

Silence of the Stone



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New Delhi : *Raja Ravi Varma's legacy lies in abject neglect in a village in Maharashtra where his popular art revolution was born.*

But every house here has been touched by his art

Kashinath Bhosale does not know it, but his house holds a treasure. On a wall near the kitchen, hang four Raja Ravi Varma oleographs, bathed in the harsh glare of a tubelight. There is Ram, taming the raging sea as he commands the bridge to Ravana's Lanka into being; and in another, baby Krishna surrounded by doting gopikas. Bound in plain wooden frames, they seem to blend into the ordinariness of the 79-year-old's house, like the thousands of calendar gods and goddesses in whom the faith of millions is reposed every day.

But for the pilgrim of Indian art, Bhosale's house —and, indeed, the entire village of Malavali, eight km from Lonavla — is precious. Scattered in its many houses, in various states of disrepair and neglect, are prints that came out of the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press from the early 1900s till the 1970s. Also to be found are original litho stones used to print cheaper versions of Ravi Varma's oil paintings. The original oleographs, which bear Ravi Varma's signature, can cost between Rs 5,000 and Rs 10,000. The litho stones are more valuable, and would sell for anything between Rs 30,000 and Rs 1 lakh each.

Kashinath's son Mukund Bhosale drags out one such bag of surprises. A black rectangular satchel, used by artists to carry their canvases, it contains two dozen prints or more, including about 10 original oleographs. Here they tumble out, the voluptuous lady with a fruit, and a galaxy of women musicians ready to burst into song. There are scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata — images of Draupadi's disrobing, of Menaka's seduction of Vishwamitra, of Shakuntala's longing backward glance as she scans the forest for Dushyant.

Kashinath, a frail figure in a kurta-pyjama and Gandhi topi, holds up a print of Ahalya, Varma's painting of a woman cursed for being seduced by Indra. She is a fair, patrician,

lonely woman, with flowing black tresses, striking but also deeply familiar. That familiarity comes from the fact that Ravi Varma's portrayal of Hindu deities and mythological characters remains the template of our religious iconography even today. This is how he imagined our gods and goddesses, their grand victories and human failings. And this is how we remember them.

The story of how this came to be can also be found in Malavali.

In 1894, Ravi Varma bought lithographic machines (as well as litho stones and technicians) from Germany and set up the country's first such press in Mumbai. The artist from Kilimanoor in Kerala wanted to popularise his art through cheaper oleographs of his paintings of gods and goddesses.

But the need for more land, and a bubonic plague in Mumbai that claimed lives of many labourers in the press, made Varma look elsewhere. His search brought him to Lonavla, and then to Malavali. Captivated by the beauty of the place, its hills and the cooler climes, he shifted the press here in 1898. A railway track nearby cemented to this decision, as the prints could then be transported easily to the rest of the country.

The mass manufacture of his work revolutionised Indian art, as the prints and oleographs became a part of every Indian household, and fostered a growing political consciousness. As Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger, who spent many years researching Ravi Varma's life for their book, *Popular Indian Art—Raja Ravi Varma and The Printed Gods of India*, write, "His paintings of gods and goddesses, epic heroes and heroines, virtually defined the new pan-Indian iconography. Using German printers and high-speed steam-driven presses, Ravi Varma published millions of copies of these famous paintings as well as other religious icons. These paintings were also used to advertise goods and services, as indeed for political propaganda, where heroes, gods and national leaders merged into one another. The prints became the most influential medium of visual communication in what was then a socially and culturally fragmented Indian society."

In doing so, Ravi Varma audaciously broke out of canvasses and frames. The prints of his paintings were on calendars, matchboxes and even playing cards. They became, what Neumeyer calls the "the best loved visuals in India", adorning nooks and corners and puja-gahars of innumerable homes. "His popularity was more because of the mass colour reproductions of his paintings than for his original works," says Vijaynath Shenoy, an art lover from Manipal, Karnataka.

As the press picked up work, Varma began travelling between Kerala and Lonavla. A small bungalow near the press, which also housed a studio, was his residence for about two-three weeks in a year. It is believed that he was also running away from a troubled marriage. The women in his paintings were perhaps inspired by the Maharashtrian women he saw in Mumbai and Lonavla, as many are clad in nauvaris. An apocryphal story has it that his muse was a woman in Lonavla, whose face adorns most of his works — like the much-famed Mohini.

Two years before he died, Ravi Varma visited Malavali to sell the press to his German technician Fritz Schleicher, along with the copyright to over a hundred paintings. Schleicher used the images on a whole range of products, from matchbox covers to gripe water bottles. A devastating fire in 1972 destroyed the press and its machines; it also put an end to a most innovative era of Indian art.

In order to make an oleograph, the print of the original painting was transferred on litho stone slabs brought from Germany, by means of tracing it on the stone. The contours would then be treated with as many colours as on the picture. The stones — multiple were needed for each print— would be stamped on a sheet of paper by means of high-speed presses to produce an absolute copy. A good quality litho stone was known to be able to recreate nearly 5,000 prints.

According to Mukesh Prabhune, an artist from Pune, due to Malavali's often damp and cold climate, it would be difficult to dry the fresh prints. The workers would hang them in a room warmed by a sigree. One day, the prints caught fire leading to the blaze that burnt down the press. "The remaining machines, lithographic stones and prints were given away to those who lived nearby and that's how many people here got hold of them," says Bhosale, who worked at the press for over 40 years. One of Schleicher's descendants, known in the village as Peter Baba, gave the satchel of prints to Bhosale. Many litho stones were taken to Malavali Hills, a sprawling farmhouse near the press, but those were washed away in floods a few years ago. There are stories of attempts to smuggle the litho stones out of the country or collectors in Mumbai and Pune hoarding them. Students of art drop by to look at the iconic press and sometimes stumble upon a treasured oleograph but most find little beyond the aura of an era gone by.

In Malavali, the remnants of that time have been scrubbed down to bare domesticity.

A few houses away from Bhosale's lives 80-year-old widow Gaubai Sable. The floor of the main room of her little tenement is covered with a linoleum sheet. "We thought we should cover the plain white stone slabs with something more colourful," she says, as she rolls up the sheet to reveal the litho stones that once bore deep imprints of Raja Ravi Varma's creations. "They had images of gods and goddesses. How can one put them on the floor and walk over them? So Peter Baba, the man who ran the press, and who gave us the stones, told us to put caustic acid on them and scrub them so that the prints and imprints would wash away," says Gaubai. She takes us outside to show more such slabs — some are placed near doorways; a few border the drain running outside and a few are placed on the path going up to the common urinals.

At a school near the village, a classroom floor glistens with sparkling white litho stones, with the traces of Ravi Varma's gods and goddesses long wiped clean. "This was a hospital once. When the patients refused to walk over the imprints of the gods, the slabs were treated with acid and all imprints washed off," says Sanjay Katkar, a teacher at the school. "Yes, I think there is some historical value attached to them but I am not sure what."

Among Sable's treasures are two negatives of Ravi Varma's prints, stashed away in a crack in the tiles of the roof. "I don't know what they are but I know they are originals. So I am keeping them. When the press was disbanded after the fire, I found them. People have offered

me money for them but I am not giving them away,” she says. Few in the village know who owns the press now, and under what circumstances it was sold a decade ago.

Prabhune, who once led a campaign for a Raja Ravi Varma memorial in Pune, says, “As an artist I could see the value in preserving this legacy of lithographic printing but the project never took off. It’s sad the way the stones were washed and scrubbed clean. Those with Ravi Varma imprints would be valued in lakhs today, other than their immense archival importance of course.” A stack of 10 slabs which he recovered from the press is kept at his house as a stark reminder of the waste.

Pune’s loss turned out to be Manipal’s gain. About a decade ago, Vijaynath Shenoy heard of the Malavali story and the possibility of its treasures being lost for posterity. Shenoy made a trip to the press and bought about 100-odd lithographic stones, with prints of the paintings intact, along with some of the original oleographs and the lithographic machines from Peter’s brother, Kamal. He also picked up calendars, posters, labels of consumer products, greeting cards, playing cards and matchbox labels with Ravi Varma’s prints on them. All of these are now on display at the Gallery of Cultural Legacy of Raja Ravi Varma, a part of the Hasta Shilpa Trust, which is a heritage village project initiated by Shenoy in Manipal. “I even picked up the packets of special colour ink powder made in Germany and used for reproduction. It’s sad that the government has done nothing to preserve this formidable legacy of one of the greatest painters of India,” says Shenoy.

As we leave Malavali, a deep darkness descends on the uneven contours of the hilly hamlet. The premises of the press, which once busily clanked away past midnight, is shrouded in silence. In a nearby house, a woman lights a lamp below a Ravi Varma print of Shiva. Despite the silence of the stones, and the abject neglect of his work and legacy, the artist’s dream of democratising his work, has come to fruition in this tiny hill village—even if in ways he had not intended.