

THE RAMCARITMANAS IN THE LIFE OF KṚṢṆA-DEVOTEES

As long as we base our understanding of the Kṛṣṇa cult primarily on its literature, we think we understand it easily by applying the model of exclusive evangelical Christianity. Kṛṣṇa worshippers in every age have written of the importance of worshipping Kṛṣṇa alone. Even the oecumenical-spirited Bhagavadgītā insists in the end that liberation is solely the gift of Kṛṣṇa: the final call is mām ekam śaraṇam vraja (18:66). Later we find in the Twelfth Book of the Mahābhārata passionate declarations by worshippers of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva that they are worshippers of one God (ekāntins) following a religion of exclusive worship (ekāntadharma) and practicing exclusive devotion (ekāntabhakti) to the Supreme Being, Nārāyaṇa. (12:336.57-66). And we have all read enough in the stout-minded medieval theologians of the Vaiṣṇava sampradāyas to have absorbed their message that all creatures have one source and Lord, one reason for our existence and one object of our service. We conclude that there is a powerful monotheistic religion in India that is well defined as "Kṛṣṇaism."

If one settles down in the holy land of Kṛṣṇaism in July--the time when most of us get to Braj--our understanding of Kṛṣṇaism as a simple monolithic faith stands up well for some time. During the rainy season in Mathurā District the name of Kṛishṇa and of Kṛṣṇa only fills the air--or of Rādhākṛṣṇa, which we can accommodate within a dynamic monotheism. The petty godlings like Brahmā who bow and scrape before Kṛṣṇa on the rāslīlā stage are

not Lords, for all their heavenly palaces, but Kṛṣṇa's creatures and his lackeys. As colonial Connecticut worshipped Jehovah, the people of Braj in the rainy season worship Kṛṣṇa. They worship Kṛṣṇa with all the genuine piety that one finds anywhere in North India, and in addition with all the fervor of local patriotism and with all the singlemindedness that vested interest gives. If any region of the world follows the religion called "Kṛṣṇaism," Mathurā, in the rainy season, is that place.

Uneasiness with one's understanding begins in September. Late in September the streets, suddenly, begin to flow with the processions of the Rāmlīlā. The same faces that one saw gleaming in the audience during the monsoon's performance of the Kṛṣṇalīlās, are now seen beaming again at enactments of Rāma's struggle with the demons of Lankā, and the new cry is "Śrī Rām Candra jī kī jay!"

To illustrate this adoration of Rāma even in the ultimate Kṛṣṇa country I shall not tell, again, how the Rāmlīlā is observed there. I shall tell the story of an event, a little later in the calendar year, in which Rāma's deep hold upon Kṛṣṇa-worshippers came home to me in full force. A trio of lads of high school age was prominent among the many who went about with me as friends and guides in my search for Kṛṣṇa dramas. Knowing only their interest in Kṛṣṇa, I was surprised when they mentioned, once, that they belonged to a club that was

meeting nightly for the serial reading of the entire Rāmāyaṇa of Tulsī Dās. I showed interest. My interest was remembered. In time a messenger appeared at my door bringing a printed invitation from a society called the Rāmāyaṇ Saṃkīrtan Samiti. A verse at the top of the card suggested the spirit of the event to come:

Mangal Bhavan, Amangal Hārī,
Dravau so, Daṣarath Ajir-bihārī!

May He be compassionate,
the Abode of Blessing, the Destroyer of Woe
who played in the courtyard of Daṣaratha!

Attention of Śrī Hein jī, Amarikā-nivāsī! In your service we beg to state that the celebration of the worship of the evil-destroying Protector of the Poor, the Jewel of the Raghu Family, the Lord Śrī Rāmācandra, has been set for the evening of December 26th at the center of the Rāmāyaṇ Saṃkīrtan Samiti. Please come early with your special friends... Programme: Rāmāyaṇ reading, the singing of bhajans, addresses, etc. Time, 7:30 p.m. Place, the Rāvalīya Lane.

Girraj Mal Agarvāl, Convenor.

On the appointed evening I rode up the Rāvalīya Lane as far as wheeled vehicles could go, then proceeded on uphill by foot through one of the oldest, narrowest, crookedest streets of Mathurā. The blind walls on either side were bleak, their material a graceless mud. Then a rude plank door appeared. It opened for me, and I was in a different world. With ornate courtesy I was welcomed into the spacious home of a merchant named Śrīnāth Dās, which was rapidly filling with men and boys. The drab adobe walls of the lane outside gave way, within, to the handsome mottled

rose sandstone of Mathurā that is so well-known to students of ancient Indian art. The brightly-calcmimed walls of the chamber were recessed behind pilasters of that lovely material. The massy ceiling was made of the same red stone in incredible room-spanning slabs. Each of the doorways of the large room was arched by a pierced tympanum of stone that provided ventilation. Down the center of the floor a broad strip of white cloth ran the entire length of the room. As males of all ages continued to arrive, youths greeted them, applied dots of red paste to their foreheads, offered cloves, and seated their guests on one side or the other of the central ground-sheet. Some who brought musical instruments put them down in the forefront along the edge of the white aisle.

Opposite the door, at the end of the long white strip of cloth, a vedi or altar had been set up on a platform against the wall. Above the altar there hung a large framed picture of Sītā and Rām, draped with garlands, the focus of visual attention for the entire room. On the altar, before the picture, a high-stemmed open lamp was burning, fed from time^{to time} by an attending altar-boy with clots of ghee. The nearer end of the altar was arched with flowers, and under the arch, in neat piles, lay several dozen brown copies of the Rāmcāritmānas--visible tokens of the nature of the evening's work.

The younger members of the assembly had been meeting in this room each day at dusk for about 90 days,

reading steadily through the Rāmāyaṇa. Their guide was a pandit named Parameśvarī Datt Vyās, whose specialty was the teaching of the Rāmcaritmānas. Stopping for explanations and discussions, the group had progressed at its own pace, ignoring the established divisions (pārāyaṇas) for the reading of that scripture in nine or thirty days. The club had read on for an hour each day, and now the end was in sight. On December 25th they had come within easy reach of the end of the last kāṇḍ, and had stopped. Now the very last verses were to be read in triumph, amid adult appreciation and congratulation and general rejoicing.

The group action of the evening began with the uniting of all present in the singing of a nām-kīrtan. The evening was focused upon Rāma, but the kīrtan began with the well-known line, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare-- and the invocation of Kṛṣṇa rather than Rāma struck no one as remarkable. Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare--the kīrtan was finished off with zeal and flourish and the clash of cymbals. A flow of emotion was set going in the room!

Now the altar-boy arose, took the Rāmāyaṇas from the altar, and passed them out for the high act of the evening--the singing by the total assembly of the last lines of the book. Recitation began with the Uttar Kāṇḍ's dohā No. 128. The dohās, caupāīs and chands were each sung to their own special melodies, and the Sanskrit ślokas at the end were rendered in yet another distinctive way. Before and after the singing of each dohā the verse was inserted

that we noticed at the head of the printed invitation:
Maṅgal Bhavan, Amaṅgal Hārī, Dravau so Daśarath Ajir-bihārī!

As the cantillation progressed it became louder and more spirited. When the last lines of the Rāmcaritmānas came in view, a flush swept over the faces on every side. It was the exuberance of the completing of a good work that had been well done, but it was more. An ecstasy was flowing out of the lines themselves--lines that were filled with Tulsī Dās's own exaltation as he, in turn, was completing his great labor of devotion. To suggest what was flooding the singers' consciousness, I shall quote a few of the final verses in the spirited rendering of F. S. Growse:

"The story of Rāma...has power to subdue the impurity of this evil age and to remove all the impurities of the soul... I have sung to the best of my ability his holy and gracious deeds. In this, the last age of the world, there is no other means of salvation, neither abstraction, sacrifice, prayer, penance... Think only of Rāma, sing only of Rāma, give ear only to Rāma's infinite perfections. Let the soul give over its perversity and worship him whose special characteristic it is to sanctify the fallen... Is there anyone who has worshipped Rāma and not found salvation? There is no other Lord like Rāma, by whose favor...even I, the dull-witted Tulsī Dās, have found perfect peace. As a lover loves his mistress and as a miser loves his money, so for ever and ever may Rāma be beloved by me."

As these and related lines were being uttered, a kind of fire swept through the room, flashing in every eye. Bhakti became a living reality. Most of those present felt, I believe,

if not a direct assurance of the immediate presence of Rāma, then at least the cathartic and clarifying effect of a faith-filled act of unambiguous self-dedication.

The last word of the holy book recited, the volumes were gathered up and placed again on the altar. The altar boy trimmed the wicks of the many-lipped lamp, stood, and rotated the flaming lamp in vertical circles before the picture of Sītā and Rām. The crowd rose and stood while the pandit sang an ārati song composed especially for the end of a reading of the Rāmāyaṇa. Then the lamp was put down upon the altar, and the sacred work was done.

The assembly re-seated itself, and the meeting became a musical soirée in praise of Rāma and of the boys' accomplishment. One and then another of the guests seated along the central aisle took up their instruments and offered songs or instrumental music in honor of Rāma--or Kṛṣṇa. Congratulatory speeches were made. Inquiries about the identity of the performers revealed that the guests were prominent men in the city's circles of business and learning and that the musicians were Mathurā's most renowned. The evening ended with a sharing of an ample prasād of sweets and fruits that an outsider might call "refreshments."

I have related this old experience to convince this assembly of Rāmāyaṇīs that the Rāmāyaṇa can be a deeply important scripture for Hindu groups that we have firmly classified as Kṛṣṇa-worshippers. The Rāmāyaṇa was important and Rāma was important to these urbane citizens of

Kṛṣṇa's own capital city. When their sons decided to read the Rāmāyaṇa, their parents provided them with a clubhouse, a library, a leader, snacks, and a final celebration to gladden the hearts of any victorious football team. The evening's enthusiasm for Rāma was not the separatist zeal of a group that rejects Kṛṣṇa. If there is a Śiṣupāla in modern Mathurā I have not met him. The very controllers of the temples of Kṛṣṇa, who would be Rāma's adversaries if he had any, themselves provide quarters for the actors of the Rāmlīlā, and lend their courtyards for the performances of others who impersonate Rāma.¹ In Mathurā there are Rāma-enthusiasts, and professional teachers of Rāma-lore who have a practical separateness, but there is no Rāmaite sect. The masses of those who sustain the Rāma festivals are outspoken Kṛṣṇabhaktas who turn for a time to the worship of Rāma with varying degrees of ardency. The relation between Kṛṣṇa-worship and Rāmāworship in Braj is not negative, nor even neutral, but positive. The devotee-circles of these deities overlap to define vaguely a religious community of complex nature that has not yet been given a truly descriptive name.

This composite faith is widespread and of long standing. It can be seen in the Sūrsāgar, the early thesaurus of religious verse of the Kṛṣṇa cult of Braj. It is indeed an Ocean of poems on the early life of Kṛṣṇa as

¹Norvin Wein, The Miracle Plays of Mathurā (New Haven and Delhi, 1972), pp. 19, 94.

its title suggests, and when one finds in it a panegyric of undivided devotion, ananyabhakti toward Kṛṣṇa, one expects a certain exclusiveness of spirit--until one finds that a reverential sixty-page telling of the story of Rāma comprises almost the whole of the Sixth Book!² Our picture of two traditions in an interlocking relationship is deepened by our information on the festival calendar of dozens of North Indian communities. In the yearly round of innumerable rural places Rāmanavamī is succeeded by Kṛṣṇajanmāṣṭamī, Kṛṣṇajanmāṣṭamī by the observance of the Rāmlīlā, the Rāmlīlā by Rāspurnimā. Schools and their students honor and enjoy both sets of holidays, claiming all as theirs. And all North Indian Hindus participate in all at least a little, according to their training, needs and tastes. These elements go together to make up the prevailing public religion of North India.

When a Kṛṣṇa devotee is asked how, as a monotheist, he can worship Rāma also, he makes the perfectly reasonable reply that in worshipping Rāma he worships only Kṛṣṇa in another form. His answer in terms of the theology of avatāra explains rationally how he can worship Rāma, but not why he is moved to do so. If the two cults were simple equivalents, the trouble of maintaining a second elaborate literary tradition would apparently be needless. The doctrine that Kṛṣṇa and Rāma are the same leads as logically to the view that the worship of Rāma is superfluous as to the view that it is necessary. As a matter of fact the Vaiṣṇavas have used the

² Sūrsāgar, ed. Nand Dulāre Vājpeyī (Vārānasī, Kāśī Nāgarīpracarīṇī Sabhā, 1934), pp. 117f., 191-251. For our purpose it does not matter whether these portions are authentic compositions of Sūr Dās or not.

avatāra historically to set aside politely the claims of several outside faiths. Their recognition of the Buddha as an avatāra, for instance, was not used to rationalize Vaiṣṇava participation in Buddhism, but to end it. Common avatāra-hood with Kṛṣṇa is not a consideration that in itself compels Kṛṣṇaites to worship Rāma. A more compelling reason is involved.

I propose that Kṛṣṇaism has adjoined Rāma-worship to itself not because Rāma is identical, but precisely because Rāma is different. What gods make available to their worshippers is the actuality of their various distinctive characters as known in literature and legend. As a helpful resource for worshippers Kṛṣṇa is not omniscient. The character of the child Kṛṣṇa developed in response to special historical distresses, and the worship of Kṛṣṇa helps in the healing of certain great hurts, but not others. In Kṛṣṇa those who are oppressed by the drabness or the sadness of life can find sources of hidden beauty. Those who are sick of the sordidness of worldly life catch glimpses of the transcendent and eternal. The lonely and loveless find a true husband, so to speak, and a true home. To revive such drooping spirits the Kṛṣṇa cult awakens and uses with great skill the powerful words and feelings of human erotic love.

But the Kṛṣṇa tradition has little guidance for persons suffering the difficulties of family life, or for citizens who long for order amidst social chaos. The mercurial spirit of Kṛṣṇa-worship gives frail support in

the stern commitment to duty that Hindu society as a matter of fact expects of its members. By easy misinterpretation the Kṛṣṇa legends can actually undermine Hinduism's rigorous sexual morality. At a certain point in the perimeter of human religious concerns, ultimate personal security is not the problem, but the struggle for tolerable social relationships. Aspiration for order has never been the driving impulse of the cult of the Child Kṛṣṇa. An earlier Kṛṣṇaism once produced, of course, a powerful religious support of social morality in the Bhagavadgītā. But in the post-classical centuries the Bhagavadgītā has not really been available for direct use in the religious life of the masses. It has not been translated into Hindī by any literary genius remotely comparable to Tulsī Dās. Even if it were available in an ideal translation, to village people it would still be an abstract intellectual work. In short, the Bāṅkṛṣṇa cult does not provide the full range of supports that Hindu community life requires. Where assistance must come to Kṛṣṇa-worshippers from sources outside their primary cult, the Rāmāyaṇa sets forth its full range of charming exemplars of the social virtues in all the common civic and family relationships. The cults of Rāma and of Kṛṣṇa are not interchangeable but they are definitely combinable. In the complex religion in which they have been combined, each cult has its own essential function. They are the two main factors in a single religion.

Working religions must be wholes. If a sector is missing in any wheel of faith, the gap must be filled; it is not optional. If they cannot close the circle from internal

resources they must borrow. Every tradition--your tradition too--has done this. It is out of such necessity that the cults of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa have lived and thriven in dependence on each other.

Further theorizing of this kind will have to be left to general historians of religion. Professional workers with Hīnduism might feel instructed to perform their own caste duty first and consider a rectification of names. To continue to call the religion we have described "Kṛṣṇa-worship" is less than adequate. "Viṣṇuism" is available but that name too has its faults. What would you call it? I open the floor to suggestions in a public name-giving contest.

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(Since social awareness and concern run deeper in some persons than in others, we have a basis for understanding why there are various degrees of interest in Rāma among Kṛṣṇa-devotees. In traditional Hīndu families the men are the makers of social decisions, and Rāmaism, I hesitantly suggest, appears to be strongly male in its following. At the soirée just described, for instance, not a woman, not a girl was present, or had participated in the readings. In a Hīndu city, it is the merchant class that feels most deeply the need for stability and order. Persons of merchant class organized and hosted and attended the festival of the Rāmāyaṇ Saṅkīrtan Samiti, and I found Vaiṣṇyas predominant in the organizing committee of the Rāmlīlā, and in supporting it with gifts.³ But in reaching out to Rāma these professional classes of

³Hein, op.cit., pp. 95f.

Mathurā differed from the general citizenry only in degree. All have some place for Rāma.)

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(Does Rāma worship, where it has most autonomy, show a corresponding tendency to appropriate and include Kṛṣṇa? I hope that those who know the life of the great Rāmaite centers will speak to that question. Primary Rāmāworship is hard to find.

I can at least observe that Rāmāworship, too, has its incompletenesses. For instance, the literature of Rāmādevotion is not notable for theological sophistication. Pressed for answers to metaphysical questions that every faith must sometime answer, Rāma-devotees have turned to the theologians of the Kṛṣṇaite sampradayas and used their work.

Rāma-worship, an earnest religion, is deficient in playfulness, and it operates in a rigid society whose members are burdened by duty and Ramaite dutifulness. For sportive relief Rāma-worshippers turn, it appears, to the lore of the Kṛṣṇa-avatāra. From the Kṛṣṇa-literature they have adopted the word and the concept of līlā or sport and have applied it to the life of Rāma. But the word "sport" has done little to make the Rāma-figure sportive, and Rāmaites have done better in taking over the myths of Kṛṣṇa himself. It is significant that Tulsī Dās, who loved Rāma with an intensity approached by few others, is the author of a work called the Kṛṣṇa-gītāvalī.⁴

⁴Tulsī Dās, Kavitāvalī, Translated and with a Critical Introduction by Raymond Allchin (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 41.

And the Rāma heritage is deficient in mystery. A god who is as dependable, as predictable, as thoroughly righteous in human terms as Rāma is not an always-satisfying symbol of the Lord who actually rules over this enigmatic universe. One of the song-offerings at the meeting of the Rāmāyaṇ Samkīrtan Samiti was a musician's haunting ballad, "Bhagavān kī līlā nyārī haiṇ," "The sports of the Lord are wondrous strange!" In an assembly for the worship of Rāma, the words of a Kṛṣṇaite composer were needed to convey that blunt and essential message.)

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(It is interesting to observe that a world-view centered on such a theological duumvirate as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa is not without precedent in earlier Indian religion. Vedism knew something similar in the complementary relationship between two of its greatest gods: Indra, presiding over the security of Aryan life in the unending struggle with external enemies, and ^{Varuna} the divine guardian of righteousness and of tranquility in the internal life of the community. The modern co-worship of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa identifies differently the critical divine functions, and it unites the pair in the framework of a worked-out monotheistic theology, but in the Vedic as in the modern time there was a compounding of cults in order to complete the religious resources of a worshipping community.)

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