

CAN THERE BE ONLY ONE RAMAYANA?

Recently, Delhi University had to withdraw from its syllabus an essay by an eminent scholar AK Ramanujan where he claimed that there were “300 Ramayans”. The 30-page essay, which offers a number of re-telling of the epic story of Lord Rama, including the Jain, Buddhist and Kannada narratives, had not gone down well with some sections of the right wing, who called it “blasphemous”.

If some Hindu organizations had indeed taken such a stand, I do not agree with them. As long as we do not paint our sacred icons in dark colours in the name of “artistic license,” or with a deliberate intention of defaming and offending those outside our faith, I see nothing wrong with multiple versions of the Ramayana.

There’s a saying: “Krishna kaisa hai? Jiska man jaisa hai.” If we take Krishna’s personality, who is the real Krishna? The baby Krishna in Gokul and the apple of the eye of Mother Yashoda? The butter stealing child, the Makhanchor? The divine playmate of the Gopis and Gopas of Vrindavan? The lover boy of Radha and the Gopis? The King of Dwarka? The politician and strategist in Hastinapur? The Divine charioteer in the battlefield of Kurukshetra and the singer of the Divine Song (Bhagavad Gita)? Krishna is in fact, all of these. Which one is Vyasa’s Krishna?

The same thing applies to Sri Ram. The Divine is a mirror where we see our own reflection. Yes, Valmiki’s Ramayan is an immortal epic. Does that mean Tulsidas’s Ram Charit Manas is a blasphemy? Kamba Ramayan in Tamil and Krittibas Ramayan in Bengali, without any value? We cannot say that Valmiki spoke the final word on Rama and close the doors to the other devotees whose hearts are bubbling with the devotion and ecstasy for Prabhu Ram which finds expression in their inspired poetry. The Divine cannot remain sealed in any one single book. If we do that we would go the same way of the Quran and Islam. Rigidity would strangle our spiritual consciousness. Rama lives not in the confines of a volume, but in the heart of the loving devotee. And each devotee has his own way of loving God. God is like

water which doesn't have any form. But he assumes a form depending on the shape of the vessel which is the devotee's heart. Let more Ramayanas be written. Let more devotees sing the praise of the Lord in various tongues and various ways. Because Rama is a living force, not a fixed character created by Valmiki. Rama lived before Valmiki, Rama lived in the work of Valmiki and Rama shall continue to live after Valmiki for all times to come in the hearts of his devotees.