HINDU BOOK REVIEW
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The Wishing Tree

Christopher Isherwood on Mystical Religion

Author: Christopher Isherwood

Harper & Row, Publishers pb $9.95

10 East 53rd Street 208 pages

New York, NY 10022 USA

The title of this wonderful anthology of Isherwood's tales and essays of Ramakrishna Vedanta is drawn from a short story at the book's end: a story of the kalpataru wishing tree and how, out of a garden full of children who make and receive their wish, one child sees the tree as an awesome cosmic force of desire and forgets to wish. He becomes a saintly man. It is an allegory to man's enchantment with maya, the Vedantists' cosmic mirage.

Isherwood is best known in the West for his Berlin/travel novels and Hollywood screenplays. In the East, his biography, Ramakrishna and His Disciples, and translation work with Swami Prabhavananda of the Hollywood Vedanta Society won

him notoriety, though he ended up wrangling with the Ramakrishna Mission over the too-sanctimonious nature of the biography.

Nevertheless, Isherwood was an initiate of Swami Prabhavananda, establishing a deep rapport with him over some forty years and at one time had considered joining the Ramakrishna Order of monks.

Isherwood is a natural alchemist with words, and in this posthumous collection (died 1986) his flinty prose often strikes magical fire. It also transports Vedanta, which can be tediously abstruse, effortlessly into the readers' mind and conveys a vivid sense of the joy and humorous questioning of a convert from English casteism to Hindu non-dual philosophy. This is finely portrayed in the opening chapter, "How I Came to Vedanta," a marvelously readable account of Isherwood's utter hate for his native Britain's Anglican Church, how as a young man he escaped his aristocratic status by decamping to Berlin, wrote and, with the impending war, came to America as a pacifist with no real philosophy. He found it in Hollywood with Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard who introduced him to Swami Prabhavananda, a chain-smoking, worldly wise, yet otherworldly monk dressed nattily in the latest California duds. Isherwood writes of his own first flight into meditation: "Playing at meditation filled me with an excitement which I have seldom felt since. It was most exciting to sit on the floor in a corner of the room and feel that one was face to face with the unknown that was oneself."

An ending chapter discusses the Grafting of the religious novel which Isherwood attempted several times, never to his complete satisfaction. This is an enjoyable introduction to Vedanta in the wild West.

Sati

Author: Arvind Sharma

Motilal Banarsidass hc Rs.75

Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar 129 pages

Delhi 110007, India

This book was whipped up from twelve already completed scholastic essays on sati right on the heels of the sati controversy over eighteen-year old Roop Kanwar in late 1987. Considering the 1,000-degree heat of the exchange between the government, sati-worshippers, pandits and swamis over the past year, this book is a cool, flame-retarding reflection. It doesn't offer answers, but it does give historical perspective, both pro and con, and the final essay - one of three not written by Sharma - attempts to enter the Hindu psyche of those who advocate sati. It is called Sati, Widowhood and Yoga and half succeeds at its intention. The portrayal of Hindu widowhood is honest enough in its harsh lifestyle and constant condemnation by the household and community to see why the sati option with its glory and promise of near deification is still magnetic even today. Other chapters include "Sati: A Study in Western Reaction," which gives among other tidbits the first records of Greek reaction to a Hindu sati in northwest India.

Indian Tales of the Raj

Author: Zareer Masani

Univ. of California Press hc $16.95

2120 Berkeley Way 164 pages

Berkeley, CA 9472O USA

Masani relates in this book adaptation of a BBC interview series the nostalgia and subconscious memories and reactions to the British Raj by Indians. In Masani's

skilled hands - he is from a patrician Bombay Parsi family, went to Oxford and became a producer for BBC - these vignettes paint with great detail what it was like to serve the Raj in a variety of positions, both as underling and sycophantic equal. The interest in Tales comes from the fact that these people by and large liked the Raj and missed its departure at India's independence. Masani's own biographical chapter sets the tone for this "I love the Raj" romp.

Burning Questions on Hindutva

Author: G.M. Jagtiani pb Rs. 10

Self-published 61 pages

D/22, Self-Help Housing Society, St. Francis Road,

Vile Parle (West), Bombay 400 056 India

Herein lies a series of questions answered with about every English platitude one can imagine - "Buck up. Gird your loins." That kind of stuff. Despite the antiquated writing, Jagtiani does ask and answer with zeal some cogent questions: "Are interfaith conferences useful?" Not really. "Does Hinduism allow conversion?" Yes, even born Hindus should become Hinduized. "Should India be declared a Hindu state?" Yes, why not. Burning answers to hot questions.

Light, Fire and Darkness

Author: Dhiru Desai

Envy Publications pb $4.95

6790 Raleigh Lagrange 52 pages

Memphis. TN 38134 USA

Desai's work is a short and sweet adaptation of the Bhagavad Gita. It isn't a translation, but a "modernized version" as he calls it. It is executed in a non-rhyming poetic style and manages to nicely capture much of the Gita's central guidance. A likable touch is its use of non-Indian locales: the Pacific Ocean, Nile River. And he also tosses in major religious figures from Confucius to Martin Luther King.