



Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God: Retracing the Ramayana Through India

Jonah Blank

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The three-thousand-year-old epic *Ramayana* chronicles Lord Rama's physical voyage from one end of the Indian subcontinent to the other and his spiritual voyage from Man to God. In *Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God*, anthropologist and journalist Jonah Blank gives a new perspective to this Hindu classic -- retelling the ancient tale while following the course of Rama's journey through present-day India and Sri Lanka. Ultimately, Blank's journey -- like that of Lord Rama -- evolves into a quest: to understand the chimerical essence of India itself, in all its overwhelming beauty and paradox.

"Quite possibly the most perceptive book that I have come across on India since the British Raj ended." -- Pranay Gupte, *The Washington Post*

"What Hollywood attempted on the big screen with casts of thousands in *Gandhi* and *A Passage to India*, Jonah Blank has achieved in 350 stylistically rich pages." -- *Los Angeles Times*

"This informative and entertaining book is something to be thankful for." -- *The New York Times Book Review*

Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God: Retracing the Ramayana Through India Details

Date : Published October 26th 2000 by Grove Press (first published 1992)

ISBN : 9780802137333

Author : Jonah Blank

Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : Cultural, India, Travel, Religion, Nonfiction, History

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B Salazar says

I'm so thoroughly entranced by this book. It reads like a travel narrative, but weaves in historical and theological information seamlessly, giving the reader a chance to both see and understand the (then) present day conflicts happening between Muslims and Hindus in India (at least in the first chapter, where I am now). The Ramayana is the canvas of this tale, and the journey of Jonah Blank is the paint. I'm so happy I found this book and decided to open it.

Michael Austin says

If Jonah Blank had come to me ten years ago and asked me if he should try to write a travel narrative through modern India using the 2500 year-old epic, THE RAMAYANA, as a point of departure for analyzing the landscape and the culture, I would have said, "don't be stupid--that's a lousy idea." The book is superb, so it is a good thing he didn't ask me first.

Suzan says

I really liked this book, in spite of the fact that the organization was lacking. I believe it gives insightful commentary about the inner workings of India loosely wrapped around the story of Ramayana. I was impressed with Blank's ability to step back from interactions and dig for the deeper meaning from not only the perspective of an American but also seemingly from that of an Indian. Facinating insight into the fundamentals of religion and how it informs our political beliefs. While I kept looking for a more chronological and map led overarching pattern or structure to the book, and I relaxed around the fact that it wasn't his actual path but a more spiritual path, it was less unsettling.... I think it's a facinating book and well worth reading. He is a wise man for his years...

Thaths says

A book that interweaves the Ramayana with a travelogue. Very insightful, and deeply flawed and frustrating in parts. I began to question whether I could trust the authors judgement when I read bits that I knew to be factually incorrect. For example, at one point the author claims someone is chewing banana leaves with their paan. Anyone who has been reasonably involved in India knows that people don't chew banana leaves. Similarly, at one point author says he was at a Dravidian (possibly Brahmin, I don't remember now) wedding in Madras where there was a horse for the groom to ride on. Anyone who is reasonably steeped in India knows that grooms riding on horses (baaraat) is a North Indian thing.

Anthony Nelson says

A fascinating tour through India, the book is a mixture of Blank's experiences while wandering with his thoughts and explications on the Ramayana. It's not a book I think that would be published these days, and it's self-indulgent in all the right ways. Blank is a wonderful writer and his encounters and travels are fascinating. His writing does exhibit all the know-it-all foibles of a 25 year, but an unusually interesting and well traveled one. Some of the attitudes probably wouldn't fly today, but worth a read as a picture of the India of its time/

Katja Vartiainen says

I really enjoyed this book. it's easy, to read, but intelligently written. there are many delicious anecdotes, and heart-braking stories, and the paradoxical coexistence of beauty, evil and serenity and of course spirituality. What bothered me at time sis the quite rough comparisons of Hindu traditions with Christianity, for example the 'sin' is essentially very different in the two. Some thoughts made me look back at my younger self- for example the end's reflections of life in marriage. But still, very much worth a read. I wish there would be a part II, where does India lie now.

Ammie says

I'm always skeptical when I read books about India, because I feel like there's so much that can be said about the country, the history, and the future and I don't know anywhere near enough about it to sort out useful information from total crap. This book acknowledged all of that, and in the end I felt like I had gained (at the very least) a much more varied set of ideas about the country. Told through the framework of the Ramayana, an ancient epic about the trials and tribulations of royal couple Rama and Sita, Jonah Blank examines the impact of the tale on the morals, modern viewpoints, and political conflicts within both India as a country and Indians in all of their diversity. Told with tenderness but also with the matter-of-fact callousness of a traveller, an interloper into another culture, the author struck a balance that seemed more realistic than some of the other books I've read along the same vein. I felt smarter when I finished, and also somehow more compassionate. Anybody who can engage me on those two levels is worth recommending.

Rita says

1990

Excellent very personal travelogue reporting many extensive conversations with Indians of all castes he encountered in his travels tracing the Ramayana.

Very young when he wrote this, about 25, and occasionally he expresses highly idealistic views one expects at that age. Yet seems very learned about history of India, diversity of religion, castes [well explained, I never knew the ins and outs].

Does his best to explain Hinduism to us, its relation to Buddhism [being a sort of offshoot], and the great diversity of beliefs among those considered Hindus. I hadn't even known about the main two streams of Vishnu worshippers vs. Shiva worshippers.

Wonderful way to get a taste of the set of stories in the Ramayana, and a bit of explanation of the Mahabharata, the other major sacred epic [Bharata being the brother of Rama who against his will had to rule during Rama's 14-year absence]. Blank tells a Ramayana segment of a few pages each chapter, just enough, not too much, and gives us a lot of context to understand something of it.

The different ways individual Indians view the various characters and events, and their morality, is quite interesting.

Audrey years ago recommended this book to me, having read it in high school.

Dayanand Prabhu says

The book provides a social commentary of India relating it to India's most loved story, The Ramayana. Jonah Blank highlights Spirituality, Romance, Adventure, Cynicism, Hope and much more. Each of it of the right quantity, not too much nor too little. A brilliant read indeed.

Christine Schmidt says

Although I had taught about the Ramayana superficially as a teacher of World History and had read excerpts, I had never gone into it more thoroughly. This epic is the heart story of so many people and this account fully shows that. Insightful into the values of India and how different they are sometimes from those of the west.

Sieglinde says

Somewhat outdated but very interesting. The book consists of the author's retelling of the Ramayana as he travels to the places depicted in the epic. He wrote thematic chapters based on subjects such a love and war based on what he experienced along the way. He speaks Hindi and some Urdu so he could talk to people who did not know English. He speaks to all classes ranging from generals to rickshaw wallahs. This book is a good introduction to India.

Anjali says

Full disclosure: Jonah is my professor this semester for a class on South Asia Relations. I bought the book because it's on his syllabus, but he requested we try to find the cheapest version available because he didn't want us to spend money....and I found an autographed copy for \$0.99. Best money I've spent in a long time. He's disarming, self-deprecating, and approachable. That aside, the man knows the entire region, India especially, better than most Indians I know, relatives included. Jonah only asked us to read 2 chapters but I found myself engrossed and decided to read the entire book on my own time. This book is well-written, provides a good background on some of the issues India and Sri Lanka are facing politically, and includes a good mix of travel narrative with historical fact and Indian mythology. Overall, I highly recommend the book as it can be appreciated by a novice to this part of the world or to someone well-versed in its complex

dynamics.

Manu says

If you read the book solely for the connection to mythology, you might come away disappointed. It happened to me for most of the book until I framed it as a travelogue which happened to connect to the Ramayana and its principal characters in quite a few ways. In that frame, barring a couple of questionable occurrences, ("feni in Kerala" made me wonder whether calling Bruce Lee a cricketer was actually sarcasm) it does a wonderfully lucid job.

The book was published in 1992 and it is always a pleasure to travel in time through books because, to quote the author, it "presents a picture of a certain place at a certain time, as seen by a certain person at a certain stage of his own life". It is quite an interesting time to read this because 1992 was a landmark year for the powers that govern the country now. I'm referring to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. That's where this journey starts.

I think the problem was in my expectations. I thought this would be a linear journey - both in terms of the chronology of the events in the Ramayana, as well as in terms of covering the geography featured in the epic. It doesn't work that way. While there are definitely quite a few interesting explorations of the geography, the book is more a study on the deep impact that the epic has even today in the life of an Indian. Not just at an individual level, but the societal, cultural, and political aspects as well.

The writing is largely non judgmental, and it would seem that the author is in wonder and awe of the subcontinent. And that makes the humour actually work. From actors playing gods and demons in the television portrayal of the epic, and the fascinating variety of Indian idols (the original kind, not the TV show) to Tamil guerrillas, Sikh militants, and Page 3 crowds, karma yogis, sadhus, and Mother Teresa, the book covers a range of characters and scenarios that truly do justice to the burst of flavours that is India. And Sri Lanka too, because the last third of the book is largely set here.

The last 50 or so pages also bring out the sensitivity of the author through the characters he brings up- a widower who visits the Taj every Friday (when entry is free, for he cannot afford the daily fees) because his best memories of his wife are there, the leper from Andhra stuck in Calcutta whose happiness in life is his wife and son. These are poignant tales of ordinary lives, definitely not the kind that could be found in Ramarajya, but very much a reality in modern India.

Definitely worth a read if you're ok with traveling only 25 years in history, and not thousands.

Robyn Hall says

This book was recommended to me by the authors sister who is a bookclub friend. She knows I have read some novels about India and its people and I feel like it's an interesting "subject". This is definitely not a novel but for anyone who is curious about India, this is a good study about the history, culture, and religions of this vast country. The story of the Ramayana is intriguing but I found the book difficult to read in some parts because there are so many unfamiliar concepts!

some "favorites" follow:

"What matters, is how you treat others. Plain and simple. And it is the very same for Hindu, non-Hindu, even for those who have no belief in God at all. Be kind to others. Not very difficult, eh?"

"Love God and treat all humans with kindness" says one guru "The rest of theology will follow from that. The Ramayana is not the stuff of petty bickering. It is an epic of self-sacrifice, of unbending morality; of trust, and of love."

"Every happy home needs a Chamber of Wrath. It is a place where people go when they are angry or sad, so that their sour mood does not infect the other members of the household." (this is a reference to the household of King Dasaratha who had 300 wives :)

I felt like I learned a lot and would love to visit the "multifaceted jewel that is India".

Aravindan Srinivasan says

Nice dose of history and an attempt to understand India through the ramayana..
