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How Raja Ravi Varma Changed Indian Illustrated Art

By [AAYUSH SONI](#)



NEW DELHI— In 1881, Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III, was looking for a painter to create his portrait as the newly crowned maharaja of Baroda, a princely state in Western India. As always, he sought the help of his mentor, Thanjavur Madhava Rao, the diwan, or chief minister, of his state, who had held the same position in the princely state of Travancore in southern India from 1857 to 1872.

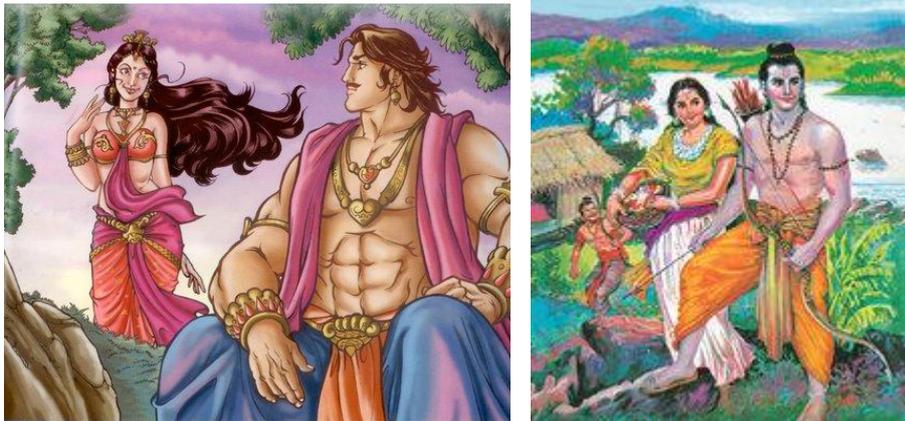
Mr. Madhava jogged back his memory to that fifteen-year stint, during which he saw how the maharaja of Travancore patronized Ravi Varma, a talented young painter from the state who had honed his skills in the kingdom. He invited Mr. Varma to demonstrate his talents north of the Periyar River.

At the Baroda court, he painted such a delicately detailed and colorful portrait of Sayaji Rao Gaekwad that in 1892 the Maharaja commissioned him to create a series of mythological paintings that were Indian in their essence. Mr. Varma traveled all over India, from his native state of Travancore to Lahore, diligently sketching what he saw.

“At the end of it, Varma created what we know today as the traditional Indian woman who is curvy and buxom,” said Deepanjana Pal, the author of “The Painter: A Life of Ravi Varma.” “The images were a composite created out of what he saw during his travels – the skin color was from north India, the way the sari was draped was Maharashtrian and the jewelry was usually from south India.”

The illustrations of women in today's comic books of the Hindu epics "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata" are a simplification of the stereotype that Mr. Varma had created then, she said.

What emerged out of those commissions were iconic works like "Shakuntala," an oil-on-canvas painting of the half-nymph of the "Mahabharata," in which she's seen dreaming about her husband, Dushyanta. That image, of a daydreaming curvy woman, clad in a bright yellow sari, lying on a carpet of green grass in a forest, in the company of her friends, later inspired a series of similar visuals that were used to sell women's products like perfumes and creams.



Similarly, the bright colors and dramatic gestures of "Sitaharan," depicting the scene from the "Ramayana" where Ravana, the 10-headed king, kidnaps Sita, wife of the god Rama, are strikingly similar to the visuals in modern comic books like the "Amar Chitra Katha" series.

In 1894, Mr. Varma's paintings traveled from Baroda to Bombay, now known as Mumbai, for a public appearance. The response was not too different from the one a similar public viewing received in Baroda, where lines upon lines of people filed through the Durbar Hall of the Laxmi Vilas Palace.

It overwhelmed Mr. Varma so much that he decided to set up his own printing press in Malavli, roughly 100 kilometers, or 60 miles, from Bombay. Mr. Varma imported a printing press from Germany to reproduce affordable lithographs of the illustrated paintings, trading exclusivity for an assumed financial affluence.

Unfortunately, the press wasn't as successful as he had expected and plunged him into debt. Toward the end of his life, he sold it off to Fritz Schleicher, a German lithographer, who turned around its fortunes by using these mythical figures on advertisements, flyers and ultimately calendars.

"Calendars published by Hem Chander Bhargava in Delhi, Brij Basi Art Press in Noida and Jothi in Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu, are inspired by Raja Ravi Varma's illustrations," said Yousuf Saeed, a filmmaker based in Delhi.

The illustrations of the "Ramayana" and the "Mahabharata" went through another process of simplification when calendar art was appropriated in the "Amar Chitra Katha" series and its lesser-known cousins published by Dreamland and Om Books.

Printed on glossy paper, bathed bright colors with melodramatic gestures and lustful expressions, the men possess six-pack abs, lean thighs and bulging biceps while the women are gifted with heaving bosoms, fair skins and curvy figures.

“The distinctive feature of a series like ‘Amar Chitra Katha’ is to make the women more feminine and make the men more masculine, whereas others conform to the traditional concept of Indian heroes — the men and women are more androgynous,” said the cultural critic Ashis Nandy.

This pan-Indian, homogenized visual imagery, created for mass-market consumption, has overshadowed the diversity of illustrations of the epics that existed before Mr. Varma arrived on the landscape of Indian art.

In the 19th-century Pata paintings of Kalighat, for instance, the gods are short, stout, have sharp eyes and are almost fully clothed, and the way the women wear saris is similar to how Bengali women drape their saris these days. The 20th-century Kota paintings from Rajasthan show the women wearing ghaagra cholis, blouses with long skirts that accentuate their bodies.

Similarly, the Mithila forms of art from Bihar were black-and-white outlines with specks of color on the illustration, giving the viewer the impression that this was a work in progress. Their “unrealness” gave them an androgynous texture that got eroded with the universalization of the “Mahabharata” and the “Ramayana” in which androgyny is absent.

“I would even go to the extent of saying it is the Westernization of the heroes,” Mr. Nandy said, “so much so that it is very difficult to imagine anybody but a north Indian playing Rama now if there’s a new version of the ‘Ramayana.’ I cannot imagine a Manipuri dancer playing Rama. That kind of diversity is totally gone.”

Aayush Soni is a freelance journalist in New Delhi. Follow him on Twitter [@aayushsoni](https://twitter.com/aayushsoni)

This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 26, 2013

An earlier version of the post incorrectly noted that Thanjavur Madhava Rao served as chief minister of the princely state of Travancore for five years, that has been corrected to 15 years.

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