

# Many Ramayanas

Jonah Blank, *Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God: Retracing the Ramayana Through India* (New York: Image Book, Doubleday, 1992).

Thanks to the Ayodhya problem, Ramayana will never be the same. A cultural epic, which is more a collection of stories assembled in the absence of printing press than an authoritative text of a single author, Ramayana is now known to the younger generation as a TV serial or as a story that started the Ayodhya crisis.

Jonah Blank took the clues from the changing perceptions of Ramayana and undertook a most interesting project. This is a book for a quick read this summer and a long conversation thereafter.

Blank takes the map of Rama's journey and follows the same path in contemporary India. He goes from Ayodhya to Chitrakut, Nasik to Kiskindhya, and from Rameshwaram to Sri Lanka. He discovers along the way that no pilgrim has had the forethought to do this in recent memory. Or, as the author observes modestly, "The pious wanderers who preceded me (for surely I was not the first) were apparently modest enough to keep their mouths shut."

The route of a pilgrim is layed out on the map of a cultural traveler who holds the pen of a journalist. The narratives of encounters are interspersed with tales from Rama's life, drawing intriguing connections between the two. Thus, "Rama's hometown today is no imperial capital, no seat of a world

empire. It is a sleepy little village like thousands of others, its twisty, unpaved alleys full of flounder-eyed goats, creaky bullock-carts, and emaciated dogs with yellow teeth. There are maybe half a dozen cars here, and the telephone numbers have only two digits."

The land of Rama is living on the threshold of modernization, the taste of independence has had a long lasting feeling. Not all that was supposed to have sunk in. Blank realizes that the reach of progress and modernization hasn't been that great, especially in the hinterland of India, where nature is also counting its blessings in the midst of material progress.

In Blank's description, "The bus from Jalgaon to Aurangabad passes through some of the most desolate terrain on the planet. Even in April, before the full wrath of the dry season has set in, all the riverbeds are stone-bone-dry. The unblinking sun bakes the earth hard and brittle, cracks it with black spiderwebs of crevices. The land is tinderbox on the verge of sponta-



neous combustion, and one hesitates to light a match for fear that the air itself will ignite."

This is an elegant book, with little pretensions and more promise in a well written prose. The cultural map provided by the author is like an interpretation of a difficult dream, not necessarily a correct interpretation, but an interpretation nevertheless. Having one on hand is more gratifying than being troubled by its absence.

The book invokes the Ayodhya crisis as a writer expresses awareness to his surroundings. But he does not offer any diagnosis, and we don't need one. The book is a simple, elegant piece of imaginative journalism that seeks our attention.

— Shekhar Deshpande



*Indian Tales and Legends, Retold by J. E. B. Gray* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1992)

This is short crisp book that tells some key stories of Indian life. Laced with attractive illustrations, the book presents itself as somewhere between a book meant for a middle-school student and a book for an adult who wishes a quick refresher course on Indian mythology.