

Philip Lutgendorf: *The life of a text: performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*. xvi, 469 pp. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

This is one of the finest books to emerge from the flurry of scholarly interest which has taken place in north Indian devotional religion over recent decades. While Tulsidas and his sixteenth-century 'Hindi Rāmāyaṇ' have been extensively studied, especially in Hindi sources but also in European ones, Philip Lutgendorf has shown great and important originality in looking beyond the text itself to examine the contexts and styles in which the text is performed. Considering the enormous and abiding popularity of this version of the *Rāmāyaṇ* (which is based partly on Vālmīki's version but is also much influenced by the more devotionally orientated *Adhyātma rāmāyaṇa*, a Sanskrit version little older than Tulsi's own text), it is clearly very appropriate to investigate how this one epic poem achieved such a widespread following in a region of India showing some of the lowest literacy rates in the subcontinent. This line of enquiry has led to an immensely informative book, both scholarly and readable, and full of insights which add much to our understanding of the way in which the '*Mānas*' is perceived by its various contemporary readerships and audiences; more broadly, the book is an invaluable source for the study of contemporary perceptions of devotional Hinduism.

Lutgendorf gives a brief assessment of Tulsi's poem as compared to the other popular versions of the Rāmāyaṇ story (but does not mention Tulsi's 'other' *Rāmāyaṇ*, the very relishable miniature version in *Barvai* metre); he offers a wisely cautious opinion on the authenticity of the *Hanumān cālīsā*, which is perhaps the only text to outstrip the *Mānas* in popularity but is almost certainly undeserving of its attribution to Tulsi. He then describes the complex construction of Tulsi's narrative, built up in a 'story within a story' framing which puzzles the novice reader by scattering scores of seemingly incongruous vocatives throughout the poem. The 'life of the text' analysed here takes place mostly in Banaras, Tulsi's adopted city and the main location of Lutgendorf's own research, and the particular culture and characteristic ethos of this setting is briefly described.

The main substance of the book is devoted to an analysis of the principal ways in which the *Mānas* text is currently performed. The most straightforward of these is sequential narration or *pārāyaṇ pāṭh*, typically broken up for practical reasons into a series of instalments such as that recommended by the standard popular edition published by the Gita Press, Gorakhpur. Lutgendorf describes the rites which accompany such recitation even on the most modest scale, and explains the use of a textual refrain, the *samput*, (typically the line *maṅgala bhavana amaṅgala hārī / dravahu so dasaratha ajira vihārī*, from *Bālkāṇḍ*) which punctuates recitation of this kind. The so-called *līlā vāṇī* and *Tulsī vāṇī*, two

contrasted melodies used variously for the recitation of the text, are briefly described; but frustratingly we are not given any specific description of the melodies themselves — an omission which becomes increasingly annoying as the melodies are alluded to several times in the course of the discussion. Lutgendorf's account of the recitation style is otherwise deeply informative, and maintains a skilful balance between factual and anecdotal content, with the ethnographic detail of particular performance events being meticulously and sympathetically observed.

If *pārāyaṇ pāṭh* suggests a degree of Sanskritization at some remove from the vernacular character of the *Mānas* text itself, an even more prestigious event is the *mahāyajña* performed by 108 Brahmins at an annual rite at the Gyan Vapi site adjacent to the most prestigious shrine in Banaras, the Vishvanath temple. In this rite, the content of the text itself is subservient to the auspicious fact of its recitation, individual poetic lines often being too quickly recited for actual comprehension; Lutgendorf shows how the *Rāmcaritmānas*, initially regarded with some circumspection by Hinduism's orthodoxy despite its prolix praise of the Brahminical status quo, has come to be seen as 'the Hindi Veda'. Since the Ayodhya incident of December 1992 and its various repercussions, the political aspect of such imagery as representative of Hindu nationhood has perhaps irreversibly coloured the context of Hindu devotionism with a darker tone; and Lutgendorf's account of the radically enhanced significance of Tulsi's text, while safely predating those grisly events, is illustrative of the manner in which an increasingly inflexible and monolithic interpretation of the Rāma narrative has come to a position of powerful dominance in northern India.

A simpler and more modest type of performance, closely observed and documented by Lutgendorf despite the 'folk' categorisation which deprives it of any formal acknowledgement as a significant part of 'culture', is the popular tradition of *Mānas* singing in the *kīrtan* style. Simply characterised by names such as '*Rām dhun*', such performances have close connections with seasonal folksong and are free of the trappings and ritual of the *yajña* described earlier.

A third and more prominent mode of recitation is the *kathā*, a formalised discourse in which professional expounders recite the text with elaborate exegesis and commentary. A discussion of this process, including accounts of the often very particular styles of presentation which give certain *Vyāsas* a star rating and a dedicated following of thousands, forms an important focus here. In this section we come closest to an appreciation of the wholly engrossing nature of *Mānas* recitation, and to the utterly satisfying religious-cum-aesthetic experience enjoyed by the audience as they hear the text. But in a complaint parallel to that of the absent description of the recitation melodies, one feels here an insufficient engagement with the text itself. Tulsi's *Mānas* inhabits a separate category from

run-of-the-mill devotional versifying, and much of its uniquely splendid qualities derive from the skilful composition of its heavily rhymed verses with their masterfully integrated use of alliteration and other poetic devices. This quality is therefore capable of objective analysis, and although Lutgendorf's book is not one of literary criticism, there is a sense in which a view of 'the life of the text' must take account of its objectively observable literary qualities; yet we see little real discussion of the original text (and a rare example of such on p. 210, dealing with an 'unrelated absolute' of a type common in the *Mānas*, is misconstrued.)

A further major mode of textual performance is the 'mystery play' tradition of the Rāmlīlā. This has been the subject of some few studies in recent years, but Lutgendorf's treatment of it restores to centre stage the role of Tulsi's *Mānas* as its textual basis and gives an absorbing account of the manner in which the sixteenth-century text is presented for a twentieth-century audience.

A final chapter dips its toe into the troubled waters of the politics referred to earlier; and although some of the discussion has been to some extent overtaken by the events of an all too worldly Ayodhya, Lutgendorf has useful things to say about the painful consequences of interpreting the allegory of *Rām-rājya* along narrowly literal lines. He ends more positively with a sanguine assessment of the life-chances of Tulsi's text and its performance traditions, competing as they now do with American soap operas beamed into India from satellites in a sky once occupied only by the chariots of the gods. Whether or not his optimism proves too sanguine remains to be seen; but if so, we have at least the consolation in this book of a highly articulate record of the life of a text as it is today.

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