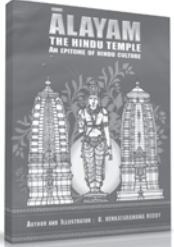


REVIEWS

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Alayam: The Hindu Temple An Epitome of Hindu Culture

G Venkataramana Reddy

Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore,
Chennai 600 004. Website: www.sriramakrishnamath.org. 2010.
vi + 128 pp. ₹ 110.

Sri Ramakrishna said: ‘By meditating on God with form one speedily acquires devotion.’ This precept is the essence of Hindu scriptures dealing with bhakti, and to a vast majority of persons a temple is a great help to realize this ideal, for ‘*Ālayam deva śarirah bhūtam*—Temple, in fact, represents the physical form (body) of the deity’ (10). This and many other kinds of insights into the architecture of temples as symbols of Hindu culture are meticulously presented in this book through texts, sketches, illustrations, and figures. The history of India and that of the Hindus is also intertwined with so many invasions that their effect on culture is best shown in its architecture, especially in the temple complexes and styles of North and South India. All this is thoroughly covered by the author, along with the philosophic symbolism and significance of the location of temples in human settlements.

G V Reddy also successfully dwells on the role and influence of the plans of worship of other religions and points out the essential differences: temples did not develop merely as places of public worship but as places where God in various forms palpably dwells.

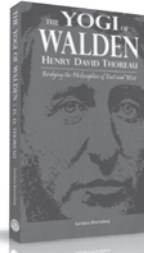
The Ramakrishna temple at Belur Math is conceptualized to show Sri Ramakrishna’s life and teachings of harmony, while considering also the idea of an all-round human welfare. Its design even takes into account the educational and philanthropic works carried out by the Ramakrishna movement. This is aptly shown in the concluding remarks and detailed sketches drawn by the

author himself on the various other Ramakrishna temples all over India.

In ten chapters G V Reddy has done a great service to both connoisseurs of Indian art and architecture as well as common people interested in having a general knowledge of temples by revisiting Hindu heritage through the eyes of Hindu experts.

Swami Tattwajnanananda

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The Yogi of Walden: Henry David Thoreau

Sundara Bharadwaj

Indus Source Books, PO Box 6194,
Malabar Hill PO, Mumbai 400 006.
Website: www.indussource.com. 2010.
xii + 223 pp. ₹ 195.

As a nation India has moved beyond post-colonialism into the realms of what today is termed as ‘transculturalism’. The late twentieth century created a discourse, via Michel Foucault and Homi Bhabha, that saw history as a reaction to colonial hegemonic forces. Today the realities in erstwhile developed nations have changed, and many of the globally white belts are now speckled with people of South East Asian descent. What Rudyard Kipling once thought of as an impossibility, namely the clichéd dictum that the East and the West can never meet, has been erased through interactions on all levels. It is within this new context of a global world that we must interpret the works of Henry David Thoreau (1817–62). And Dr Sundara Bharadwaj does an excellent job in reinterpreting Thoreau as a man who not only bridged the gap between his own Christian context and the tenets of Hinduism, but also as a man who spearheaded a campaign that today is being revived as a ‘back to nature movement’. The whole thrust

of Hinduism as a religion has been to find the Reality that moves all of nature and yet transcends it. Dr Bharadwaj clearly elucidates this connection of Thoreau and Hinduism: ‘Thoreau’s fellowship with birds and other creatures that made their home around Walden hut is worth mentioning. Citing *Harivamśa* ... he felt proud to say in *Walden* (57–58): “An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning; such is not my abode”’ (87).

This thorough acquaintance of the author with the primary texts of both Thoreau and Hinduism effectively support his argument proving Thoreau a yogi within the Indian tradition. And this transcending national and historical boundaries situates the works of Thoreau within the larger context of ‘transculturalism’.

There are some points in this book that could have been better discussed. In the first chapter, titled ‘Sanatana Dharma: A Treatise’, and in the last ‘Conclusion’ Dr Bharadwaj makes reductive and simplistic comments on the meaning of dharma and *kama* respectively. In what seems to be naive and often repeated sentences he praises Max Müller as ‘the foremost among Western Orientalists’ (2), after seemingly expressing relief at the Western world’s unlearning of ‘the misconceptions about Indian culture and society’ (ibid.). This smacks of a disregard to established theories of contemporary understanding of colonialism, the Orientalist Project—vide Edward Said—‘transculturalism’, and in between these the best-selling academic works of Antonio Negri on the nature of imperialism and empire-making—vide Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, 2000. I find Thoreau more of a Protestant coming to terms with his repressed desires within the subtexts of his works rather than him being a proponent of the concept of *kama* in Indian traditions. There exist numerous Indian treatises on the nature and pleasure of physicality, which our author fails to recognize in his book. This is not to say that what Dr Bharadwaj writes is incorrect, but what is presented here is insufficient for our times.

As it was mentioned, Dr Bharadwaj is well versed in both Thoreau and the Indian scriptures; this is illustrated by his numerous comparative passages from *Walden* and the Upanishads. Yet,

he entirely avoids present-day hermeneutics in interpreting Thoreau as well as the Indian scriptures. This might alienate a great part of the academic audience, who would also find an outdated bibliography and the lack of an index—a trifle off-putting. Even a cursory glance at the bibliography suggests that the book is written within the pre-Derrida, pre-Foucaultian style. This disregard for theory is the greatest danger that books written on Hinduism today present to a world as well as academicians well versed and expectant of firm theoretical bases in works of erudition.

Notwithstanding the reservations held against such scholars as Wendy Doniger by right-wing Hindu fundamentalists or the ethical works on the Talmud by Levinas and later by Martha Nussbaum, we must acknowledge that comparative theological and literary works coming out of India bridging two different traditions often fail at the level of metaphysics. General statements and selective quotations mar this otherwise superb comparative work. For example, on pages two and three Dr Bharadwaj suddenly rattles off quotations from the Zen Buddhist scholar D T Suzuki and then T S Eliot. He wants to show their admiration for everything Indian. While this may show the scope of the author’s readings, such out of context quotations do not do justice to the existential truths of either Dr Suzuki or T S Eliot. The former remained an admirer of Zen, enticing the Trappist Thomas Merton into Buddhism rather than Indology, and the latter called himself ultimately a ‘high Anglican’ who saw Hinduism as a fulfillment of the Word made Flesh of the New Testament.

Yet any seeker of wisdom will find enough food for thought in this very well compiled book. The two appendices are really heartening, being one of the original letters of Thoreau and an annotated excerpt from his *Walden*. The book tries valiantly to bridge the gap between the East and the West and indeed appropriates the life of Henry David Thoreau within the Indian tradition of those seers who had experienced the radiance of the Golden-effulgent One.

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