he adopted British style with India subject. He became very popular through the country for his realistic and romantic style. The greatest achievement of Raja Ravi Varma was the establishment of lithographic Press and stating reproduction of his own painting. These prints, popularly known as Oleographs, sold to aspired art loving and religious public at a very affordable cost. Raja Ravi Varma's art became public art. In the small essay various events connected to his art practice and his popular art culture have been discussed.

**Keywords:** Oleographs, lithographs, printing press, popular culture, nationalism, Euro centric.

## Introduction

### Indian Art in Pre Independence India

Colonial art is imported art from Europe. They were very keen to introduce their art to India, Colonial art also introduced Art education in India. Art School governed by the British Academy were famous for art such as realistic art, model study, still life etc. The company government supported many artists who migrated to India for documentation of Indian topography, architecture, royal portraits and also the Jeor of folk culture, dance and ather day to day itinerary. The British academic education that was introduced in art schools that were established namely " Calcutta School of Art and Craft, Madras School of Art and Craft, JJ School of art and Craft, Lahore School of Art and Craft, besides there were many Art Schools that were established by Royal family such as Jaya Chamarajendra Technical Institute in Mysore, Baroda School of Art and Craft, Trivandrum, Patna, Indore, Lucknow and many other places had stared art school with European method of learning. These art schools not only provided basic art education to students but also supported to employment under the service of the British regime and many students turned as independent artists worked for public and alike.

### Rise of Raja Ravi Varma

Raja Ravi Varma was born in 1848 in the Royal family at the place called Kilimanoor in Kerala. It has been known though various records that Raja Ravi Varma had an eventful life as a royal person and royal artist. He had his initial training under teachers of Tanjore style painting but soon he was attracted for the fascination of the photo-realistic art and painting. Though cornicles of Raja Ravi Varma, it has surfaced

that he also had training under European artist where he was introduced to oil colors which was non-Indian entity. Raja Ravi Varma was a smart student and a quick learner. He learnt the basic skills of oil painting, also his vigorous practice very quickly achieved monarchy in the subject.

Raja Ravi Varma became expertise in painting portrait like life patron which he initiated with the members of the royal family of Travancore Kingdom. He painted portrait of kings in their ritual attire, he also painted queens, princess, and many royal household. One of the most significant painting that was wildly appreciated painting of Dhevan T Madhav Rao. He also did several portraits of British officers and public figures. At one point Raja Ravi Varma became one of the most favored

Portrait artist of the country. Raja Ravi Varma's artistic exploration expanded beyond Trivandrum. He established studios in a place called Mavelikkara (Kerala) which was his place of his wife. His studio was converted to Art School by his son named after the artist "Raja Ravi Varma College of Fine Arts and continues to be art school till date.

### **Raja Ravi Varma and National Movement**

The Indian National Movement commenced in the 1880s in a humble manner. It was intensified in 1920s. But interestingly Raja Ravi Varma's peak career as an artist may be demarked from 1870 onwards until his death in 1905. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Indian art as mentioned above was a period of consolidation and also it is the period of identifying Indianness in art and literature. Many European scholars evinced interest in art and literature, dance music and Sanskrit language besides history epigraphy manuscripts and archeology were being more affectingly addressed by the European scholars. Inis at this movement gradually developed into small industrial state with communication and transportation facilities developed through railways line and better highways. Raja Ravi Varma being a personality who is eager to adopt contemporary technical advancements and also go by the public interest. Hence raja Ravi varma was well trained in writing reading and speaking English and had great communication skills. His art also received great appreciation and recognition from the royal families and as well as British administrators. That's why Raja Ravi Varma art works spread across Kerala.

### **Expansion of Raja Ravi Varma artwork**

19<sup>th</sup> century art in India as mentioned above was predominately British oriented. The national movement which was created in 1880s paved a way to start an agitation against the Britishers and create nationalism in the public of India. The art of Raja Ravi Varma instrumental in depicting non-European themes. He not only introduced selected puranic ethical stories represented in high melodramatic style. Looking at Raja Ravi Varma style one can say he was influenced by the Indian schools like Traditional murals of Kerala and Maratha styles rather features had to be identified, however the matured phase paintings explicitly depict euro-centric style with Indian subject. This is the most important contribution of Raja Ravi Varma to the Indian art.

### **Lithographs as Instruments of National Identity**

Prior to Raja Ravi Varma's era, the general public could not view paintings because they were restricted to temples and courts. Everything changed when his lithographic prints were introduced. Lithographs may be made in vast quantities and at a low cost. All of a sudden, the average person could purchase pictures of heroes and gods. Images of India's mythological grandeur were now accessible to even the illiterate and those living in remote areas. His work established a common visual lexicon

throughout the subcontinent, surpassing local languages and traditions. Thus, a pan-Indian cultural identity that was essential to the nascent notion of an Indian nation was sown by Ravi Varma's illustrations.

### **Assertion of Indian Cultural Superiority**

Using European skills such as oil painting, perspective, and realistic anatomy, Ravi Varma accomplished something uncommon: he used these tools to elevate Indian topics rather than copy Western art. Combining the finest elements of Indian spirituality and European reality, Raja Ravi Varma demonstrated that Indian culture was not inferior but rather was highly capable of adapting, creating, and thriving. His accomplishments served as a silent protest against the notion that Indians did not possess the capacity for fine art. Ravi Varma contested the colonial-imposed cultural hegemony with his artwork.

India's diversity has always been both its greatest asset and setback. This was visually addressed by Varma's paintings. People from different regions, languages, and even religions held Rama, Krishna, and Lakshmi in high regard. Raja Ravi Varma's work contributed to the development of a sense of shared heritage, which was essential for nationalist cohesion, by emphasizing pan-Indian myths and symbols. Building the idea of a united Indian nation rather than a conglomeration of broken kingdoms required this visual coherence.

The freedom struggle gained a greater emotional and cultural intensity courtesy of Ravi Varma's art. His creations served as a reminder to Indians that their culture was incredibly rich in both spirituality and the arts. His pictures gave people hope that India may regain its lost splendour through self-rule by boosting pride and self-worth.

As a result, his impact went much beyond the canvas and touched the core of the uprising of nationalism. Ravi Varma's lithographs made their way into homes, stores, and temples, even in remote places where political speeches and pamphlets were not as widely distributed. Every picture of Rama, Durga, or Lakshmi in a modest house served as a silent reminder of India's majesty and a call to oppose colonialism. This evoked a silent revolution among the masses. His paintings established a universal, approachable language of resistance that relied on emotion and collective cultural memory rather than education or literacy.

### **Establishment of printing press**

Raja Ravi Varma's lithographic press was a revolutionary venture that transformed Indian visual culture in the late 19th century. Established in 1894 in Girgaum, Bombay (now Mumbai), with the technical assistance of German lithographer Fritz Schleicher, the press aimed to make Ravi Varma's art accessible to the general public, who previously relied on expensive hand-painted works. The earliest productions included oleographs (oil-based lithographs) of Hindu deities such as Lakshmi and Saraswati, which gained widespread popularity. In 1896, it was relocated to Malavli near Lonavala, Maharashtra, and renamed it the "Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press," expanding its output and commercial reach. The printing process involved intricate techniques, beginning with the transfer of Raja Ravi Varma's original oil paintings onto lithographic stones (later zinc plates). Each print required separate stones for different colours, sometimes up to 15–20 for complex works. The images were then transferred onto paper using hand-operated presses, with Schleicher later introducing mechanical printing to increase efficiency. Some prints were further enhanced with hand-tinting for finer details. The press mass-produced a variety of subjects, including iconic depictions of Hindu deities like Vishnu's Dashavatara and mythological scenes such as Shakuntala and Damayanti, alongside royal portraits and European-inspired compositions. The

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Establishment of Raja Ravi Varma's litho press in Lonawala which initiated the multiple production of the oleographic prints which paved way for the popular culture which can be equated with the establishment of the public Lord Ganesha Festival celebrations by Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

Both the events such as Raja Ravi Varma's oleographic prints predominately depicted the Selected themes from Indian scriptures also depict popular divinities of India have also received a wide circulation, sales and appreciation. Similarly Lord Ganesha festivals at Puna became a national festival, where the entire county began to celebrate by installing Lord Ganesha at public places. Purpose of Raja Ravi Varma's oleographic prints Lord Ganesha festival have a same assertion. The purpose of both events to create the awareness about the national independence. Thus Raja Ravi Varma's prints in one hand represent technical advancements of printing technology of the period equally challenging the quality to European prints. This was great achievement by any Indian artist at that time. The prints occupied the public consciences and became object of worship. In many private houses of Southern part of India, the demand was soo high the majority of the people acquire one the prints of Raja Ravi Varma to worship as well as venerate.







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