



# Ketan Mehta captures Ravi Varma's passions

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**K**etan Mehta's latest film, *Rang Rasiya*, was almost not allowed to open last Friday. This seemed ironical to me, for the celebrated painter, Raja Ravi Varma, on whom the work is based, had always fought for artistic freedom.

To begin with, the movie was in the cans for five years, because, as Mehta told me over the telephone from Mumbai, a distributor could not be found. And mind you, this happened to one of India's most renowned directors who gave us movies like *Bhavni Bhavai* and *Mirch Masala*.

When the distributor was finally found, Mehta faced another hurdle that threatened to stop *Rang Rasiya*'s release. Ravi Varma's great granddaughter, Indira Devi Kunjamma, petitioned a Kerala court saying that the film depicted him as a "playboy". Mehta countered this by saying that his work was "not a true story", but based on a novel written by Ranjit Desai some 30 years ago.

He contended: "I struggled all these years to get the movie into the theatres, because I was convinced that Ravi Varma was a great painter, whose story needed to be told through cinema. It is sad that while he had stood for the freedom of expression and won his case in the courts of British India, his descendants are negating what their great grandfather believed in and stood for.... What is even more regrettable is that people were raising objections even before watching the film."

Ravi Varma's was not only a master artist — who generally used Maharashtrian models to depict Hindu gods and goddesses — but also a social activist. He made oilo graphs of his paintings — often scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata — that

could be easily bought by poor people. Some of them were "untouchables" who were not allowed to enter temples in those times, and so they had these prints in their humble puja rooms at home.

In fact, the movie has one touching scene where we see these "untouchables" praying to the paper prints of gods and goddesses right outside a temple — where entry for them was barred.

With Randeep Hooda playing Ravi Varma and Nandana Sen (daughter of Nobel Laureate Amritya Sen) as his muse and lover, *Rang Rasiya* narrates how the painter falls out of favour with his wife, a princess, and family even as the colours on the canvas seduce and enslave him in their passionate embrace. When he sees a lowly housemaid, Kamini, in an alluring pose as she goes about sweeping the floor, he at once picks up his paintbrush, asks her freeze and captures her form for eternity.

More scandalous than this would seem to be his association with a prostitute, Sugandha (Nandana), who transforms into not only his model and lover, but also goddesses — like Lakshmi and Saraswati — giving a definitive shape to divinity.

And later in the film we see an aging Ravi Varma battle a legal case — where the prosecution charges him with sullyng the religion by using a prostitute to portray goddesses.

Though patronised by liberals such as the ruler of Travancore (a princely State in pre-independent India) — who honours the painter with the title of Raja — and the princely State of Baroda — who appoints him as its chief artist — Ravi Varma often had to face the wrath of upper caste Hindus. They were angry, because the lower castes had finally found religious freedom. They could now pray without going to temples.

Sadly, things have not changed much over the decades (Ravi Varma died in 1906).



A FILM BY KETAN MEHTA

Rang Rasiya

**DELAYED:** A poster for the film *Rang Rasiya*, which took five years to find a distributor.

*Rang Rasiya* begins in today's Mumbai where even as an auction of his paintings are going on, a mob ransacks the place saying that he defiled religion.

Mehta intersperses his film with a haunting love story of Sugandha and Ravi Varma with him capturing her every mood and posture with colours of passion.



**NOT A JESTING MATTER:** A profound subject like industrial pollution is trivialised in Kanan's *Oru Oorla Rendu Raja*.

## Oru Oorla Rendu Raja

It is so unfortunate that a profound subject like industrial pollution is trivialised in Kanan's *Oru Oorla Rendu Raja* (Two Kings in a Land) through a train of distracting songs and dances as well as mindless buffoonery that is passed off as comedy.

When a young and pretty doctor, Priya (Priya Anand), sees her school friend, played by Vishaka Singh, bleed to death in a factory run by a profit-driven entrepreneur (Nasser), the utter callousness of it all seems apparent.

Labourers go deaf, battered by abnormally high decibel levels caused by outdated equipment, and, at other times, develop cancer handling without protection corrosive liquids. So, Priya files a public interest litigation at the Madras High Court, and while she takes a train to the city to appear for a hearing, she meets two wastrels, Azhagu (Vemal) and Michael (Soori).

While most of the movie has been shot in the train — with it playing both a Cupid and villain (a host of men board to murder Priya) — there are scenes that drag you away for titillating dances (set in scenic spots) and also for a short road journey where Soori pairs with Thambi Ramaiah, a driver in

a flashy Audi, to bang us with Tamil cinema's idea of wit that would not tickle a 10-year-old today.

A film that could have been wrapped up in 90 minutes and with an awful lot of power and punch is diverted into all kinds of loop lines — a little romance thrown in and a couple of fights. Mind you, these interruptions are so darn irritating.

While a couple of scenes — like for instance the cop on the train waking up to shoot the villains (which, though, reminded me of the policeman in *Jolly LLB*) and the fights where Azhagu and Michael are not supermen — impress, there is little else to lift *Oru Oorla Rendu Raja* from the mess it pollutes itself with.

But yes, Nasser is just terrific (watch that scene in the court) and Anand is wonderfully controlled — and what a blessed relief this is for a Tamil work. However, Singh and Soori are wasted for the enth time. Much like Santhanam, Soori is dumped into eternal inanity, and will Singh ever get out of playing such inconsequential roles?

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