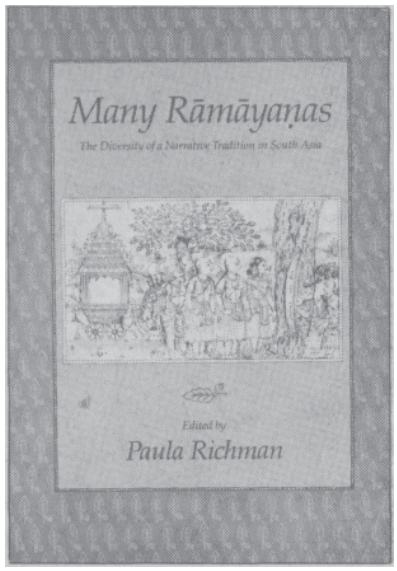

BOOKS

"We Make It Better"

Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia
Ed. Paula Richman,
Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992. Rs 250.
Review: Ruth Vanita

This pathbreaking, extremely well-researched and enlightening volume, by bringing together and analysing some of the almost innu-merable versions of the Ramayana story, and investigating the conditions of their production, hopes "to display the vitality and diversity of the Ramayana tradition".[1] It sees this tradition as "a source on which poets can draw to produce a potentially infinite series of varied and sometimes contradictory tellings".[2] In his keynote essay, "Three Hundred Ramayanas", A.K. Ramanujan acknowledges the pioneering work of scholars like Camille Bulcke in this field, and goes on to point out that: "The number of Ramayanas and the range of their in-fluence in South and Southeast Asia over the past 2,500 years or more are astonishing. Just a list of languages in which the Rama story is found makes one gasp: Assamese, Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmir!, Khotanese, Laotian, Ma-laysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, San-skrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan to say nothing of Western languages".[3]

The editor and several of the contributors repeatedly state their inten-tion not to privilege certain versions, such as Valmiki's, over others; they criticise "the tendency unduly to privilege Hindu versions evidenced by the common practice of referring to the various tellings of the Rama story by the essentially Hindu term Ramayanas".[4] In the process, however, they implicitly and explicitly privilege Buddhist and Jain over Hindu versions, oral over written versions, and so-called "people's" versions over texts attributable to an individual author. They have a general tendency to see the former in each of these pairs as more progressive, flexible and freedom-oriented.

These preferences largely derive from the currently fashionable deconstructionist tendency for decanonisation. For instance, in their desire to "offset the prevalent atti-tudes to Valmiki"[5], some contributors forget that this well-established prevalent attitude may have something to do with poetic excellence. To say that Valmiki's telling is merely "one among many"[6] is also to overlook the time factor — the earliest extant ver-ion is likely to have been more influential than later versions.

The ahistorical positing of the "essentially Hindu" against the Buddhist or the Jain, that occurs in many essays, is at odds with the evidence of the stories themselves that Buddhist and Jain values are part of a general stream of values and ideas which later came to be termed "Hindu" or "Indian". Treating Buddhism and Jainism as separate religions is a product of historical hindsight, like treating Christ as the founder of a new religion when he was actually a Jewish reformer in a tradition of such reforming prophets, "Christianity" having been constructed much later by some of his followers such as St. Paul.

Instead of viewing differences as representing polar opposites, a ten-dency expressed in the title of part two of the book, "Tellings as Refashioning and Opposition", these differences could be seen as part of the tradition's self-reflexiveness. Overlooking this important feature of the tradition results in simplistic readings and in self-contradiction as, for instance, saying that"men labelled low-caste'.... have created and maintained counter-Ramayanas"[7], when Valmiki himself was a member of one of the "lowest" castes and is widely recognised as such by all castes. If the most privileged text was composed by a member of a low caste, then what were the "counter-Ramayanas" countering?

Here, we come up against another myth of our times—that'people's' or supposedly collective oral versions are more democratic and therefore prefer-able to individually written versions, regardless of how popular and widely-loved the latter may be. Thus, we are told, "people select particular incidents from the Ramayana to express their view of

reality."[8] Closer analysis reveals that these "people" may be just a handful of experts, such as the puppeteers at the Kerala puppet plays, who perform for one another, after the few spectators present doze off.

The best essays in this volume are those that engage closely with certain texts, written or oral, and do not over-look similarities between them, even while pointing out differences. Among them is David Shulman's essay, "Fire and Flood: The Testing of Sita in Kampan's Iramavataram". Shulman compares Valmiki's and Kampan's versions of the incident. His sensitive exegesis points to Valmiki' s "play with levels of self-awareness"[9] in Rama, who is known as god by the reader, but does not always know himself as god. Rama knows himself as a human being, the son of Dasaratha, and, in the moment of crisis when he doubts Sita, cries out "Who am I really?". Brahma responds to his cry, telling him that he is an incarnation of Vishnu as S ita is of Lakshmi. Thus a harmonious reconciliation is brought about. Shulman reads Kampan's text as based on the "issue of union and separation", which is central to Tamil *bhakti* and also to earlier Tamil love poetry. Sita finally wins, "like the devotee who so often triumphs over the god"[10]; Rama is si-lenced and has to realise his own hu-manity.

Patricia Y. Mumme's essay, "Ramayana Exegesis in Tenkalai Srivaisnavism", is a fascinating account of a South Indian sect's theological readings of particular incidents in the text and their establishing of parabolic equivalences for certain characters, for example, Sita as mediator approached by repentant sin-ners to intercede with the Lord who will not be able to refuse any request or recommendation made by his wife.

Philip Lutgendorf, in "The Secret Life of Ramchandra of Ayodhya", explores the practices of the North

Indian Rasik Sampradaya, which seeks liberation by identification with Rama in his universal play or *lila*. This imaginative visualisation of the world of Saket becomes a reality "so com-pelling that the conventional world fades into shadowy insignificance" before it, until the participant attains mystical glimpses of the transcendent world and is able to enter it at will, even while in the body.[11] Lutgendorf displays a remarkable combination of empathy and erudition, with an ability to make cross-cultural connections he points to the medieval Christian monastic involvement with the erotic Song of Songs as a parallel to the erotic asceticism of the *rasik* tradition. Selfconsciously feminist commentators in this volume are disappointingly predictable. Thus, Kathleen M. Erndl's "The Mutilation of Surpanakha", comparing different versions of the episode, focuses on Rama and Lakshman's violence to Surpanakha, but elides that part of the episode, present in all versions, where this violence is triggered off by Surpanakha's attempt to get Sita out of the way by devouring her. Erndl concludes that "Surpanakha is pun-ished for her display of unrepressed sexuality"[12] without going into the question of whether unrepressed sexuality includes unrepressed violence towards other women who may be one's sexual rivals. Unsurprisingly, this western feminist analysis ends up attributing backward and anti-women values to Hinduism: "From a cultural perspective, the episode sheds light on Hindu attitudes toward female sexual-ity and its relationship to such polari-ties as good and evil, pure and impure, auspicious and inauspicious".[13]

Erndl's "cultural perspective" conveniently enables her to forget that these attitudes are not at all uniquely "Hindu", but are prevalent in every culture, given that every known culture is and has been male-dominated. The Sita/Surpanakha opposition is paralleled not only by the Virgin Mary/ Mary Magdalene opposition but by the Bride of Christ/ Scarlet Woman in Christian theology, which is reproduced in many variations in western myths and literatures. The title of anotheressay approvingly cited by Erndl, "Women, Untouchables and Other Beasts inTulsidas' Ramayana" (Geeta Patel), makes explicit the implicit as-sumption of several contributors that Tulsidas' text is irredeemably misogynist. While Tulsi's text, like most texts, is not free of misogyny, it is also remarkable for its responsiveness, at many junctures, to women's predicament and feelings. To cite only one example from many, at Parvati's wedding, her

mother, Maina, is bidding her farewell with the conventional formula advising her to worship her husband, when the anguish of the moment induces an outburst against what, in its times, could only appear as the existential injustice of woman's situation: " 'Always worship Shankar's feet, a woman has no religion apart from her husband, who is her god.' As she said these words, her eyes filled with tears and she again pressed the girl to her heart. 'Why has destiny created woman in this world — she is always dependent on others and is never happy, not even in a dream/ *(Kat vidhi sriji nari jag mahi, paradhin sapnehu sukh nahin)*. Agonised by an excess of love, the mother forced herself to be patient, realising this was not the right time (to voice such thoughts)." *(Balkand* 16, my translation). What is significant is that Parvati is a goddess who has under-taken severe penances to win Shiva as a husband—without deny ing the force of her love for Shiva, Tulsi can still forcefully express the equal truth of her unfree predicament as emblematic of all women, even of the most privileged.

Our desire tq attribute ideological bias to particular authors, based on their social backgrounds, should not render us blind to our own ideologies and backgrounds. Is it significant, for instance, that of the contributors to this book, only three are Indian, and these three, like their seven American colleagues, live and work in the USA? Only one, David Shulman, is not based in the USA — he teaches at the He-brew University, Jerusalem. If these facts seem not particularly relevant or important, they should be wary of reducing an author's engagement with a story or stories to the pressures of his or her social and ideological context.

When the researcher, instead of imposing his or her own paradigm on the practice of the storytellers, allows the latter to speak for themselves, we get glimpses of an altogether different model, self-view and world-view. Thus, both Velcheru Narayana Rao, in his account of women's songs, "A Ramayana of their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu", and Ramdas Lamb, in his account of a low-caste sect's appropriation of Tulsi's text, "Personalising the Ramayana: Ramnamis and their Use of the Ramcharitmanas", are com-pelled to acknowledge that the groups whose versions of the Rama story the commentators would like to see as oppositional, do not themselves see these versions as in opposition to the better-known versions.

For instance, the Ramnamis, a low-caste and largely illiterate com-munity, who treat the Tulsi text as *bothsruti* and *smriti* and have evolved a whole devotional and interpretative practice around it, do not seem to see themselves as so terribly oppressed and excluded as the commentator tends to see them. In their stylised exchange of verses memorised from the text, they confidently take on the roles not only of Rama's devotees such as Hanuman and Lakshman, but of Rama himself. This confidence, I would think, derives from an "essentially Hindu" world-view, in which the divine and the human flow into, and are ultimately indistinguishable from, one another: "The Ramnamis find no contradiction in this dual perspective on the Manas as, on the one hand, sacred and inviolable and, on the other, open to interpretation, criticism, and modification. Defending the community's relationship with the text, an elder Ramnami exclaimed, 'The Ramayan is so great we cannot possibly damage it; we can only make it better'!"[14]

References

1. Paula Richman, Introduction, p.5.
2. Ibid, p.8.
3. A.K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas", p.24.
4. Frank E.Reynolds, "Ramayana, Rama Jataka, and Ramakien: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Buddhist Tradi-tions", p.60, fn.3.
5. Paula Richman, Introduction, p.9.
6. Ibid
7. Richman, ibid, p. 15.
8. Ibid, p. 12.
9. Shulman, p.95.
10. Ibid, p. 110.
11. Lutgendorf, p.225.
12. Erndl, p.83.
13. Ibid,p.84.
14. Lamb,"Personalising the Ramayan", p.251.

Women and Work — Changing Scenario in India. Edited by Alakh N. Sharma and Seema Singh. Indian Society of Labour Economics and B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1992.

A collection of papers that looks at major developments in women's work from different perspectives: the historical background, employment in the rural and unorganised sector, education and women's work, and the impact of various development programmes on women. In addition, there are writings on theoretical and methodological issues, such as wage differentials between the sexes and the invisibility of women's work.

Trade Unions and TNCs **— Building Workers' Unity in the New 'Super States'.** Documentation for Action Groups in Asia, 1992.

The Documentation for Action Groups in Asia have been involved in the documentation and study of the activities of transnational corporations since 1973.

This is a compendium of papers presented at a study meeting of Asian trade unionists in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. Among the issues the participants discuss are the pattern and flow of foreign direct in vestment, trade union experiences and strategies todevelop trade union linkages.

Kavita Charanji