

RICHMAN, PAULA (ed.). *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991. xiii+273 pages. Index. Cloth US\$40.00; ISBN 0-520-07281-2. Paper US\$14.95; ISBN 0-520-07589-7.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is an epic story that has played a decisive role in the life of the Indian peoples for the past two millennia. Even now, in the final years of the twentieth century, a serialization of the *Rāmāyaṇa* on Indian television attracted an audience of eighty million people, and the issue of Rāma's birthplace has sparked recent riots in India that caused thousands of deaths. The epic belongs to the popular culture of an area stretching from Surinam to Japan that includes almost half of the world's population. It has also drawn the interest of Western scholars ranging from Max Müller to Paula Richman, the author of the present volume.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* appeals to different people in different ways. Gandhi "regarded the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Tulsidas as the greatest book in all devotional literature" (DESHPANDE 1958, 183); Rabindranath Tagore glorified its author Vālmīki and characterized the book as an illustration of "poetic truth" (TAGORE 1953, 183); Monika Thiel-Horstmann in her recent *Rāmāyaṇa and Rāmāyaṇas* and Paula Richman in the work under review approach the epic as a subject of serious academic research.

*Many Rāmāyaṇas* grew out of Richman's reaction to E. V. Ramasani's reinterpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* earlier this century, and to a subsequent article by A. K. Ramanujan entitled "Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*." The book is a collection of twelve articles, including that of Ramanujan. It is divided into three parts that cover the discussion on the *Rāmāyaṇa* in both North and South India, with some mention of East Indian texts as well. The articles investigate a host of major issues, including textual variants, oral traditions (principally in South India), the influence of the epic on religious and sectarian development, and its contribution to shaping Indian attitudes on women.

Part 1 of the collection, entitled "Larger Patterns," begins with a long introduction by the editor that explains the book's goals and provides a synopsis of the Rāma story for those unacquainted with the epic. Richman summarizes the major cause of the diversity in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition by quoting Ramila Thapar's observation that "*Rāmāyaṇa* does not belong to any moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places" (4).

Ramanujan's article is a comparative study of the various *Rāmāyaṇa* texts. He compares details of the Ahalyā episode as described by Vālmīki and Kampan; shows the rational nature of the Jaina tellings; considers non-Indian versions of the epic; and discusses oral traditions. Although Ramanujan sees a "structural relation" between different texts, he believes that "on closer look one [version] is not necessarily all that like another" (44). Frank E. Reynolds' "*Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma Jātaka, and Rāmākien*" ventures to prove that "the Rāma story is not, as such, a Hindu story" (51), claiming that the Buddha was the first teller of the epic via the *Jātaka* tales (53).

In part 2, "Telling as Refashioning and Opposition," Kathleen Erndl compares various aspects of the characters Śūrpaṅakhā and Sītā, equating Sītā with Lakṣmī (the goddess of prosperity and auspiciousness) and Śūrpaṅakhā with Alakṣmī (the goddess of misfortune and inauspiciousness). I might point out here that Alakṣmī is still worshipped in certain ancient *brata* rituals in Bengal (TAGORE 1976, 27).

Velcheru Narayana Rao's article introduces versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* expressed

in Telugu women's songs. It is clear from the article that this tradition is a part of the local folklore, with the songs depicting Sītā as a bride in an Indian joint household. Rao also points out the difference of attitude in the songs of Brahmin and non-Brahmin women.

Clinton Seely compares the modern Bengali epic *Meghanādavadha Kāvya* with other versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. His theory that there are three substrata stories in this epic is thought-provoking (144). He refuses to give any credit to Michael Modhusudan Dutt, the author of the epic under discussion, for creating a new story, concluding that "the raja—redressed though he may be—wears no new clothes, even though the reader sees what in fact is not there" (152).

Part 3, "Tellings as Commentary and Programs for Action," begins with an article by Richman on E. V. Ramasami's interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Based on a detailed political and social analysis, Richman presents Ramasami's reading of the epic as a protest against North India's domination of the south. It is quite clear that Ramasami's interpretation was politically motivated, and he can be accused of viewing everything through tinted glasses. Richman also points out several contradictions in Ramasami's writings (182, 184). Traditionally, when a region of India attempts to resist the influence of Rāma it does not usually replace him with the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s villain Rāvaṇa, as does Ramasami; instead other deities are emphasized, such as Kṛṣṇa in East India. It might also be pointed out that Rāma is no less divine in the popular South Indian Kampan text of the *Rāmāyaṇa* than in the North Indian Vālmiki text.

This and other recent books have ably presented the diversity of the Rāma story to interested readers. Now efforts should be made to discover the reasons and processes behind this diversity. It may be presumed that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is essentially Aryan; were these stories carried by the Aryans as folklore when they entered India from central Asia about 1500 B.C.? How did the tale enter the Dravidian languages, which have no relation to Indo-Aryan? Discussion of this type might not only throw some light on important aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but also generate new insights on the subject of cross-cultural contact.

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