

BOOK REVIEWS

Frank Whaling

The Rise and the Religious Significance of Rama

New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass

This well researched book presents a wealth of information concerning three major Rāmāyanas viz. Valmiki, Adhyātma, and that of Tulsi Dass. The reader is able to see how the figure of Rama changes into an almost entirely new being under the force of changing cultural environment. The Vālmiki Rāmāyana stresses Rāma's humanity, while Adhyātma, in the milieu of vedanta philosophy, makes Rāma into a teacher. The influence of Shivism is also seen. Much of the dramatic tension is lost since many events are understood as predestined. In Tulsi Dass, Ramā becomes God incarnate, the object of fervent devotion, and even chanting his name with the right attitude can bring salvation. Each study is divided into three parts looking at the subject from three angles, the historical, the symbolic, and the religious (in the sense of theology and piety). Whatever point is made is backed up by copious quotations.

The main drawback to the study is that basically the approach seems very academic and rather dry. Here and there the author brings in comparisons with Christ and one rather feels that the whole study is very much coloured by an earnest desire on the part of a Christian to understand the faith of a modern-day member of the Ramanandin-group through examining history. The result seems to be rather forced and done more from a moral obligation to love and understand one's neighbour, than from a personal involvement with the subject. This results in the poetic content of the different Rāmāyanas being rather lost. Long lists are formed showing the number of times Rāma's physical beauty is referred to, or his moral characteristics, or cosmic epithets applied to him. The very fact that Rāma is taken in isolation seems rather peculiar since Sita is also a divine being and in a certain sense a part of him. One feels this isolation of Rama has been done so that a comparison with Christ can more easily be made. The sections where there are attempts at comparing Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and Christ are at such an intellectual level that