

# 'Photos of the Gods'

THE PRINTED IMAGE  
AND POLITICAL STRUGGLE  
IN INDIA

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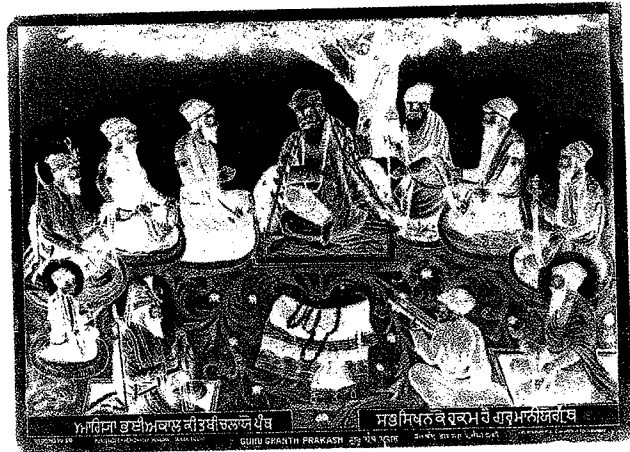
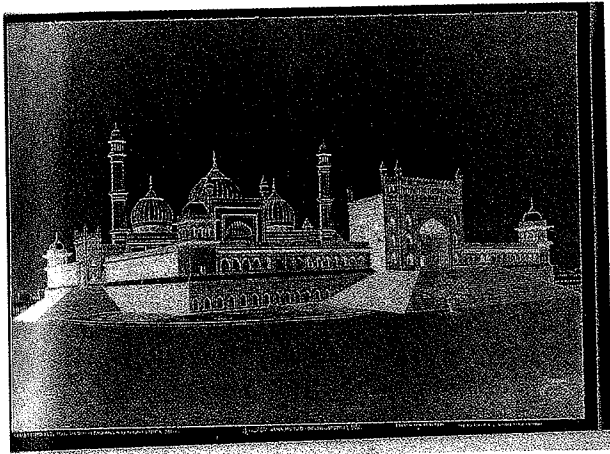
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4 Lithographs  
and the camera  
in Bombay  
and Delhi,  
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Between the late 1870s and the early 1890s, Calcutta and Poona were the main centres of printed image production in India. By the earliest years of the twentieth century, however, the centre of gravity had decisively changed to an axis that ran between Bombay and a small town called Lonavala, on the Bombay to Poona railway line. Central to this change in the commercial picture industry was the artist Ravi Varma (1848–1906) and the press he founded, which would continue to have a significant presence long after he had severed his connection with it. Ravi Varma was born near Trivandrum in the southern state of Kerala into a family connected by marriage to the Raja of Tanjore. From the mid-1870s onwards his dramatic paintings of scenes from the religious epics and romantic depictions of women won him medals at exhibitions in Madras, London, Chicago and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> He appealed, simultaneously, to two very different audiences: early cultural nationalists who saw in his work an inspiring new national imaginary, and imperial patrons who admired his accomplished mastery of the technical conventions of European portraiture.<sup>2</sup>

Ravi Varma's lasting fame rests on the output of the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press, founded in 1894,<sup>3</sup> which set new standards in the size, printed quality and tactility of chromolithographs. The Press was initially established in Girgaum, Bombay. When Ravi Varma sold his stake in the business in 1901 (although not severing his relationship with it until 1903) it moved out of Bombay to Lonavala, from where the press continued to issue prints by other artists with his signature, helping to sustain an endless debate about the comparative aesthetic worth of original paintings and mechanically produced prints. To an extent that I hope to show is unwarranted, Ravi Varma has become in the popular imagination the founding father of 'calendar art', the popular mass-produced art of India. In this chapter I try to place him alongside other contemporary significant practitioners and to provide an insight into the historical and cultural context that they would in turn transform.

The events described in this chapter unfold against a dramatic intensification of nationalist consciousness within India. Famines continued: it is estimated that between 1896 and 1900 alone more than nine million Indians perished. The partition of Bengal in 1905, which the new Viceroy, Lord Curzon, intended to split and weaken political opposition to British rule, had the opposite effect. The swadeshi movement gathered strength: English goods were boycotted and Manchester cloth burnt in public bonfires. The 1905 annual meeting of Congress at Benares passed a resolution supporting the boycott movement, a significant radicalization of Indian politics. Meeting in Surat in 1907, gradualists and radicals (by now labelled 'Moderates' and 'Extremists') openly split and the latter were effectively exiled from Congress for many years. Sporadic terrorist activity after 1907 was met with increased state repression and surveillance of the press. Tilak was arrested in 1908 and jailed for six years, most of which was spent in unbroken solitary confinement. Other 'Extremist' leaders were forced into exile and for much of the next ten years the 'Moderates' attempted to co-operate with the Government. The visions of India that Ravi Varma and others conjured throughout this tumultuous period became increasingly political and contested.<sup>4</sup>

#### RAVI VARMA AS MYTH

In May 1993 a huge retrospective of Ravi Varma's work was held at the National Museum in New Delhi. The star of the opening, according to press reports, was Sonia Gandhi: 'all eyes turned to her as she walked in, a well-turned out figure in her stunning off-white silk salwar-kameez'.<sup>5</sup> Inaugurating the exhibition, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao recalled that the first paintings he had ever seen were by Ravi Varma and claimed that both originals and chromolithographs of these paintings could be seen all over the country: 'It is ironical that you have . . . paintings of huts in palaces and paintings of palaces in huts'.<sup>6</sup> In Ravi Varma's

work, he continued, there was 'a unique fusion of Western techniques and Indian traditions'<sup>7</sup> and a reflection of the 'nationalism that was all pervasive during the freedom struggle'. After this the Director of the Gallery announced that the Secretary for Culture had authorized a special discount on the commemorative publication that would hold good for precisely one hour. One hardened journalist reported that 'the titters among the audience threatened to escalate into guffaws'.<sup>8</sup> Doordarshan's television news concluded its report of the event with the claim that 'Ravi Varma was the greatest artist of our time'.

Three weeks later a very different view was expressed in a letter to *The Pioneer* from the artists Bal Chabda, M. F. Husain, Akbar Padamsee, Tyeb Mehta and Laxma Goud. They condemned the attempt to foist 'the philistinism of the bourgeois' upon 'a complex and pluralistic movement' and disputed in particular the oft made claim that Ravi Varma was the 'first modern artist' in India. Such claims were the work of 'crypto-art historians' intent on promulgating an evolutionary view of art that privileged the mastery of perspective and oils and constituted 'an act of cultural cloning highly damaging to the creative spirit of man'.<sup>9</sup>

In all this Ravi Varma emerges as a highly charged trope, a space in which conflicting histories and aspirations are invested. The grounding of different narratives around Ravi Varma recalls Kris and Kurz's observation concerning the 'riddle of the artist', why it is that 'certain periods and cultures have been prepared to accord a special, if ambiguous, place to the creator of a work of art'.<sup>10</sup> This chapter is concerned in the first place with the 'special' and 'ambiguous' place that the sign of Ravi Varma has come to occupy in writings on colonial and popular culture in India. What 'riddle' does Ravi Varma embody, and what does this special and ambiguous place conceal in the wider field of popular visual culture?<sup>11</sup>

Ravi Varma as a sign is split into the father of modernism and the perpetrator of a devalued mass artefact. He is thus doubly disabled; we get no sense of

the ways in which he was not a single individual but a fragment of a larger narrative, and in disparaging the popular we are left with a homogenized 'calendar art' that leaves no room for an understanding of the diversity of different popular imaginaries. These are simultaneously parallel and antagonistic narratives that buttress and threaten to unhinge each other. In the Ravi Varma myth, his popular appeal always lurks ready to derail him from the path of aesthetic transcendence. A 1911 account of the artist is typical: 'his pictures attained an almost unique popularity but the oleographs were executed by imperfect mechanism and soulless mechanics. The colours were laid with the worst possible taste . . .'.<sup>12</sup>

Disassembling the narrative of Ravi Varma as the sole founder of modern Indian art will allow us at the same time to open a space in which to appraise the diversity of equally complex 'popular' practices.

Implicit in the 'official' version of Ravi Varma is his role as the inaugurator of an inevitable process of mimetic ascendancy. It is he who first uses oil, first masters perspective, comes to 'Romanize the Indian pencil': in short it is Ravi Varma that transformed the Indian imaginary from the realm of fantasy to a historicized realist chronotope. The official version repeatedly lauds him for this: he 'gave' India its Gods in a real form, so real that they have been endlessly replicated over the past century in the clothes and jewels that Ravi Varma first bestowed. His technique emerges as a crucial mediator between two world views, between 'myth' and 'history', between the 'archaic' and the 'modern'. It is Ravi Varma who enabled the relocation of signification from a 'medieval' semioticity<sup>13</sup> present in all mimesis into the strategies of representation itself.

Crucial to Ravi Varma's canonization as the father of modern Indian art was the propagation by his admirers of myths concerning his struggle to acquire the art of painting. This legend was, however, to serve a dual purpose: the validation of Ravi Varma's greatness, and also the establishment of his nationalist, 'Indian' credentials, for as Geeta Kapur has observed,

'Here is not only the struggle of the artist to gain a technique but the struggle of a native to gain the source of the master's superior knowledge, and the struggle of the prodigy to steal the fire for his own people.'<sup>14</sup> An early part of the legend recounted by his Malayali biographers retells how he 'filled the walls of his home with pictures of animals and vignettes from everyday life, how he persisted in picture-making in spite of threats from the much-harassed domestics, and how, in these scrawls and doodles, his uncle, the artist Raja Raja Varma<sup>15</sup> discovered the signs of a genius in the making'.<sup>16</sup> In the early 1860s the young Ravi Varma moved to the court of Maharaja Ayilyam Tirunaal at Trivandrum, where he had the opportunity to meet court painters and experiment in oil.<sup>17</sup> John Berger has suggested that in sixteenth-century Europe oil paintings were like 'safes let into the wall', so exactly did the medium of oil come to embody commodity relations. In late nineteenth-century India we might say that the medium of oil paint stands for a materiality and substance equivalent to history itself, a chronotopic tangibility that previous representational strategies had never fully achieved: 'oils are able to simulate reality by giving a sense of the weight and volume of substances. Bodies, flesh, jewellery, costume, furniture and architecture acquire a striking materiality, a verisimilitude.'<sup>18</sup>

It was in Trivandrum that Ravi Varma was also able to peruse albums of European paintings, and where he came to see Edward Moor's *Hindu Pantheon*,<sup>19</sup> which had been published in 1810 and retrospectively can be seen as an early charter for some of the representational transformations that Ravi Varma would very soon effect.

#### THE EARLIEST RAVI VARMA REPRODUCTIONS

Although suggestions had been made to Ravi Varma as early as 1884 that he should have his paintings 'oleographed',<sup>20</sup> it was not until 1890 that mass-produced images of his work became available in the

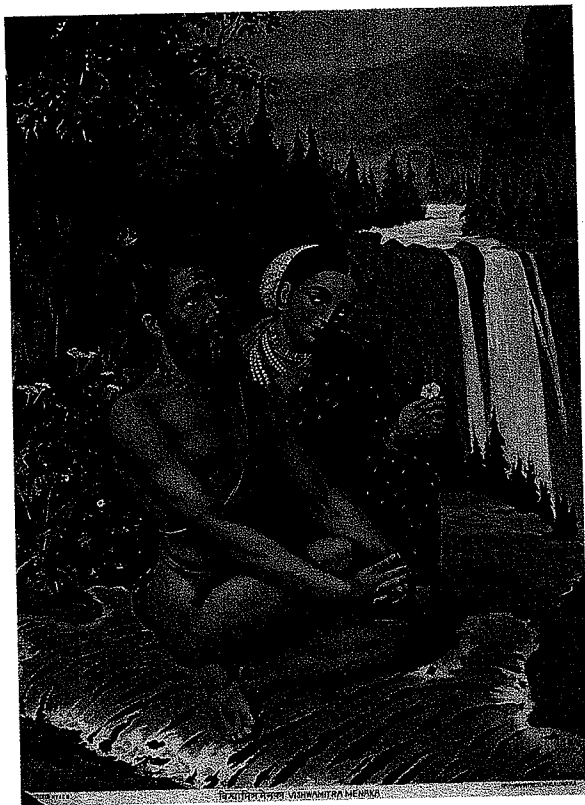
form of photographic prints. In 1888 Ravi Varma had been invited to Ootacamund to meet the Gaekwad of Baroda, who was holidaying in this southern hill station. Here the Gaekwad commissioned the artist (at a cost of Rs 50,000)<sup>21</sup> to produce fourteen large 'puranic' paintings depicting events from the Ramayana and Mahabharata for his new Laxmi Vilas Palace. The palace was to take a decade to construct at a cost of £180,000 and Ravi Varma's paintings were destined for the Durbar Hall, which was later described in a 1916 guide in these terms:

The palace has a large Durbar Hall, ninety-three feet long and fifty-four feet broad, with mosaic decorations on the walls and a mosaic floor specially executed by Italian workmen, and carved wooden galleries reserved for ladies. It is well-furnished and contains bronze and marble statues of the principal members of the Gaekwad family and the past Dewans, and costly paintings of the Royal family and Hindu mythological subjects by European and Indian artists.<sup>22</sup>

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh has argued that in Baroda State, Ravi Varma found a blend of modernity and the 'traditional values of a model kingdom analogical to the site posited in his paintings'.<sup>23</sup>

Ravi Varma's paintings were completed in 1890 and were publicly exhibited before they reached the confines of this symbol of royal excess. First they were shown at Trivandrum<sup>24</sup> and, following Ravi Varma's departure for Baroda in November 1891, they were shown in Bombay. Venniyoor quotes ('the first biography'):

They were publicly exposed for some days and immense crowds of people assembled from all parts of the Bombay Presidency to see the paintings. They produced quite a sensation for a period, for it was the first time that subjects from the great Indian epics had been depicted on canvas so truthfully and touchingly. Hundreds



35 Ravi Varma, *Vishwamitra Menaka* (c. 1901), a Ravi Varma Press chromolithograph.

and thousands of their photographs were sold all over India.<sup>25</sup>

According to Joshi (1911) there was also a public display in Baroda before they were installed in the Laxmi Vilas Palace. Here again, 'thousands of reprints of these pictures have been sold all over India'.<sup>26</sup>

The only remaining trace of these photographic images – which predated the earliest products of the Ravi Varma Press by four years – is in the volume already cited above, S. N. Joshi's 1911 booklet *Half-Tone Reprints of the Renowned Pictures of the Late Raja Ravivarma*, published by the Chitrashala Steam Press, Poona, whose activities have been discussed in the preceding chapter. While the majority of plates have been prepared from Ravi Varma chromolithographs,



36 Ravi Varma, *Vishwamitra and Menaka*, plate reproduced from S. N. Joshi's *Half-Tone Reprints* (1911).

several of the plates are clearly based on original paintings, rather than any subsequent chromolithographic translation. All these direct images are from the Baroda series, suggesting that these plates have been prepared from the early photographic prints whose popularity was noted in early accounts.

*Vishwamitra Menaka*, one of the Baroda series, was also later issued as print number 128 by the Ravi Varma Press (illus. 35). The image in Joshi's pamphlet (illus. 36), however, is clearly taken from the original oil in the Laxmi Vilas Palace. The Joshi reproduction includes the wooden crook (at bottom left) present in the original oil but absent in the chromolithograph. Several features of foliage and the line of the cliff also further indicate that Joshi's image is taken from a photograph of the original.



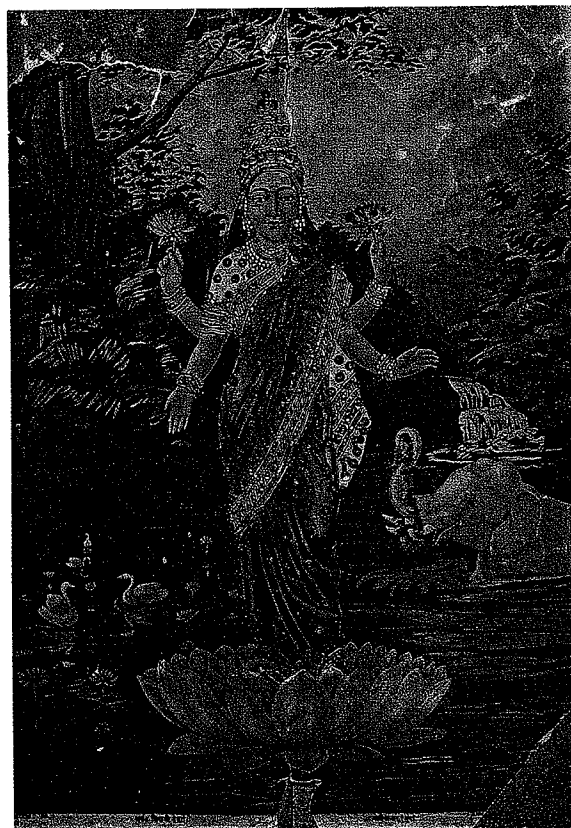
## BIBLIOGRAPHIC MYSTERIES

As a cultural phenomenon Ravi Varma is hugely important and several major issues coalesce around him that are absolutely central to the purpose of this book. However, Ravi Varma also presents something of an indissoluble bibliographic problem and the difficulty in resolving several issues limits the certainty with which some specific propositions about his printed output can be advanced.

For instance, one of the major (and certainly most often cited) sources,<sup>27</sup> claims that the first image published by the Ravi Varma Press was *The Birth of Sakuntala*, although the chromolithograph of this bears the serial number '13'.<sup>28</sup> The more plausible contender for the first image produced by the Press is an image of Lakshmi (illus. 37), which is consistently numbered 001. Regardless of these questions of priority there can be no doubt that images of goddesses and of other female icons were enormously successful and 'found their way into the *puja* rooms of Hindu households immediately'.<sup>29</sup>

It is likely that Ravi Varma himself directly authored just under 90 of the images that bear the Ravi Varma Press imprimatur. Images produced by the Press, however, sometimes bear much higher serial numbers,<sup>30</sup> suggesting that there were many hundreds of images. The 89 images whose copyright Ravi Varma sold to Fritz Schleicher would thus have formed only a small proportion of the total ultimately issued by the Press.

In other words, *most* images bearing the Ravi Varma Press imprimatur are not in fact the work of Ravi Varma. There is evidence that other artists were employed to paint under the Ravi Varma imprint. Venniyoor records that he was assisted by V. M. Dhurandhar and by M. A. Joshi from Baroda, in addition to his own brother Raja Raja Varma, and also gave commissions to an impecunious western-trained artist named Naoroji.<sup>31</sup> It is also clear from even a cursory examination of Ravi Varma Press lithographs that there is a wide stylistic variation between many of the

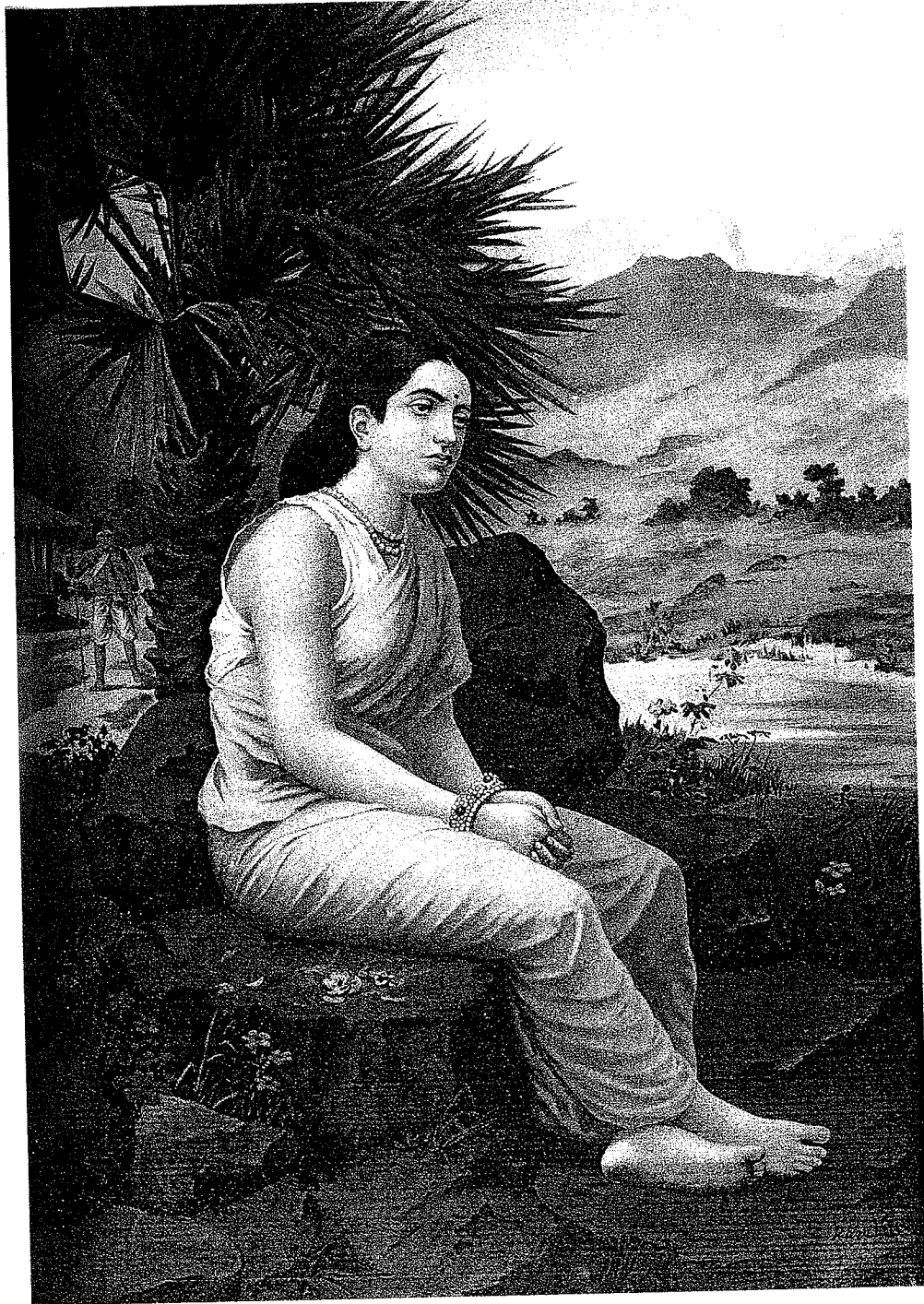


37 Ravi Varma, *Standing Lakshmi* (c. 1894), a Ravi Varma Press chromolithograph decorated with *zari*, and pasted onto board.

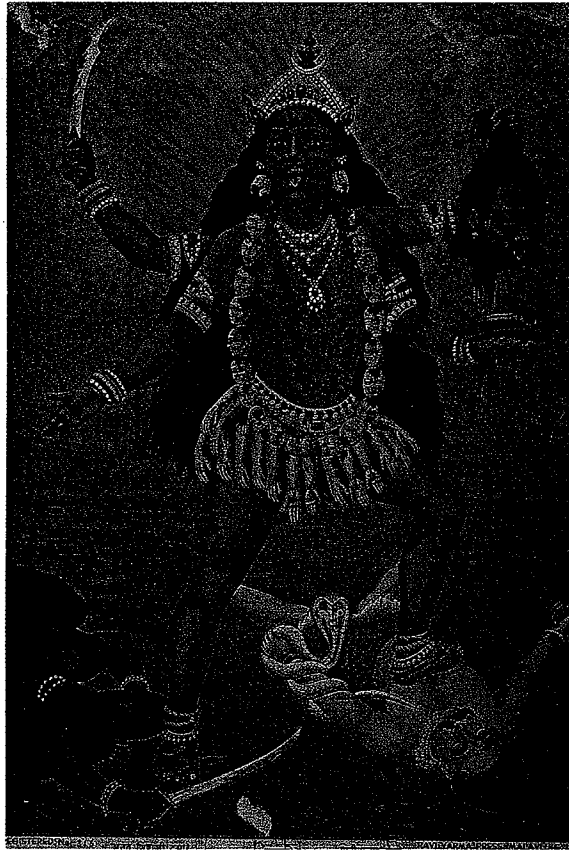
mass-produced prints and those oil paintings whose authorship is not disputed.<sup>32</sup>

The Ravi Varma Press *Kali* (illus. 39) – printed at various times as no. 68 and as no. 315 – is a good example of a later image (post 1915) that clearly has no direct connection with Ravi Varma the artist and is, in many ways, utterly opposed not only at a stylistic level, but also at what one might describe as the moral and political level. The image bears all the standard iconographic traits of this popular Bengali goddess and differs from earlier Calcutta Art Studio lithographs perhaps only in its directness and primacy of colour. It is difficult in a print like this to see what might have been the basis for the populace of Bombay's aesthetic discriminations in favour of





38 Ravi Varma, *Sita Banvas or Exile of Sita* (c. mid-1890s), a Ravi Varma Press chromolithograph.



39 *Kali* (c. 1915) by Ravi Varma Press, Karla-Lonavala.

Ravi Varma Press products as against those of earlier studios. The Calcutta Art Studio image (illus. 90, which dates in its earliest form from 1879) makes full use of the possibilities of lithography, achieving dramatic chiaroscuro effects. The Ravi Press image by contrast features a crudely coloured central figure against a plain background and replaces the theatrical apocalyptic quality of the Calcutta image with a simplistic gore. The Ravi Varma image also came under attack in a missionary tract, *Glimpses of a Land of Sun and Sadness*, published by the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society in the early twentieth century. The author, Beatrice M. W. Grautoff, reproduced the lithograph and commented: "What an awful picture!" we exclaim as we look at the ferocious figure of Kali!<sup>33</sup>

#### MAKING THE GODS MORE REAL

In chapter 1 we explored the impetus behind the establishment of government art schools in India. It had been hoped that new techniques of representation could be instilled that would facilitate a broader dismantling of the Hindu world view. Perspective would necessarily make the gods less real, it was believed, for the mythic realm they inhabited would be unable to bear the scrutiny of linear perspective and its mathematical certainty. Linear perspective was not only the technical mainstay of the representational scheme that underwrote that certainty, but was also the central totem in the repertoire of colonial signification.

However, these new representational systems disseminated by the art schools were used by Indian artists to make the gods *more* real, not less real. Techniques taught in art schools proved not to be like surgeons' knives, excising myth and abnormality, but appeared instead as something like magical wands that could be used to endow gods with a tangibility and presence that made them more immediate. Perspective and the conventions of realism did not render the gods absurd or archaic: they made them more present. As Anuradha Kapur observes, within realism, 'representationally, the past and the present almost look the same': the time of the Gods appears to be 'our' historical contemporary time.<sup>34</sup>

One of the effects of changes in representational codes in the late nineteenth century, as images worked within realist conventions, was a transformation in the relationship between an Indian tradition and what was authorized as believable. Realism – in its pictorial, performative and literary guises – provided a translational bridgehead from the 'mythic' to the 'historical', allowing previously disavowed individuals and narratives to inhabit the chronotope of truth. A set of closely connected new media (oil painting, theatre, chromolithography and film) became a Trojan horse at the gates of colonial truth. The truths that Indians were starting to create within these allied media could no longer be disregarded.

One detailed example of how Ravi Varma visually collapsed mythic time into the present charts a trajectory that takes us beyond his own lifetime and permits us to explore some of the unities that audiences and readers brought to bear upon his images. It also gives us an insight into the political space that connected the work of figures such as Ravi Varma (who, as I have argued, was at least as much 'imperialist' as he was 'nationalist') and 'extremist' followers of Tilak. In addition it illuminates the regional dimension of these patterns.

Later in this book, we shall see examples of explicit allegory that serve as popular visual texts for Nehruvian modernization. In these images produced at the apex of independent nationhood we will find all the terms of the allegory explicitly present. The artists responsible for these later images are ex-sign painters and I suggest that their experiences in communicating messages through advertisements significantly affected their subsequent work. But there is also, clearly, a political factor of huge importance: within Independent India the multiple terms of the allegory could be stated openly; frequently in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial India, in order to evade surveillance, only one of the terms was made visible. We might also surmise that in Ravi Varma's case this political constraint was also paralleled by his own perception of opposed nationalist and colonial markets for his work. Many of his images are masterpieces of liminality that, even more so than most images, stand on the borders of different communities of interpretation.

In the late 1870s Ravi Varma was commissioned by Maharaja Visakhram Tirunaal to paint *Sita Bhoopravesam* (Sita's Ordeal; illus. 40), a work which was to be of great significance 'on his road to national recognition'.<sup>35</sup> Following an incident during a visit by the Duke of Buckingham, the Governor of Madras, Ravi Varma severed his relations with Visakhram and after some time sold the painting to Sir T. Madhav Rao, who sought an example of Ravi Varma's work for the young Gaekwad of Baroda.



40 Ravi Varma, *Sita Bhoopravesam*, plate reproduced from S. N. Joshi, *Half-Tone Reprints* (1911).

Venniyoor records that *Sita Bhoopravesam* caused 'a sensation' in Baroda. The painting depicts the final ordeal of Sita upon her return to Ayodhya. After enduring years of captivity by Ravana, her chastity is openly questioned by Kaikeyi, who had been instrumental in ensuring the banishment of Ram. Unable to endure this final insult, Sita appeals to Bhoomi Devi, the earth mother. A chasm opens at her feet and Bhoomi Devi takes her down into this as Ram looks on in astonishment.

This is an image capable of various readings and we may suppose that its popularity was also due to the resonances it struck with those who saw it in the 1880s. Something of the connotative dazzle thrown off by the image is suggested by Venniyoor's perceptive comment: 'The look on Sita's face is an enigma: it may be anger or love, grief or pride, perhaps a shade of every emotion she had known in her life.'<sup>36</sup>

In the context of the feminization of a subject India in the late nineteenth century, it is plausible that Sita may have been read as a figure of the nation and its people, whose honour was also threatened by colonial interrogators. We may also see some of Ravi Varma's personal predicaments as a producer of nationalist allegories under the patronage of the British and their Indian collaborators inscribed in this image. He pursued an exemplary career of 'sly civility',<sup>37</sup> balancing the needs of European patrons

and local elites against his own religious and political commitments. Ranjani Rajagopal provides the following, illuminating, observation: 'When he travelled with Europeans in trains he observed their habits never coming in their way, allowing people to follow their own ways of life. He did not believe in appropriating the English way of life or speaking English since he knew that these were foreign elements that would have to return home some day.'<sup>38</sup>

By the time the play *Kichaka Vadh* (The Killing of Kichak) came to the attention of the Bombay Government in 1907, it had already marked out Marathi theatre as a realm deserving thorough examination. In the same year, A. C. Logan (Commissioner, Central Division, Bombay Government) had recorded that 'the performance of such plays is calculated to excite the lowest classes, who would not be reached by newspapers or meetings'.<sup>39</sup> *Kichaka Vadh* was performed throughout Bombay and the Deccan 'to houses packed with large native audiences'<sup>40</sup> until it was banned in January 1910.<sup>41</sup> The play focused on an episode from the *Mahabharata* that had also formed the subject matter of a series of Ravi Varma paintings, which had been circulated widely through reproductions as chromolithographs and postcards. This episode concerned the consequences of the exile of Draupadi and the Pandavas from Hastinapura for thirteen years. The first twelve of these were spent in a forest, and the final year in disguise in the city of Viratnagar. A condition of the original agreement stated that if they were discovered during this period of disguise they would be required to spend another twelve years in the forest. During this period Kichaka, the brother of Queen Sudeshna (in whose employ Draupadi then was), returned to Viratnagar and was attracted to a beautiful *sairandhri* (tire-woman) who, unbeknown to him, was Draupadi in disguise. Kichaka requested her to be sent to his harem and Yudhistira (the eldest of the five Pandavas) then faced the dilemma of revealing his identity or Draupadi's degradation. The dilemma was resolved by Bhima's decision to kill Kichaka secretly.

In addition to images of *The Stripping of Draupadi*,

*Sudeshna and Draupadi* and *Draupadi at the Court of Virata*,<sup>42</sup> Ravi Varma also painted four images listed by S. N. Joshi as 'Sairandhri no.s 1-4'. The first two of these are very similar and depict the anxious Draupadi before her encounter with Kichaka. No. 1 'represents Draupadi's grief and anguish when she is on the point of departing for Kichaka's house, in obedience to her mistress' orders'<sup>43</sup> and no. 2 shows her 'on her way to Kichaka's house . . . praying to the *Sun* to protect her from danger and to preserve her chastity'.<sup>44</sup> The other two images depict her arrival; she is shown in no. 3 with a look 'of fear and haughty disdain and contempt, mingled together at the sight of the beastly Kichaka'<sup>45</sup> and in no. 4, depicted in a seedy chiaroscuro, we see her 'standing by herself in helpless terror and Kichaka . . . trying all the arts of persuasion to seduce her'. This later image was certainly sold as both a chromolithograph and a postcard.<sup>46</sup> The chromolithograph version (illus. 42) is titled *Keechak Sairandhri* and differs slightly from the painting: the doorway is shrouded in darkness and the plate on the floor holds two bunches of grapes. The image reproduced here (as illus. 41) is a postcard (dating from c. 1910) which photographically reproduces the painting. Printed by P.S. Joshi of Bombay, it is captioned on the reverse: 'Kichaka in order to satisfy his lustful desire is encroaching upon Sairandhri's modesty'.

This door to a darkened space gives visual form to what we may suppose was in popular interpretation seen as a metaphorical opening onto the historical experience of colonial India. That this may have been the case is certainly suggested by the interpretative gloss placed upon this episode in the play to which we referred earlier. *Kichaka Vadh* was the work of Krishnaji Prabhakar (alias Kakasaheb) Khadilkar, who had taken over the chief editorship of *Kesari* following Tilak's conviction in 1908 (see below). His first play had been produced as early as 1896, and shortly before *Kichaka Vadh*, which opened in 1907, he had written *Sawai Madhavravacha Mrityu*, which dramatized the suicide of Madhavrao peshwa. Vasant Shantaram Desai highlights Khadilkar's political intentionality, noting



41 Ravi Varma, *Kichak-Sairandhri* (c. 1910), a postcard published by P. S. Joshi, Bombay.

that 'he had a message to give to the people of Maharashtra who were then, like the rest of India, downtrodden by foreign rule'.<sup>47</sup>

The play opens with Kichaka's return to Viratnagar and focuses on the distinction between the indecisive ditherings of both King Virata and Yudhistira and the forceful decisiveness of Bhima, who, so *The Times* noted in 1910, 'wishes to strangle Kichaka regardless of the consequences':

At last Bhima and Draupadi together extract from [Yudhistira] a most reluctant permission. Bhima goes secretly to the Bairoba temple, and removing

from its stand the god's idol, he takes its place. So hidden, he is present when Draupadi, abandoned by the King's guards,<sup>48</sup> is seized upon by Kichaka. In vain Draupadi appeals to the latter for mercy. He laughs alike at tears and menaces, and is about to carry her off in triumph when the god Bairoba is seen to rise from his pedestal. It is Bhima. He seizes the terrified Kichaka, hurls him to the floor and strangles him at Draupadi's feet.<sup>49</sup>

The report in *The Times* from which Chirol quotes then records that 'these things are all allegory':

Although his name is nowhere uttered on the stage or mentioned in the printed play, everyone in the theatre knows that Kichaka is really intended to be Lord Curzon, that Draupadi is India, and Yudhistira is the Moderate and Bhima the Extremist Party. Every now and again unmistakable clues are provided. The question indeed admits of no doubt, for since the play first appeared in 1907 the whole Deccan has been blazoning forth the identity of the characters. Once they have been recognized the inner meaning of the play becomes clear. A weak Government at home, represented by King Virata, has given the Viceroy a free hand. He has made use of it to insult and humiliate India. Of her two champions, the Moderates advocate gentle – that is, constitutional – measures. The Extremists, out of deference to the older party, agree, although satisfied of the ineffectiveness of this course. Waiting until this has been demonstrated, they adopt violent methods and everything becomes easy. The oppressor is disposed of without difficulty. His followers, namely the Anglo-Indians – are, as it is prophesied in the play and as narrated in the Mahabharata, massacred with equal ease.<sup>50</sup>

The *Times* correspondent sought also to convince his readers that this discovery of the allegorical dimensions of the performance was no mere figment

of his own imagination. Rather, his own brief ethnography of the audience suggested that they too shared this reading:

It may be said that all this is mere fooling. But no Englishman who has seen the play acted would agree. All his life he will remember the tense, scowling faces of the men as they watch Kichaka's outrageous acts, the glistening eyes of the Brahmin ladies as they listen to Draupadi's entreaties, their scorn of Yudhistira's tameness, their admiration of Bhima's passionate protests, and the deep hum of satisfaction which approves the slaughter of the tyrant.<sup>51</sup>

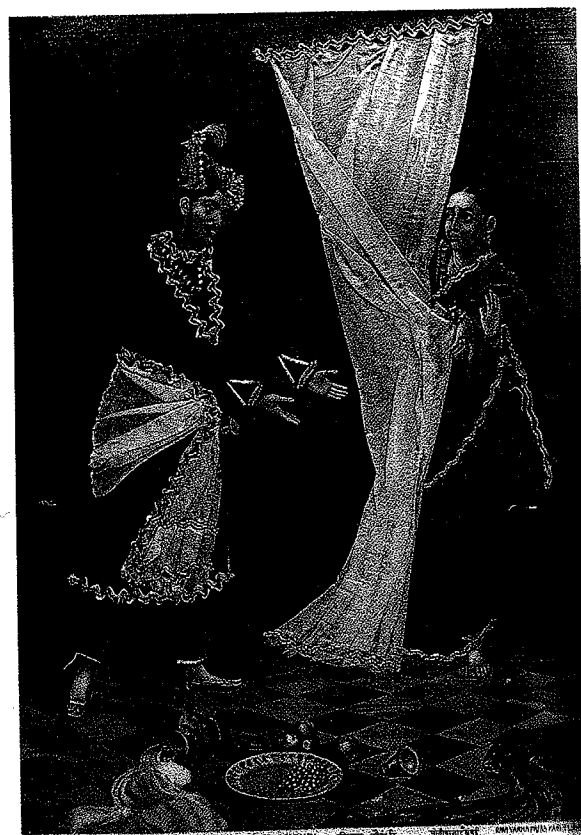
It has been suggested that a later play of Khadilkar's displayed a similar allegorical quality: in *Bhaubandaki*, which was produced during Tilak's incarceration in Mandalay, Ramshastri, the judge in the Peshwa court was played 'in such a powerful manner that the audience thought that it was Tilak that had been portrayed'.<sup>52</sup>

Situating Ravi Varma's image at the nexus of theatre and politics allows us to see in great detail the new hybridized space that opens up as the 'powers of European art' operate in a wider cultural field. Rather than in the intentionality of Ravi Varma, it is in the wider nexus of representational practices and the audience's sly consumption that the 'ruse of recognition' can be seen to operate. Indian images were beginning to succeed in animating the national voice, but not in the manner originally anticipated by Napier. The gods were not simply mannequins to be remodelled within a new representational scheme; the realignment of deities along a new realist tangent created a new hybrid space of magical realist mytho-politics. This hybridity is as Homi Bhabha has suggested, a 'separate' space, 'a space of separation . . . which has been systematically denied by both colonialists and nationalists who have sought authority in the authenticity of "origins"'.<sup>53</sup>

As well as their after-life in a wider performative mytho-political realm, mass-produced images, such as

those by Ravi Varma, were also appropriated at a personal and domestic level. The most dramatic sign of this is the 'dressing' of the figures in the chromolithograph. This supplementary adornment encompassed the application of sequins, glitter, and in some cases, cloth embellished with brocade (*zari*). In an example of this transformation applied to Ravi Varma's chromolithograph *Keechak Sairandhri* (illus. 42) both the central figures have been dressed: Kichaka wears red velvet and Sairandhri is adorned in a magenta sari. Both their costumes are edged with a metallic *zari* and adorned with sequins and small baubles.

Conventionally this might be termed 'anti-realist' since the application of all these materials to the



42 Ravi Varma, *Keechak-Sairandhri*, c. 1900. Ravi Varma Press chromolithograph decorated with *zari*.



picture surface destroys the illusion of the picture plane as a window. The reality effect is fractured through the sheer weight of signs of the image's coming into being. To view it as magical realism, however (see chapter 1), allows us to understand it more productively. As with Carpentier's baroque there is a 'horror of . . . the naked surface' and the hybridization of the surface of the image permits the viewer to 'flee' from the 'geometrical arrangements'<sup>54</sup> in which Draupadi's honour is threatened. Draupadi is here the subaltern confronted by a political force that offers to take her through the door to the vanishing point. The materialization of Draupadi as a textured mark on the surface (which is also a trace of domestic female engagement with the image) might be seen as a refusal of this journey, a turning back that creates a new space of projection, in the opposite direction, back towards the beholder. Partha Chatterjee has stressed that, for the late nineteenth-century middle-class Bengali babu, agents of the colonial state 'were not objects of respect and emulation: they were objects of fear'.<sup>55</sup> The complex of images that encompasses Ravi Varma's original painting, Khadilkar's play and the hybridized/customized chromolithographs of the image are all manifestations of what Joshi termed 'helpless terror'. But within this complex there is a changing dynamic. Whereas for Ravi Varma the problem is how to plot this terror within a system of representational co-ordinates, with the 'powers of European art', in popular appropriations and reworkings of the images there is evidence that it is this system of 'mathematically regular ordering'<sup>56</sup> that itself has become part of a system of terror from which a redemption is necessary. One of the determining elements in this emerging Indian magical realism thus becomes how to escape a horror encoded in the very language of visual representation. Surface accretions, and attempts to pull the image back away from the vanishing point of colonial reason, emerge as parallel to the attempt within Bengali drama, recorded by Partha Chatterjee, to 'escape from the oppressive rigidities of the new

discursive prose into the semantic richness and polyphony of ordinary, uncolonized speech'.<sup>57</sup>

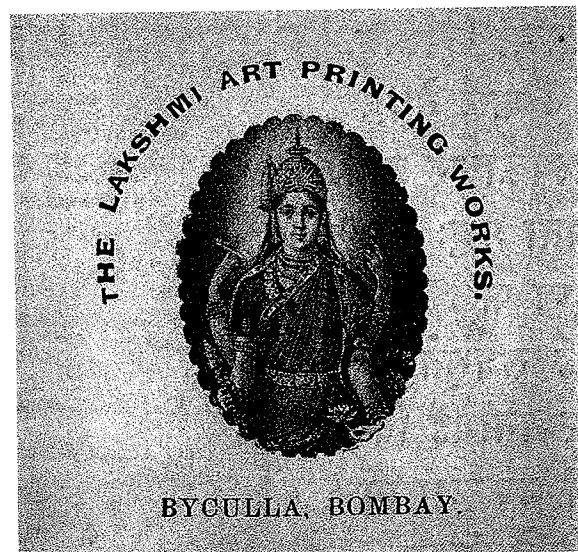
D. G. PHALKE

A parallel inter-ocularity is to be seen at play in the relationship between chromolithography and film. Partha Mitter has suggested that 'Ravi Varma's spectacular canvases influenced the pioneers of the Indian cinema . . . much as Victorian art inspired the Hollywood director D. W. Griffith'.<sup>58</sup> There is without doubt a remarkable parallelism between the titles and themes of Ravi Varma Press chromolithographs and silent films of the first decade of Indian film production, but it is one that largely circumvents Ravi Varma himself. The mutual obsession between film and chromolithography is inscribed right from the start of the moving picture era. After a decade of experiments with documentary shorts – some of which like *Benares or Kashi* and *Ganapati Festival* (released c. 1911)<sup>59</sup> focused on places and activities of great ritual significance – a series of hugely popular narrative mythological films appeared. The first of these, which has not survived, was R. G. Torney's *Pundalik*, released at Bombay's Coronation Cinematograph on 18 May 1912.<sup>60</sup> The film, which was made with the technical assistance of the photographers Bourne and Shepherd, was a biography of the Marahasthrian saint. When its run was extended for a further week in response to public demand the Coronation announced that 'almost half the Bombay Hindu population has seen it last week and we want the other half to do so now'.<sup>61</sup> Shortly after this two further mythologicals appeared, *Savitri*<sup>62</sup> and *An Episode from the Ramayan*, shown at the Gaiety from 2 November 1912, which depicted 'Rama in Lanka, slaying the demon Ravana, followed by a grand procession of elephants, chariots etc'.<sup>63</sup> All these films preceded D. G. Phalke's much better known *Raja Harishchandra*, which was released in 1913. In Phalke's career, however, we can trace explicit contiguities between different representational strategies.



Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (b 1860) had studied at the J. J. School of Art in Bombay and the Kalabhavan (school of art) in Baroda. He practised as a professional photographer, magician and lithographer before making his mark as India's first feature film-maker. He developed his knowledge of film-making through correspondence with the editor of the *Bioscope* in London and during a visit to England, where he was assisted by the manager of the Hepworth Company.<sup>64</sup> What Ravi Varma is to chromolithography, Phalke is to film: both have acquired an unassailable iconicity as national cultural figures.

As with the early Calcutta lithographs and Girish Chandra Ghosh's mythological plays there is a simple historical conjunction through which the key producers of these various art forms came to work intimately together. The conjunction occurred over the period from about 1901 until 1911 while Phalke worked variously at Ravi Varma's Lonavala press, and subsequently managed a printing works in Bombay. Rajadhyaksha records Phalke's move to Lonavala, the site of the Ravi Varma Press, midway between Poona and Bombay, which by now was run by the German technician Schleicher to whom Ravi Varma had sold his interest in 1901. The chronological coincidence of Ravi Varma's departure and Phalke's arrival amounts almost to a succession of leadership in the field of popular visuality. Leaving Lonavala, Phalke established his own press, Phalke's Engraving and Printing Works, in Dadar and, following a visit to Germany in 1909 in search of further technological expertise, he appears to have established the Lakshmi Art Printing Works in Byculla.<sup>65</sup> Starting in 1910 this new enterprise published a series of profusely illustrated booklets, collectively named *Suvarnamala*, coinciding with festivals such as Shivratri, Ram Navami, Krishna Asthami, Ganesh Chaturthi and Divali (illus. 43). These were available on subscription, bound with a silk ribbon, and single-colour illustrations by the artist M. V. Dhurandhar, another graduate of the J. J. School of Art who had previously worked for the Ravi Varma Press.<sup>66</sup>



43 Logo of The Lakshmi Art Printing Works, printed on the back cover of the 'Ramnavami' number of *Suvarnamala*, 1911. A press run by D. G. Phalke immediately before his venture into film-making.

Following his revelatory experience while watching *The Life of Christ*<sup>67</sup> Phalke studied cinematography and travelled to England in February 1912 to purchase equipment. His first film, *Raja Harishchandra*, was premiered on 3 May 1913 at the Coronation Cinema in Bombay. The story of Raja Harishchandra had been the subject of an earlier lithograph by the Calcutta Art Studio<sup>68</sup> and also of a painting by Ravi Varma, but it is in Phalke's later films that the parallelism between the printed and filmic image is most marked.

In 1917 Phalke released *Lanka Dahan* (The Burning of Lanka) at the West End Cinema at Girgaum, Bombay,<sup>69</sup> where it was shown every hour from 7 a.m. until midnight.<sup>70</sup> This was Phalke's greatest success and was a triumph for the actor A. Salunke who played both Sita and Ram. Barnouw and Krishaswamy record that when Ram appeared the audience prostrated itself before the screen.<sup>71</sup> It has been claimed that when it was shown in Poona the crowds almost broke down the door and that in Madras the film's takings had to be transported in a bullock cart with police

protection.<sup>72</sup> An account of its Bombay opening by the film-maker J. B. H. Wadia provides some sense of its huge impact upon the audience:

'Lanka Dahan' was a minor masterpiece of its time. The spectacle of Hanuman's figure becoming progressively diminutive as he flew higher and higher in the clouds and the burning of the city of Lanka in table-top photography were simply awe-inspiring.

I remember that devout villagers from nearby Bombay had come in large numbers in their bullock carts to have *darshan* of their beloved God, the Lord Rama. The roadside was blocked with the caravan of bullock carts. Many of the villagers had stayed overnight in their improvised dwellings just to see the film again the next day.<sup>73</sup>

Print number 307 published by the Ravi Varma Press (probably c. 1914; illus. 44) depicts Hanuman airborne above the conflagration engulfing Lanka and we might reasonably suppose that this served as a model for Phalke.

One year later in 1918 Phalke released *Shree Krishna Janma*, of which a portion survives in the National Film Archive in Pune. Here, a succession of familiar images appear which support the contention that Phalke created narrative filmic elaborations grounded in immediately recognizable images that had already penetrated the popular psyche of India through the mass-produced works of these earlier presses.

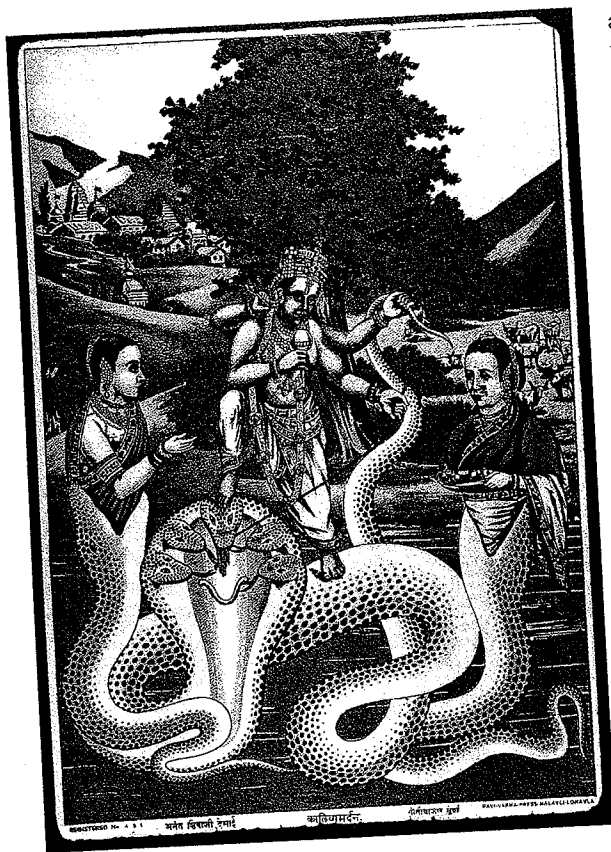
In 1919 Phalke continued his exploration of Krishna mythology in *Kaliya Mardan*, of which almost the whole footage survives. The film's central scene replicates an image already familiar through a Ravi Varma lithograph. But the influence here is not of Ravi Varma the artist, since both the chromolithographs of Hanuman and of Krishna subduing Kaliya (illus. 45) reflect the visual culture of the Ravi Varma Press many years after the artist had disengaged himself from it. The contiguity may thus be between different periods of Phalke's own career, firstly as a



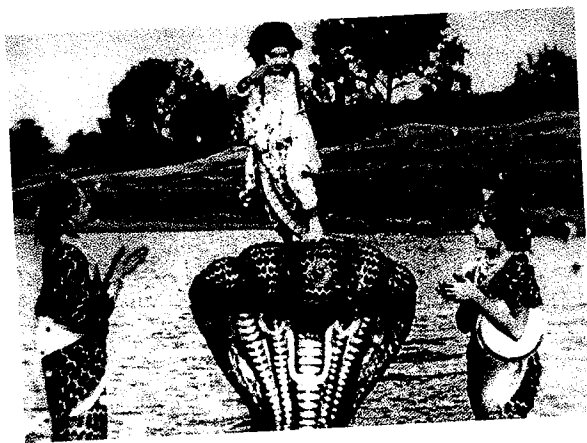
44 *Lankadahan Hanuman*, c. early 1900s, Ravi Varma Press. Phalke may well have prepared such blocks during his time at the Ravi Varma Press.

block-maker and artist and subsequently as a film-maker (illus. 46).

We have seen that the Ravi Varma painting that became the key motif of Khadilkar's play *Kichaka Vadh* was disseminated throughout India in the form of chromolithographs and postcards. It was this mass-reproduction that in the eyes of some critics led to Ravi Varma's aesthetic downfall. Having stolen the fire of perspective he was foolishly tempted to compromise his art through lithography. The dominant myth has Ravi Varma as a reluctant participant, persuaded in the end by the need to raise popular taste and drive out debased 'scenes of heaven and hell'. Thus did he unwittingly become the 'father of calendar art',



45 Kaliyamardan, c. 1915. Ravi Varma Press.



46 A still from D. G. Phalke's *Kaliya Mardan*, 1918.

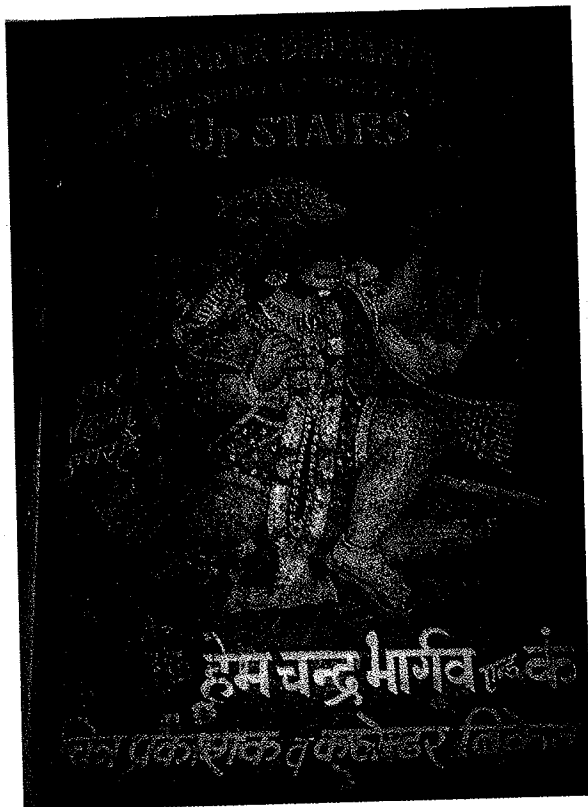
a point repeated *ad infinitum* at the time of the 1993 Delhi retrospective.

In fact, the evidence to be found in any Indian village (and one such is described in the final chapter of this book) tells a rather different story, for what twenty-first century peasants choose to hang on their walls owes comparatively little to Ravi Varma's work. Those images that do replicate themes associated with the artist could equally well be routed through an alternative Calcutta Art Studio or Chitrashala Steam Press lineage. Rather than Ravi Varma it is Brahman painters from Nathdvara that dominate mass picture production. An earlier consensus proposed that it was Ravi Varma 'who established the representational style, defined the parameters of the archive, and pioneered its mass reproduction': this is a thesis that now requires revision.<sup>74</sup>

#### HEM CHANDER BHARGAVA

Among the bustle of Delhi's famous Chandni Chowk market is an old painted signboard showing Hanuman flying through the air bearing herbs to the wounded Lakshman (illus. 47). This sign advertises the presence of the oldest surviving picture publishers, the firm of Hem Chander Bhargava, founded in 1900, which still occupies its original modest first-floor offices.

Hem Chander Bhargava's press, founded only eight years after Ravi Varma's, displayed a similar commercial acumen and 'sly civility' in responding to the diverse markets of late colonial India. Hem Chander was much more active than Ravi Varma in addressing other religious communities in India. Sikh and Muslim subjects figure prominently among his earliest images. However, like Ravi Varma, Hem Chander's output engaged with and reflected the parallel technologies of photography and cinematography, but it also increasingly produced images for a mass Indian market that started to repudiate some of the conventions of photography. Just as the Ravi Varma Press (especially after the artist's departure in



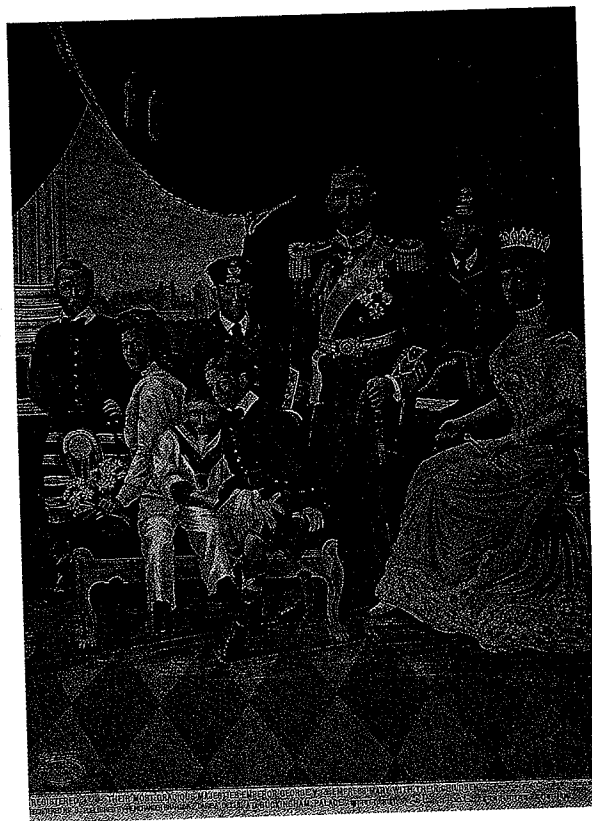
47 Hemchander Bhargava's signboard in Chandni Chowk, Delhi. Dating from the early twentieth century this is still displayed outside their shop.

1901) increasingly produced what might be termed 'post-perspectival' images, so Hem Chander too produced images that in appealing to new emergent markets took him further away from the 'powers of European art'.

The earliest print of which I know, number 3,<sup>75</sup> dates from about 1911.<sup>76</sup> This depicts *Their Most Gracious Majesties Emperor George V & Empress Mary* with their children at Buckingham Palace (illus. 48) and was printed at the Bolton Fine Art Litho Works in Tardeo, Bombay. This is clearly modelled on a photograph and we may surmise that the image was issued to coincide with the enthusiasm that stemmed from George V's visit with the Queen for the Durbar in 1911. It was during the Delhi Durbar on 12 December 1911 that the

King rescinded Curzon's partition of Bengal and announced the transfer of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi.<sup>77</sup>

This curious image reveals something of Hem Chander's commercial instincts, printing a diverse set of saleable images. There is some evidence of the earlier circulation of such royal images within the public spaces of popular Hinduism. Sidney Low's account of a tour through India with the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1905-6 reveals that royal images were offered at a 'mart for the sale of devotional literature' at the Allahabad Kumbh Mela: 'The customers can buy religious tracts, or if they prefer, ancient chromos of King Edward VII as Prince of Wales in the costume of the 'seventies - a remnant, perhaps, of the previous Royal tour.'<sup>78</sup> The



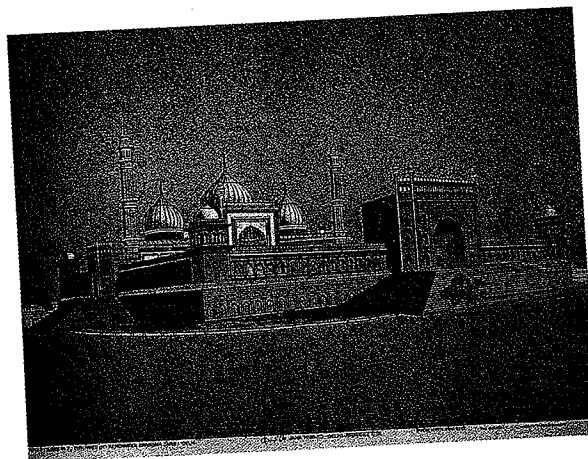
48 *Their Most Gracious Majesties . . .*, c. 1911, chromolithograph. Hem Chander Bhargava.

comparative lateness of the image in relation to Hem Chander Bhargava's date of first trading, however, suggests that initially it may have been concerned with other matters. Prestigious picture distributors such as Anant Shivaji Desai simultaneously pursued other sidelines (such as the sale of hats, fancy dress and German silver) and we shall shortly see that the first seven years of S. S. Brijbasi's existence did not involve the publication of any pictures.

The Hem Chander myth stakes a claim to a rather different series of developments that I have as yet been unable to substantiate. In this version, the company produced religious prints at their very inception in 1900. Kishorilal Bhargava claimed that they started with between eight and ten designs, one of which was the image of Hanuman depicted on their Chandni Chowk signboard. Other designs depicted Ram, Krishna, Durga, Shiv, Saraswati and Lakshmi, and it is claimed that from the start Hem Chander's designs were quite distinct from and superior to the products of Ravi Varma Press.

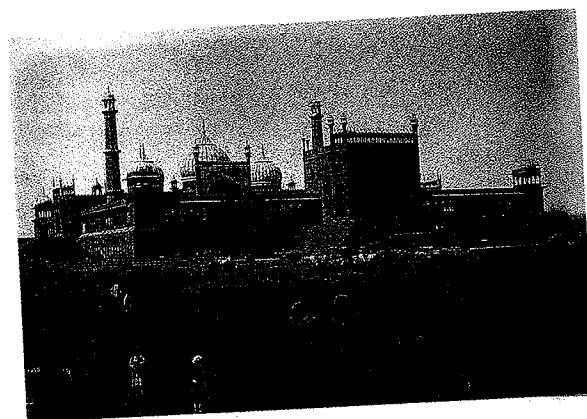
In addition to the George V print, the surviving images from this period depict Sikh and Muslim subjects, although their serial numbers suggest that an even larger number of Hindu images may well have been published alongside these. The earliest extant images are all chromolithographs (10 x 14 inches) printed at the Bolton Fine Art Litho Press in Tardeo, Bombay. The first 168 images appear to have been printed there before printing was switched to the British India Press, also in Bombay, who produced images of a similar size and quality. In the mid-1930s – probably in response to the superior size and quality of Brijbasi prints of the early 1930s – Hem Chander arranged for large photo-lithos (14 x 20 inches and 20 x 28 inches) to be printed in Germany. World War II terminated this arrangement and Hem Chander then had its stock photo-lithographed in Bombay (almost certainly by the Bolton F.A.L. Works).

Hem Chander's print number 7 is a highly stylized representation of Delhi's Jama Masjid (illus. 49). This again suggests Hem Chander's opportunism during



49 Jama Masjid, c. 1910, chromolithograph, Hem Chander Bhargava.

this period, for we can imagine this appealing to two markets – a Muslim audience who might have used it for devotional purposes, and a tourist/ traveller audience who would also have had access to photographic images such as Lala Deen Dayal's early photograph (illus. 50). The Hem Chander image bears the marks of Company style and we will soon note the sharp contrasts with later Nathdvara compositions. The Jama Masjid is drawn almost as a perspectival exercise with a degree of competence that permits us to say that the artist stood slightly to the left of where Lala Deen Dayal had earlier



50 Lala Deen Dayal, *Jama Masjid*, Delhi, c. 1874. Albumen print.



erected his camera. Such perspectival grids are rarely apparent in later Nathdvāra images.

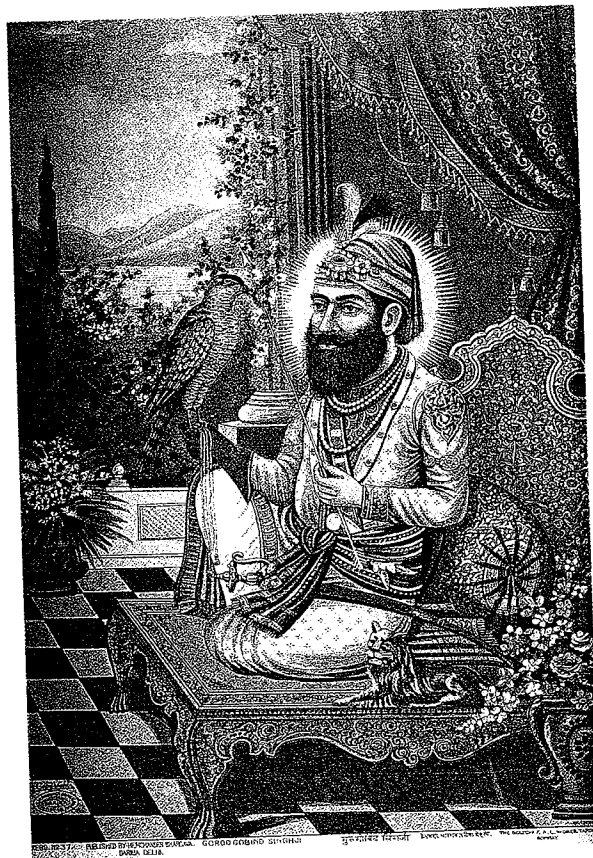
Other similar images from around this period (probably the mid-1920s) depict the Taj Mahal, Humayoun's Tomb, the Dargah of Nizamuddin, Mecca and Karbala, and a very large number of Koranic texts inscribed within ornate floral borders. *Karbala Moula* (no. 150) bears a close similarity to a Ravi Varma Press image (no. 741) and suggests something of the interchange of designs during this period.

There are an equally significant number of Sikh prints depicting Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Arjun Dev, among others. Three of these are worth commenting upon. The first, *Ten Sikh Goroos* (no. 24), may well be from an earlier series of prints whose further discovery might substantiate the claims made on behalf of Hem Chander Bhargava. It shows Guru Nanak flanked by his attendants Mardana and Bala surrounded by further depictions, in distinct medallions, of the gurus. No. 50, *Guru Granth Prakash* (illus. 51), portrays all the gurus together in a unified pictorial space, a meeting which, as McLeod notes,<sup>79</sup> could never have taken place since more than two centuries separate the first from the last of the gurus. An image like this is powerful proof of a habitus characterized by 'messianic' time for such simultaneity could be made possible only by a 'Divine Providence which alone is able to devise such a plan of history and supply the key to its understanding'.<sup>80</sup> Although we can provisionally date this lithograph to about 1925, it bears a close similarity to a much earlier woodcut image collected by Lockwood Kipling about 1870,<sup>81</sup> clearly suggesting something of the diversity of printed images that always existed alongside the enthusiasm for realism within lithography at the end of the nineteenth century.

A third image of Guru Gobind (*Goroo Gobind Singhji*, no. 37; illus. 52) by contrast exists in a state closer to what Anderson describes as 'homogenous, empty time'.<sup>82</sup> The scene – of Guru Gobind sitting on a *gaddi* (throne) – contrives to recreate the codes of photographic portraiture and background scenery of the



51 *Guru Granth Prakash*, c. 1920, chromolithograph. Hem Chander Bhargava.

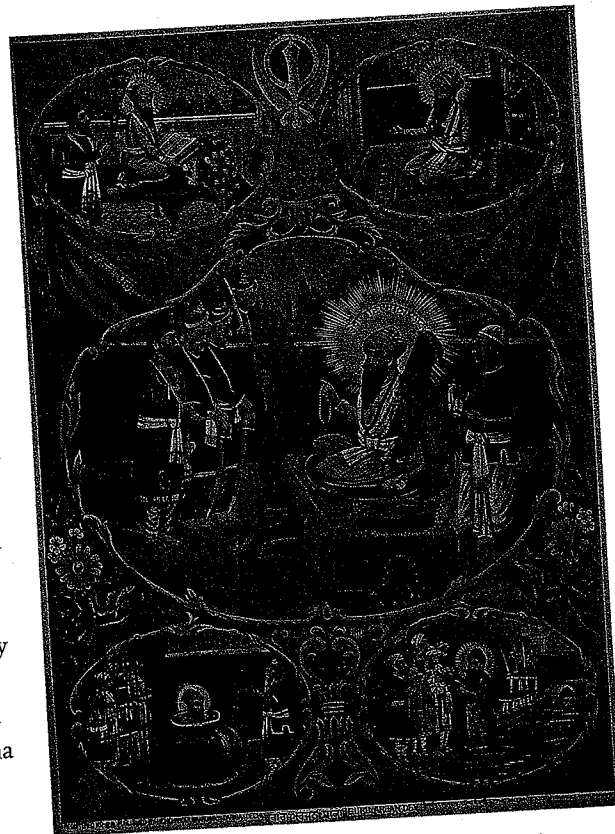


52 *Goroo* (sic) *Gobind Singhji*, c. 1920, chromolithograph. Hem Chander Bhargava. An image which draws upon the conventions of early studio photography.

time.<sup>83</sup> There is a great attention to surfaces: the sumptuous *takia* (cushion), *gaddi* and curtain drapes are carefully worked over, and the pillar, plant pots and landscape vista all suggest the paraphernalia of photographic representation of the time. These conventions were apparent in the earlier image of George V, and an intriguing local Indian parallel is reproduced by Gutman in her study of Indian photographic practice.<sup>84</sup> The influence of conventions associated with photography is also apparent in two further images, *Shahidi Darshan* ('Darshan of the Martyrs', no. 53) and *Guru Arjan Dev* (no. 69; illus. 53). In both these images there are five narrative episodes presented in oval or irregular medallions as though they were photographic albumen prints inset in an old-fashioned photographic album designed for cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards. This impression is compounded by the presence of floral decorations, another feature of many of these early albums.

The inter-ocular field of the scopic regime outlined in this chapter is clear. Phalke's work at the Ravi Varma Press ensured a profound intimacy between many chromolithographs and early cinematography. Hem Chander Bhargava was likewise sculpting a lithographic practice that was profoundly indebted to photographic conventions of the time. However, if (as Ashish Rajadhyaksha has argued) Phalke's refusal of perspective might be seen as an 'ethical choice', a repudiation of the colonial world picture,<sup>85</sup> we might also see in Hem Chander's output a similar fumbling towards a post-perspectival practice. Photography is explicitly referenced in many images but more for its surface materiality (as in *Guru Arjan Dev*) than its perspectival rationalization of the world. The scopic regime that Ravi Varma, Phalke and Hem Chander Bhargava articulate passes through an engagement with what Richard Temple had called 'powers of European art' and emerges on the other side marked by the external signs of that passage, but bearing a subtly different moral – and political – message.

The scopic regime that these different practitioners together produced was built upon technologies and



53 *Guru Arjan Dev*, c. 1920, chromolithograph. Hemchander Bhargava. The design replicates the appearance of some late nineteenth-century photographic albums.

conventions promulgated by the British colonial state. However, these representational techniques had been appropriated rather than fully internalized.<sup>86</sup> Indian art had been undeniably 'modernized' but, to recall Gladstone Solomon, it was a 'secret of their own country' that Indians were now 'engaged in unravelling'.