

## ***Dhārmik* Kings in Courtly Agendas: The Figure of Rāma in the Works of Keśavdās**

The figure of Rāma and his story constitute a privileged topic to analyse the dynamics of the adaptation of Sanskrit classical models into the Braj Bhāṣā literary tradition flourishing in the sixteenth-century North India. They are traditionally acknowledged as authoritative subjects that legitimize the language in which they are narrated as a suitable literary means. With such a purpose, we will analyse how they are variously interpreted in the works of the poet Keśavdās (1555–1617), who mainly retells the story of Rāma in his *Rāmcaṇḍracandrikā* (*Moonlight of Rāmcaṇḍra*, 1601) and *Vijñāṅgītā* (*Praise of Knowledge*, 1610). In the first case, he describes Vālmiki appearing in a dream and empowering him to retell such divine story in the vernacular (*bhāṣā*), reshaping the content in a new form made of rhetorical figures and a sophisticated literary style. In the second work, the story of Rāma is taken from the *Yogavāsīṣṭha* and reinterpreted from a philosophical perspective, still open to *bhakti* influences. Rāma is the young prince who is educated to the rules of *dharmarājya* ('righteous kingdom') and learns the principles of morality and metaphysics. Combining classical models and new historical claims, he embodies a model of sovereignty that adapts to modernity and can be acceptable for the addressee of the work—Keśav's patron Vīr Siṃh, the king of Orcha. But the figure of Rāma also occurs in other works by the poet, such as the *Kavipriyā* (*Manual for Poets*, 1601) and the *Chandmālā* (*Garland of Metres*, 1602) with a more secular attitude: it is reinterpreted for aesthetic and political purposes and readapted to different historical, religious and cultural contexts thanks to its endless symbolic potentiality.

### **1. The Divine Nature of Rāma in the *Rāmcaṇḍracandrikā***

The *Rāmcaṇḍracandrikā* was composed in 1601 and consists of 39 chapters called *prakāśa*. It opens with an invocation to Gaṇeśa (1.1), Sarasvatī (1.2) and Rāma (1.3, see *infra*, paragraph 1.1), and, abiding by poetic conventions, it continues to mention the lineage of the poet—a family of Sanāḍhya Brahmins,

experts in all the classical treatises in Sanskrit (*aśesa śāstra*, 1.4).<sup>1</sup> Within this authoritative line of ancestry, Keśavdās defines himself as a slow-witted poet, who dares to celebrate the glory of Rāma in the vernacular (*mandamati śaṭa kavi*, 1.5). Following the canonical set of topics to be described in a poem, we then find the date and the reason for the composition of the work, before the narration of Rāma’s story commences.

As his source of inspiration, Keśavdās mentions Vālmīki appearing in his dreams and soliciting him to celebrate Rāma’s name and virtues to reach a condition of ultimate bliss (*kyom pāum sukhasāru?* 1.7, *Rāma nāma / satya dhāma*, 1.9). Persuaded by Vālmīki, the poet chooses Rāma as his favoured deity and composes this work in his praise (*Keśavdās tahī karayo Rāmacandra jū iṣṭha*, 1.18).

This work—as many others belonging to the *rīti kāl*—has been neglected for a long time because literary critics such as Rāmcandra Śukla refuted any originality to be found within and criticized its mannerist style.<sup>2</sup> Still, referring to his source of inspiration declared as the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, we can see that Keśavdās elaborates the story in his own peculiar way and his *Rāmkathā* follows a different arrangement of the topics.

Out of 39 chapters:

8 correspond to the *Bālakāṇḍa* (76 *sargas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*);

2 correspond to the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (111 *sargas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*);

2 correspond to the *Āranyākāṇḍa* (71 *sargas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*);

1 corresponds to the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* (66 *sargas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*);

1 corresponds to the *Sundarakāṇḍa* (66 *sargas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*);

8 correspond to the *Yuddhākāṇḍa* (100 *sargas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*);

17 correspond to the *Uttarakāṇḍa* (116 *sargas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*).

While the chapters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are mostly balanced with a substantial equilibrium among the different parts of Rāma’s life—his youth, the exile, the war and the reign—in the *Rāmcandracandrikā*, we can immediately notice a disproportion in the number of chapters dealing with the final part of Rāma’s story, which implies Keśavdās’s predilection for some themes connected to the king-

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1 As he asserted in the *Kavipriyā* (2.6–7, 19), his forefathers had received patronage from the Delhi Sultan Alāh ud-Dīn and Keśavdās himself frequented Akbar’s court. Cf. Heidi Pauwels, ‘The Saint, the Warlord, and the Emperor: Discourses of Braj Bhakti and Bundela Loyalty’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 52, issue 2, 2009, p. 201; Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings. The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 56–59.

2 Rāmcandra Śukla, *Hindī sāhitya kā itihās*, Ilāhābād: Lokbhāratī Prakāśan, 2002, pp. 141–42, cf. also Danuta Stasik, *The Infinite Story: The Past and Present of the Rāmāyaṇas in Hindi*, Delhi: Manohar, 2009, p. 124.

dom of Rāma at the end of his epic actions.<sup>3</sup> In particular, in this concluding section of the text we find descriptions of the court with its gardens, customs and riches, dialogues among sages and the king, prescriptions about his royal duties, his behaviour towards his wife and the appointment of his sons as heirs to the throne. These descriptions meet the requirements that any poem shall include, as stated by Keśavdās himself in his *Kavipriyā* (chapter 7), prescribing the topics to be addressed in order to produce a refined *kāvya* in *bhāṣā*.<sup>4</sup>

This preliminary survey on the beginning of the work and its general structure allows some introductory remarks to be made concerning the author's approach to Rāma's story: as proved by the figure of Vālmīki who gives him official investiture, the poet's choice seems to be made out of literary intermediation more than devotional fervour. Still he does not omit the celebrations of Rāma's salvific virtues and philosophical statements about his supreme divinity: 'He is the venerable Absolute, and he is considered both as the descent of the deity [upon earth] and the one who makes this descent happen' (1.17f).<sup>5</sup>

Keśavdās's purpose in retelling the story of Rāma in Braj is very much open to question: was it a religious one? Did he want to propose his own model of devotion to Rāma, alternative to the *bhakti* of Tulsīdās—to whom he is often compared—and a new path for salvation accessible to the devotees? Did he have solely a literary concern and want to legitimize himself as the modern Vālmīki?<sup>6</sup>

3 Parenthetically, in Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* the proportion is reversed with a bulk of the narrative dealing with the first two *kāṇḍas*, especially 361 sets of *caupāi-dohā* in the *Bālakāṇḍa*, 326 sets of *caupāi-dohā* in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, 46 sets in the *Āraṇyākāṇḍa*, 30 in the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*, 60 in the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, 121 in the *Laṅkākāṇḍa*, 130 in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*. Cf. Tulsīdās, *Rāmcaritmānas*, Gorakhpur: Gobind Bhawan-Karyalaya, Gita Press, 2001.

4 'A country, a town, a forest, a garden, a mountain, an ashram, a river, a pond; / A sun[rise and a sunset], a moon[rise and a moonset], a sea, all seasons and times [are called] the adornments of the earth' (translation by Danuta Stasik, '*Bhūmi-bhūṣaṇa* or How Nature Should Be Described. A Few Glimpses into Keśavdās's *Kavi-priyā*', *Cracow Indological Studies*, vol. 7, 2005, p. 279). The city must be described in all its parts, being the walls, the fort, the tower, the gate, wells, prostitutes and courtesans (7.4). Then in chapter 8, the poet goes on to describe the reign with its ornamental components, being 'the king, the queen, the crown prince, the court priest, generals, messengers, ministers, advisors, soldiers, horses, elephants and impressive battles' (8.1).

5 *soī parabrahma śrīmān haim avatārī avatāra mani*.

6 Rāmcandra Śukla maintains that the purpose of Keśavdās was to compose a *prabandhakāvya* in the vernacular without any interest in the deeper meaning of Rāma's story, but he overloaded it with so many figures and stylistic effects that he deprived it from any emotional appeal or poetic beauty (*keśav kī racnā ko sabse adhik vikṛt aur aru-*

Or did he instead mean to offer a pedagogical model for his patron, composing a work that had some political relevance?

To possibly address these questions, we propose to begin our overview from a philological analysis of the text. Probably, we will not detect the same religious import as in Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas*, but we will definitely gain a critical perspective on it, by acknowledging that it was composed responding to a different political, cultural and literary agenda.

Although Keśavdās is generally considered to be a worshipper of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa within the Vaiṣṇava tradition, the tone of his work in praise of Rāma is pervaded by devotion.<sup>7</sup> We can see the divinity of Rāma in the *Rāmcaṇḍrakā* from many different examples.

### 1.1. The Benedictory Stanza in Honour of the Supreme God

In the *maṅgalācaraṇa* (1.3), Rāma is praised as the supreme god:

All the Purāṇas and the old sages say that He is the Absolute,  
Nothing different they say.  
He offers His vision to the ones who cannot understand the [abstract] philosophical systems.  
[And] the Vedas that describe Him as 'neither this, nor that', excluding any [other] way out.  
Knowing this, the poet Keśavdās keeps repeating every day the name of Rāma,  
Without any fear of [the poetical flaw of] repetition.  
His figure confers the power of becoming invisible, His virtues [confer] the power of becoming huge,  
Devotion towards Him confers greatness; His name confers liberation (1.3).<sup>8</sup>

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*cikar karnevālī vastu hai ālaṅkārik camatkār kī pravṛtti jiske kāraṇ na to bhāvom kī prakṛt vyañjanā ke liye jagah bactī hai, na sacce hṛdayagrāhī vastuvārṇan ke liye; cf. Śukla, Hindī sāhitya kā itihās, p. 143).*

<sup>7</sup> For references cf. Stasik, *The Infinite Story*, p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> *pūraṇa purāṇa aru puruṣa purāṇa pāripūrṇa / batāvaim na batāvaim aura ukti ko / daraśana deta jinhaim daraśana samujhaim na, neti neti hakaim veda chāmḍī āna yukta ko / jāni yaha keśodāsa anudina rāma rāma, raṭata rahata na ḍarata punarukti ko / rūpa dehi aṇimāhi guṇa dehi garimāhi, bhakti dehi mahimāhi nāma dehi mukti ko.* Transcriptions of stanzas from Braj Bhāṣā record an inherent 'a' for metrical reasons, the same as the names of the Rāmāyaṇa characters. Names belonging to the modern literary tradition in Hindi follow the phonetic transcription of R.S. McGregor's *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (e.g., Keśavdās, *Rāmcaritmānas*, *rāmrajya*). Whenever not differently indicated, all translations are mine.

Rāma is celebrated here as the indescribable Absolute and as such identified with the Upaniṣadic formula *neti neti*. Still, from this supreme dimension of ineffability he is able to assume a visible shape and to become the god Rāma, whose celebration passes through the devotional practice of *jāpa*. The repetition of a name, which in poetical theory is a flaw of tautology, is upset by devotion and becomes a meritorious practice, as if to say that religious zeal trespasses the rules of poetry. Or that religious motivation makes also speech flaws such as repetition acceptable, even for poetically sensitive listeners.

## 1.2. Claims on Rāma's Omniscience

As in Tulsī's *Rāmcaritmānas*, Rāma's omniscience in the *Rāmchandracandrikā* is already known both by him and by the other characters of the story, such as the demon deer Mārīca (chapter 12).

When Rāvaṇa asks for Mārīca's help in abducting Sītā, the demon warns him by saying that he will not find a place in the entire universe to hide, because Rāma, in his supreme divine nature, is all-pervasive and all-knowing.

Do not consider Rāma as a [simple] man, the fourteen worlds are filled with Him.

I don't see any place where you can go [and hide] with Sītā, I feel the Lord [everywhere] on the water and the earth (12.9).<sup>9</sup>

Listening to these words that cast doubts on his might, Rāvaṇa loses his temper and threatens Mārīca, who finally resolves to fulfil his order because, dying by the hand of Rāma, he will be released from sins.

Mārīca went, knowing in his mind that he would die soon in both cases.

But by hand of Rāvaṇa he would [get to] dwell in hell, by hand of the Lord in heaven (12.11).<sup>10</sup>

This episode represents the prelude to the abduction of Sītā to Laṅkā and the adventures of Rāma to release her. Just before his journey starts, Keśavdās inserts one *dohā* that explains the reason for undertaking all these actions although he is omniscient: Rāma assumed his shape and performed the divine

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9 *rāmahi mānuṣa kai jani jānau / pūrana caudaha loka bakhānau // jāhu jahām siya lai su na dekhaum / haum hari ko jalahū thala lekhaum.*

10 *jāni calyo mārīca mana marana duhūm bidhi āsu / rāvana ke kara naraka hai hari-kara haripura bāsu.*

acts described in the *Rāmkaṭhā* in order to please his devotees who are unable to grasp his supreme immaterial form.

Even if the Lord Raghunātha is [always] equal [to himself], all pervasive, all knowing,  
He performs his divine play as a man, so that [also] unwise people are enchanted (12.26).<sup>11</sup>

### 1.3. The Theme of the Shadow Sītā

Again, like in the *Rāmcaritmānas*,<sup>12</sup> Keśavdās follows the tradition of the Shadow Sītā, starting with the Purāṇas and adopted in several later versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* such as the *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*. Being the supreme god, Rāma would never allow his wife to be abducted and taken to someone else's house; therefore, to protect her when she is alone, he creates a circle of fire and the Shadow Sītā.<sup>13</sup>

[Rāma says:]  
Princess, listen to my speech now, I am going to destroy the burden [of evil] on earth.  
Remain [hidden] in the fire and create a shadow body [for yourself with which] you will wish for the deer [that will be passing nearby] (12.12).<sup>14</sup>

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11 *jadapi śrī raghunātha jū sama sarvaga sarvagya / nara kaisī līlā karata jehi mohita saba agya.*

12 Cf. Tulsīdās, *Rāmcaritmānas*, *Āraṇyākāṇḍa* 24.1–2, p. 682: ‘Listen, my darling, who have been staunch in the holy vow of fidelity to me and are so virtuous in conduct: I am going to act a lovely human part. Abide in fire until I have completed the destruction of the demons. No sooner had Śrī Rāma told Her everything in detail than She impressed the image of the Lord’s feet on Her heart and entered into the fire, leaving with Him only of a shadow of Hers, though precisely of the same appearance and the same amiable and gentle disposition’.

13 The tradition of the Shadow Sītā is analysed by Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 12ff. and mentioned by John Brockington, *The Sacred Thread: Hinduism in Its Continuity and Diversity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984, p. 237; V. Raghavan, *The Greater Ramayana*, The Professor K. Venkataraman Lectures for 1971 at the University of Madras, Varanasi: All India Kashiraj Trust, 1973, p. 45.

14 *rājasūtā eka mantra suno aba, cāhata hauṃ bhuva bhāra haryo saba / pāvaka meṃ nija dehahi rākhahu, chāya sarīra mṛgaim abhilākhahu.*

Rāma already knows the upcoming turn of events and instructs Sītā about what is going to happen. Differently from the other versions of the story, it is Rāma here who instils in his wife the desire for the deer, reducing somehow her responsibility in this matter. In view of the inescapable consequences this will provoke, he intimates her to get prepared, creating the Shadow Sītā that will take part in the ventures that are about to happen, while the authentic Sītā will remain uncontaminated. This illusory double, protecting her from Rāvaṇa's rape and preserving her purity in front of the people, is created through the fire and will be ultimately destroyed in the fire, in the ordeal to which she will be called upon at the end of the story.

#### 1.4. The Issue of the *Agniparīkṣā*

The treatment of Sītā's trial by fire is an interesting point that neatly differentiates Keśavdās's perspective from Tulsīdās's work. When inserted in the *Rāmāyaṇas* with a devotional inspiration, this episode becomes problematic because it poses questions about how a benevolent god can come to compromise with such cruel treatment. Tulsīdās solves the problem by toning it down, as a necessary ritual to burn away the Shadow Sītā and allow the real one to come back. The episode in the *Rāmcaritmānas* is then resolved in few lines and its inscrutability is attributed to the limited human mind that cannot understand the choices of a god.<sup>15</sup>

Differently, in the *Rāmchandracandrikā* the scene is deprived of any cruelty—in no way attributed to the king—and becomes a real apotheosis of the queen

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<sup>15</sup> Tulsīdās deals with the episode in the *Laṅkākāṇḍa* 108.7–109, when Rāma, after defeating the *rākṣasas* and winning the war, asks Hanuman to bring Sītā back to him. The author says that as Sītā had been previously lodged in fire, Rāma now sought to bring her back to light, and for this reason he addressed her some reproachful words that pressed her to the ordeal by fire, which she accepted with obeisance and dedication. She entered the flames as though they were as cool as sandal paste. 'Both her shadow form as well as the social stigma [occasioned by her forced residence in Rāvaṇa's] were consumed in the blazing fire; but no one could know the secret of the Lord's doings. Even the gods, the *siddhas* and the sages stood gazing in the air. Fire assumed a bodily form and, taking by the hand the real Śrī [Sītā], (...) presented her to Śrī Rāma as if the Ocean of Milk presented Goddess Indirā [Lakṣmī] to Lord Viṣṇu. Standing on the left side of Śrī Rāma, She shone resplendent in Her exquisite beauty like the bud of a gold lily besides a fresh blue lotus'. Cf. Tulsīdās, *Rāmcaritmānas*, Chand 109.1–2, pp. 930–931. The ordeal is minimized in this description by saying that the people around who were forlorn listening to Rāma's request simply did not understand its deeper import that is the burning of the Shadow Sītā and the return of the real one.

delivering herself to the fire, probably closer to a Rājput ethic widespread at the time of composition of the text. The annihilation of the queen for the glory of her king is given for granted in the political agenda of the seventeenth-century Hindu courts. It is contemplated among the royal strategies, and does not cause any moral or emotional commotion.

In chapter 20, after the end of the war and the defeat of Rāvaṇa, Rāma finally meets Sītā ‘adorned with all the ornaments’ (*saba bhūṣaṇa bhūṣita*). On the way towards her husband, she comes into the embrace of fire ‘as a chaste maiden is welcomed by her father with open arms’ (*pitā aṅka jyom kanyakā śubhra gītā / lasai agni ke aṅka tyom śuddha Sītā*; 20.4 cd). For her brightness, Sītā sitting in the fire is compared to different goddesses, such as Śacī, Indra’s wife, sitting on a jewel throne (*mano ratnasimhāsanasthā sacī*; 20.5c), Sarasvatī lavish with water (*girāpūpa meṃ hai payodevatā sī*; 20.6a) or Lakṣmī on a lotus bud (*kidhaum padma ke koṣa padmā bimohai*; 20.6d). Her firmness is further equated to the one of an ascetic woman on the mount Sindūr (*sindūra sailāgra meṃ siddha kanyā*; 20.7a) or a yogini in the red twilight (*dagdāha meṃ dekhiye joginī sī*; 20.8b). The redness of the fire makes her appear like a figurine painted with red sandal (*āraktapatrā subha citraputrī*; 20.10a) or the vermilion on the forehead of Gaṇeśa (*mano birājai ati cārubeṣā*; 20.10b). She is attractive like the image in a mirror adorned with jewels and steady like the affection in the heart of a lover (*hai manidarpana meṃ pratibimba ki prīti hiye anurakta abhītā*; 20.11a).

In stanzas 20.12–13, all the gods come to see Sītā passing through the fire, while in stanza 20.14 Rāma is pleased by her purity and welcomes her after she proved her innocence to the entire world (*śrīrāmacandra haṃsi aṅka lagāi līnhoṃ / saṃsāra sāksi śubha pāvana āni dīnhoṃ*).

Here follows a section in praise of Rāma by Brahmā and the other gods gathered (20.15–23). It is the same fireproof to become the reason for praising Rāma, and a confirmation of his supreme condition through the sacrifice of his wife. Interestingly, the metaphysical qualities of Rāma as the Absolute are granted by Sītā, in a kind of mystical relation between the god and his *śakti*, close to the new devotional trends attributing a crucial importance to the female complement for the realization of the supreme nature of god.

[Brahmā] (*dodhaka*)<sup>16</sup>

Rāma, you are the one who always dwells inside [the heart, still] you delight the fourteen worlds.

16 A subdivision of *triṣṭubh* (verse having 11 syllables in each of the four *pādas*), consisting of the *ganās bha bha bha ga ga* (SII SII SII S). Cf. Maheshwari Sinha, *The Historical Development of Medieval Hindi Prosody (Rāmānanda-Keśav, 1400–1600 A.D.)*, Bhagalpur: Bhagalpur University Publications, 1964, p. 39.



Someone in the world knows you as the one without qualities, someone [else] describes you as always endowed with qualities.

Your light awakens the world [but you are] not said nor heard or seen.  
Nobody can grasp your extent, [you have] no beginning, no end, no shape (20.15–16).<sup>17</sup>

The Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophical stance of the text is clearly stated in the following stanza that slightly brings the discussion from the unqualified plane of the Absolute as *nirguṇa brahman* to a description of the different shapes it acquires with the creation.

(*tāraka*)<sup>18</sup>

You have a shape endowed with qualities [and at the same time] you are the possessor of qualities,  
From one single shape you created many shapes.  
Your shape is made only of the quality of light.  
You made the creation and are known as the Creator (20.17).<sup>19</sup>

The apex of Rāma's praise is reached mentioning the different shapes he assumed (*avatāra*) to save the world from any outrage.

You are the world and the world is in you, you created the limit of the world.  
When someone exceeds that limit, then because of that you take a visible shape.  
In the guise of a fish you released all the sufferings [of the earth], in the shape of a turtle you held a mount,  
In the shape of a boar you became celebrated all over the world, and snatched the land of [the demon] Hiraṇyakaśipu.

You assumed the shape of a lion-man and dispelled the long sufferings of [your devotee] Prahlāda,  
In the shape of a dwarf you cheated [the demon] Bāli, as [Paraśurāma] Bhṛṅgunandana you destroyed the Kṣatriya warriors [who tyrannized people].

You killed your enemy Rāvaṇa and saved the law that was sunk,

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17 *rāma sadā tuma antarayāmī / loka caturdaśa ke abhirāmī // nirguṇa eka timhaim jagā jānai / eka sadā guṇavanta bakhānai // jyoti jagai jagā madhya tihārī / jāya kahī na sunī na nihārī // kou kahai parimāna na tāko / ādi na anta na rūpa na jāko.*

18 A subdivision of *ati jagatī* (verse having 13 syllables in each of the four *pādas*), consisting of the *gaṇas sa sa sa sa ga* (IIS IIS IIS IIS 5). Cf. Sinha, *The Historical Development of Medieval Hindi Prosody*, p. 40.

19 *tuma hau guṇa rūpa guṇī tuma thāye / tuma eka te rūpa aneka banāye // ika hai jo rajoguṇa rūpa tihāro / tehi sṛṣṭi racī vidhi nāma bihāro.*

You will then take the shape of Kṛṣṇa and having defeated all enemies you will alleviate the burden of the earth.

Out of compassion you will take the shape of Buddha, then as Kalki you will destroy hordes of barbarians,  
In such a way you have manifold shapes, achieving all purposes with your greatness (20.19–23).<sup>20</sup>

Afterward, Mahādeva praises Rāma as the Lord of the world and the compassionate son of Daśaratha, who finally intervenes to convince him about Sītā's purity as a kind of acknowledgement of his own excellence.

[Daśaratha] (*niśipālikā*)<sup>21</sup>

Rāma, son! Accept Sītā as virtuous in your heart.  
Consider her as the life-breath of your kinsfolk and the ensemble of all your female ancestors.  
[And you] Lakṣmaṇa! Acknowledge Rāma as Equal to Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahmā,  
Praise him as the supreme Lord (20.25).<sup>22</sup>

## 1.5. Meeting with the Sages and Dialogue with Vasiṣṭha

Chapters 23–25 represent a point of novelty in Keśavdās's story, when a group of sages from the forest go to meet Rāma in Ayodhyā at the end of the 14 years of exile. In the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, the ṛṣis come to the court to pay homage to the king and they tell him the genealogy of the *rākṣasas*, in order to glorify Rāma, who defeated them.

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<sup>20</sup> *tumahī jaga hau jaga hai tumahī meṃ / tumahī biracī marajāda dunī meṃ / marajādahim chorata jānata jāko / tabahī avatāra dharo tuma tāko // tuma mīna hvai bedana kī ugharo jū / tumahī dhara kacchapa beṣa dharo jū / tumahī jaga yajña barāha bhaye jū / chiti chīna laī hiranācha haye jū // tumahī narasiṃha ko rūpa saṃvāro / prahlāda ko dīragha dukha bidāro / tumahī bali bāvana veṣa chalo jū / bhṛgunandana hvai chiti chatra dalo jū // tumahī yaha rāvaṇa duṣṭa saṃhāryo / dharaṇī maha bīrata dharma ubāryo / tumahī puni kṛṣṇa ko rūpa dharoge / hati duṣṭana ko bhuva bhāra haroge // tuma baudha sarūpa dayāhim dharoge / puni kalki hvai mleccha samūha haroge / yahi bhāmti aneka sarūpa tihāre / apanī marajāda ke kāja saṃvāre.*

<sup>21</sup> A subdivision of *ati sarkarī* (verse having 15 syllables in each of the four *pādas*), consisting of the *gaṇas bha ja sa na ra* (SII ISI IIS III SIS). Cf. Sinha, *The Historical Development of Medieval Hindi Prosody*, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> *rāma, suta! dharmayuta sīya mana māniye / bandhujana mātugana prāna sama jāniye / tīsu sura tīsa jagadīsa sama dekhiye / rāma kahaṃ lakṣmaṇa! viṣeṣa prabhu lekhiye.*

This part in the *Rāmcandracandrikā* has a completely different tone, being a philosophical dialogue to console Rāma who does not want to go back to his royal duties after having spent many years as a hermit in the forest.

Listen great sages, I cannot see any pleasure in the world,  
The individual Self cannot prevent death and once dead he cannot extinguish  
rebirth (24.1).<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the chapter Rāma describes the sorrows that afflict man at every moment of his life, and compared his dull mind to a ship floating in a sea of sin, with waves of lies that make the flow of greed grow (*pairata pāpa payonidhi mem mana mūrha manoja jahāj caṛhoī / khela taū na tajai jaṛa jīva jaū baravā-nala krodha dārhoī*; 24.22ab). He then asks the sages to teach him a means to release the Self (24.28a). Viśvāmitra invites Vasiṣṭha to make Rāma understand the authentic unchanging nature of the Lord (*īśa ko aśeṣa satya tattva*; 24.30b) and enlighten the intellect of Rāma (*devadeva rāma deva ko prabodha bodhiye*; 24.30d).<sup>24</sup>

In chapter 25, Vasiṣṭha makes Rāma realize his identity with the Absolute and, as such, his state of liberated-in-life. He remarks that being the supreme Self, not even his master can teach him anything but he needs to become conscious of the truth he knows perfectly by himself.

You are one [and the same] at the beginning, in the middle and the end, [even if] the Self takes different births.  
[This] creation that you create by your [own] thought, how could I grasp it, Murāri? (25.1).<sup>25</sup>

This dialogue between Rāma and Vasiṣṭha is an interesting passage that draws his inspiration from the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and will be taken up again in a later work

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<sup>23</sup> *sumati mahāmuni suniye jaga maham sukkhha na guniye / maranahim jīva na tajahim mari mari janmana bhajahim.*

<sup>24</sup> This closing verse hints to the possible source of inspiration for this chapter as the Sanskrit allegorical drama *Prabodhacandrodaya* (11th c.), which describes the vices that bewilder the mind as an army that must be defeated by virtues and discrimination to obtain enlightenment. As we will discuss in some details (cf. paragraph 3), Keśavdās will propose his own version of this drama in a later work called *Vijñāngītā*. Apart from the direct mention of his source of inspiration in the last verse (*prabodha bodhyate < Prabodhacandrodaya*), the poet builds the entire chapter around the discussion of the vices that affect the mind using the same names that will take the shape of autonomous characters in the *Vijñāngītā*.

<sup>25</sup> *tuma ādi madhya avasāna eka / aru jīva janma samujhai aneka // tumahī ju racī racanā bicāri / tehi kauna bhānti samajhauṃ murāri.*

by Keśavdās, being the *Vijñāngītā* (1610, see *infra* paragraph 3). Considering that the *Rāmcandracandrikā* was composed in 1601, we can presume that the author had been interested in this subject for a long time and almost ten years later he dealt with it in detail. In some occasions, he even used the same stanzas in the two works, e.g. *Rāmcandracandrikā* 25.39 and *Vijñāngītā* 21.52 (see *infra*).

While the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* describes the spiritual training of the young prince Rāma by Vasiṣṭha that is part of his royal education, the dialogue in the *Rāmcandracandrikā* occurs at a moment when Rāma has been crowned king but wants to give up to his royal duties because he is disappointed with mundane life after getting used to the ascetic habits of the forest. Therefore, the role of Vasiṣṭha completely changes in this context, being deputed to convince the king not to give up his reign because it would fall into disorder and could be jeopardized. The approach he recommends to Rāma is the one of the liberated-in-life (*jīvanmukta*), who lives in the world fulfilling his duties but with an enlightened mind and being already liberated from the bounds of *saṃsāra*.

Keśava says—those in whose heart [only] self-restrain glows, [still] outside they enjoy body pleasures.

Those having the mind always under control—for them the forest is like a house and the house is like a forest indeed (25.39 cd).<sup>26</sup>

The end of the dialogue gives an explanation to the entire chapter: as it is implausible that God needs to learn from someone else about his intimate nature, because he is already omniscient, here Rāma reveals that he already knew all what Vasiṣṭha expounded, but he kept it secret so far in order to perform his wonderful acts that delight his devotees. Still, having achieved the symbolic meaning of his story, they are now ready to learn the highest philosophical truth.

I did not make known all what you made known today,  
Now what has been said be done [and] the act you said [be accomplished]  
(25.41).<sup>27</sup>

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26 *kahi keśava yoga jagai hiya bhītara bāhara bhogana yom tanu hai / manu hātha sadā jinake tinako vana hī gharu hai gharu hī banu hai.*

27 *mohi na huto janāibe / sabahī jānyo āju // aba jo kahau so kījiye / kahe tumhāre kāju.*

## 2. Rāma as the *dhārmik* King in the *Kavipriyā*

In the same year 1601, Keśavdās composed both his adaptation of the story of Rāma, the *Rāmcandracandrikā*, and a treatise on poetics entitled *Kavipriyā*.

In the *Kavipriyā*, aiming to show poets some refined examples of poetry to imitate, he elaborates some stanzas that can serve as a model. As already mentioned, chapter 8 of the text is dedicated to the court and its ornaments, among which we find the king, the prince, the queen and their military and bureaucratic equipment. This chapter is fully imbued with the imagery connected with *rām-rājya* that is the model for any virtuous kingdom and Rāma is the perfect sovereign incarnating *dharmā* and Hindu morality. The ideal of *rām-rājya* as the perfect kingdom is used as the standard of comparison also for the Mughal emperor *Jahāmgīr*, in whose honour Keśavdās composed a panegyric entitled *Jahāmgīr-jascandrikā* in 1612. Interestingly, in the *Jahāmgīr-jascandrikā* 1.35, Keśavdās refers to the rule of Jahangir using the same stanza he composed almost ten years before in honour of Rāma to celebrate his virtuous rule in the *Kavipriyā*.<sup>28</sup>

Over each of his cities only thundering clouds approach,  
 He is not concerned by calamities; his only concern is for the populace's poverty.  
 Even inaccessible routes are taken towards the cities of enemies,  
 (or: [intercourse with] inaccessible women is made only in the cities of enemies).  
 [In his reign] inconstancy [towards women] is only a literary item and the only theft is of others' pain.  
 In his role of landlord, he is considered the deity who sustains the earth.  
 Keśavdās says—abhorrent is only abhorrence of human bodies;  
 On the top of castles only the statues of deities are seen.  
 Such is the political policy of King Raghuvīr/*Jahāmgīr* (8.5).<sup>29</sup>

This passage is emblematic both of the versatility of the author, who easily adapts his poetry to completely different contexts, and of the efficacy of the model of *rām-rājya* as the virtuous paradigm of sovereignty that could represent a source of inspiration even to the Mughal empire. On the other side, this nonchalant overlapping of the two sovereigns, one being the emblem of Hindu kingship

<sup>28</sup> Cf. also Allison Busch, 'Literary Responses to the Mughal Imperium: the Historical Poems of Keśavadāsa', *South Asia Research*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2005, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> *nagara nagara para ghanahī tau gājaiṃ ghorī tī kī na bhūti bhūti adhana adhīra kī / ari nagarīni prati karata agamyāgauna bhāvai bibhicāri jahām corī para pīra kī / bhūmiyā ke nāte bhūmibhūdhara tau lekhiyatu durgani hī kesorāya durgati sarīra kī / gadhani gaḍoī eka devatā hī dekhiyatu aisī rti rājanīti rājai raghuvīra/jahāmgīra kī.*

and the other the Mughal emperor, unveils the political dynamics of tightening the ties between Hindu courts and the Mughal empire, which tried to have them absorbed into its sphere of influence by appropriating of their cultural models.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Rāma as a Seeker for Liberation (*jīvanmukta-mumukṣu*) in the *Vijñāngītā*

Keśav's *Vijñāngītā* is one of the oldest adaptations in Braj Bhāṣā of the Sanskrit allegorical drama *Prabodhacandrodaya*, which was composed by the poet Kṛṣṇa Miśra in the eleventh century. The text describes the fratricidal war between the two kings: Discrimination (Viveka) and Bewilderment (Mahāmoha), in order to appease their father Mind (Manas) and liberate the Self (Puruṣa). The drama moves from an Advaita Vedānta philosophical standpoint and describes the process of the gradual awakening of the Self and the ascent towards a monistic experience, passing through this symbolic interior war.<sup>31</sup> The transmigrating Self is progressively released from the mirages of the illusory world and the traps of *saṃsāra*, becoming aware of its identity with the Absolute and ultimately liberating itself. Renowned for providing a model of an allegorical play for classical

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<sup>30</sup> Many literary works such as imperial panegyrics and mythical genealogies combining legendary Hindu ancestors and new Muslim rulers witness the transfer of local Hindu courts into the Mughal sphere of influence, close to imperial politics. On this topic see, for example, Muzaffar Alam and Subrahmanyam Sanjay, *The Mughal State: 1526–1750*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998; Busch, 'Literary Responses to the Mughal Imperium', pp. 31–54; Simon Brodbeck and James M. Hegarty (eds), *Genealogy and History in South Asia, Religions of South Asia* (special issue), vol. 5, no. 1/2, 2011; Brajdu Lal Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1998, pp. 73–86; Carl W. Ernst, 'Muslim Studies of Hinduism? A Reconsideration of Arabic and Persian Translations from Indian Languages', *Iranian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2003, pp. 173–95; Monika Horstmann, *Visions of Kingship in the Twilight of Mughal Rule*, Thirteenth Gonda Lecture, Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2006, pp. 7–20; Norbert Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Precolonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Cynthia Talbot, 'Inscribing the Other, Inscripting the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1995, pp. 692–722.

<sup>31</sup> Sita Krishna Nambiar, *Prabodhacandrodaya of Kṛṣṇa Miśra: Sanskrit Text with English Translation, a Critical Introduction and Index*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998, p. 18.

Indian literature, the *Prabodhacandrodaya* had a flourishing tradition of translations and adaptations into many different languages.<sup>32</sup>

Keśav's adaptation is particularly interesting because it is set against the historical and cultural scenery of seventeenth-century North India, offering a portrait of that crucial phase both for Hindu-Muslim encounters and new *bhakti* developments.<sup>33</sup> It was written in 1610, in a flowering period of translations from Sanskrit into modern Indian languages, which provided legitimacy to the use of vernacular for literary compositions in a process of cross-pollination of different traditions, especially in royal courts connected to the Mughal Empire.<sup>34</sup>

A creative textual approach emerges from Keśav's work, where the story of the *Prabodhacandrodaya* becomes the impetus for composing a compendium of philosophy, ranging from classical Purāṇic lore to treatises on morals, opening the text to many other influences coming from a variety of works. In particular, with the same creative approach he used the *Rāmcandracandrikā*, Keśav completes the description of the war between Discrimination and Bewilderment in the first twelve chapters of his work, and dedicates the last nine to many other stories taken from the most disparate texts.

In Kṛṣṇa Miśra's drama, after the war we find King Mind overcome with the grief over the loss of his sons, who has resolved to put an end to his life, until goddess Sarasvatī is sent to persuade him to fulfil his royal duties, with a peaceful attitude and dedication to Hari.<sup>35</sup> Differently, in Keśav's work this spur toward action assumes the shape of a teaching for the king about his royal duties and his moral elevation. In particular, many legends are introduced, mainly taken

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32 At least 25 versions are known in Hindi, but many others are found in Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Persian, apart from various other adaptation in Sanskrit. Cf. Saroj Agravāl, *Prabodhacandrodaya aur uskī hindī paramparā*, Prayāg: Hindi Sāhitya Sammelan, 1962.

33 This complex allegory combines *māyāvāda* with *viṣṇubhakti* in the philosophical framework of theistic Vedānta; Matthew Kapstein, *The Rise of Wisdom Moon by Krishna-Mishra*. New York: New York University Press and JJC Foundation, 2009, pp. xxxii–xxxiv. Devotion is the means through which man obtains a peaceful mind and the Self attains its true nature of oneness with the Supreme Self, which is identified both with Viṣṇu and Brahman; Nambiar, *Prabodhacandrodaya of Kṛṣṇa Miśra*, pp. 11–12. Therefore, *bhakti* represents a crucial theme of the *Prabodhacandrodaya*, notably evolving in its many later translations and adaptations.

34 Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200–1800*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004; Carl W. Ernst, 'Muslim Studies of Hinduism?'; Audrey Truschke, *Cosmopolitan Encounters: Sanskrit and Persian at the Mughal Court*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2012, <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8WM1MFZ/download> (accessed 10.08.2019).

35 Nambiar, *Prabodhacandrodaya of Kṛṣṇa Miśra*, pp. 23–24.

from the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, which is the other textual source that strongly influenced Keśavdās's composition, as already mentioned in paragraph 1.5.

On the one side, hearing about the stories of great *bhaktas* such as Gādhī or Prahlāda, the listener—Rāma in the case of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and Keśavdās's patron in the case of the *Vijñāngītā*—learns that through intense austerity (*samādhi*) and Hari's grace, he can become a *jīvanmukta* and obtain release, introducing the theme of the divine grace as a reward for one's own spiritual commitment and devotion.

On the other side, Keśavdās makes a parallel between himself and the author of the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*: just like Vasiṣṭha instructed Rāma, Keśavdās is now instructing his patron Vīr Siṃh about the possibility of attaining the path for liberation practicing detachment from desire (*virakti*) while being in one's own house. He then asks about the path of Devotion to the Lord (*haribhakti*), which he may realize.

This passage draws on some classical sources for the kings' education, accurately readapted and incorporated, in order to present a kind of 'Mirror for princes' for King Vīr Siṃh.<sup>36</sup> The main source in the *Vijñāngītā* for teachings on royal duty are the two classical Indian epics, that is to say the *Mahābhārata*, which assumes once more its central role in the production of royal culture and aesthetics,<sup>37</sup> and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which is regarded as the most important text affirming the *rājadharmā* and promoting royal authority.

Vīr Siṃh is depicted as facing a moral dilemma for having dismissed his elder brother Rām Shāh from the throne of Orcha and made a strategic alliance with the emperor *Jahāṅgīr* in a kind of mutual support in the respective illegiti-

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36 On this popular genre of manuals prescribing the rules for the moral and political education of the kings, see for example Sajida Sultana Alvi (tr.), *Advice on the Art of Governance. Mau'īza-i Jahāngīrī of Muḥammad Bāqir Namj-i Sānī, An Indo-Islamic Mirror for Princes*, Persian Text with Introduction, Translation and Notes by Sajida Sultana Alvi, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

37 The fascinating topic of the reproduction of the epic space of the *Mahābhārata* sustaining the discourse on power in premodern India is widely dealt with by Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, pp. 223–237. Many sovereigns patronized regional translations of the epic as a mode of articulating their imperial claims by appropriating its geography and adapting the storyline to their specific political needs. Moreover, the Persian translation of the *Mahābhārata* had a crucial role 'in the production of a Mughal imperial culture in the 1580s and a new Indo-Persian imperial aesthetics' (Truschke, *Cosmopolitan Encounters*, pp. 181ff). In a close intertwining of aesthetics and politics, texts have the power to reshape the realities they represent and 'not only reflect but actually produce political power' (Truschke, *Cosmopolitan Encounters*, p. 250).



mate ascent to the throne.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, in order to reassure Vīr Siṃh about the fact that a war undertaken to restate a condition of law is nothing but the *dharma* of kings and should not affect their moral and spiritual ascent, Keśav cites some famous examples of unfathomable wars from the two classical epics.

From the *Rāmāyaṇa* he mentions the story of Kuśa and Lava engaged in a conflict against their father, since the sacrifice horse that Rāma had released for his *aśvamedha* strayed into their forest. Being unaware that the horse belonged to Rāma and that he was their progenitor, Kuśa and Lava were finally forgiven and appointed crown princes (stanza 9.38).

As had already emerged with regard to the *Rāmcandracandrikā* (cf. paragraph 1.5), in the *Vijñāngītā* the quest for spiritual liberation is always associated with liberation in life (*jīvanmukti mumukṣutva*). Therefore, the figure of Rāma as the supreme deity that takes a human form and accomplishes his royal duty is the perfect example of virtue and spiritual elevation that everyone should imitate, especially kings who have political responsibility towards their reign.

In the case of his patron as the addressee of the text, the political strategy that Keśavdās is suggesting to Vīr Siṃh is a mix of commitment to royal duty, detachment from the feebleness that weakens the spirit, and a necessary pragmatism that helps to detach oneself from the triviality of one's own actions, with a bigger awareness of the ultimate goals of life, always keeping Rāma as a model to imitate for spiritual and political elevation.

### 3.1. Merits of Reciting the Name of Rāma

After having identified the individual Self with the Absolute and getting release from the wordily illusions, in line with the Advaita Vedānta perspective from which it started, in its last chapter the *Vijñāngītā* comes to a devotional point celebrating the name of Rāma as the ultimate means for salvation.

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<sup>38</sup> The political alliance between Prince Salīm and Vīr Siṃh was sealed through the murder of Abul Fazl, the personal counsellor of Akbar. Jahangir considered him responsible for Akbar's predilection for Khusrau as his successor to the throne; therefore, he arranged for murdering him at the hand of Vīr Siṃh. In return, Prince Salīm, who became Emperor Jahangir, supported Vīr Siṃh's ascent to the throne of Orcha in 1605. See Richard Burn (ed.), *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. 4, *The Mughal Period*, planned by Walseley Haig, Delhi: S. Chand & Co, 1937, p. 149, and John F. Richard, *The Mughal Empire*, vol. 1, part 5, *The New Cambridge History of India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 95.

Vīr Siṃh asks Keśavdās how to dedicate only to Devotion to the Lord (*haribhakti*). The poet recommends him to worship the name of Rāma, listening to which the mind becomes pure above all.

If austerities and sacrifices are not performed, nor is grasped the core of the precepts of law and morality,  
If a poor man lacks any ability in any way, which way [to salvation] will be told to him, oh lord?

When [the supreme being made of] existence, consciousness and beatitude takes a [visible] shape, he dispels the three sins of the three worlds (21.59cd-60).<sup>39</sup>

All the people chant the name of Rāma, which must always be accomplished with pure pronunciation.

(*bhujāṅga prayāta*)<sup>40</sup>

It is said that half of the name can destroy any hindrance, if the full name is remembered, then he is the Absolute.

Two syllables can save the two worlds [that is this world and the other world], any syllable that is pronounced dispels deceit from the heart.

If one makes listen and another one listens to it, that becomes a meeting of saints. If one makes recite and another one recites it, it will destroy the multitude of sins.

If one makes remember and the other remembers it, all the latent impressions are burnt away. Gaining the name of Rāma, the four lineages [i.e. the four castes] are discarded<sup>41</sup> (21.62).<sup>42</sup>

[Vasiṣṭha] (*caupāi*)

When the Vedas and the Purāṇas will disappear, and prayers and austerities will be performed only in holy places,

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39 *joga jāga kari jāhi na āvai / dharma karma bidhi dharma na pāvai / hai asakta bahu bahu bhānti bicārau / kauna bhānti prabhu tāhi ucāray //*  
*vahī saccidānanda rūpai dharaim / su trailoka ke pāpa tīnau haraimge / kahaigo sabai nāma śrīrāma tāko / sadāsiddha hai suddha ucchāra jāko.*

40 A subdivision of *jagatī* (verse having 12 syllables in each of the four *pādas*), made of *gaṇas ya ya ya ya* (ISS ISS ISS ISS). Cf. Sinha, *The Historical Development of Medieval Hindi Prosody*, p. 39.

41 Because anyone from any caste can obtain liberation immediately.

42 *kahai nāma ādhau subyādhau nasāvai / smarai nāma pūro su pūro kahāvai / sudhārai duhūm loka koṁ barna doū / hiyeṁ chadma chāḍai kahai barna koū / sunāvai sunai sādhusaṅgī kahāvai / kahāvai kahai pāpapuṅjau nasāvai / smarāvai smarai bāsanā jāri dārai | lahai rāmahīm baṁsa cāro udhārai.*

When it will be advised either to kill or set on fire,<sup>43</sup> then only the name [of Rāma] will discard that Era of Damnation (*kali[yuga]*) (21.63).<sup>44</sup>

In these verses Rāma is celebrated not only in his metaphysical value and equated to the supreme being having the shape of existence, consciousness and beatitude (*saccidānanda*), but also in his relevance within devotional practices that immediately give freedom from sins and salvation to whoever offers him sincere dedication.

#### **4. Combination of Secular and Religious Perspectives Connected to the Name of Rāma**

In his dialogue with Vālmīki opening the *Rāmcaṇḍracandrikā*, the author plays with the name of Rāma to glorify the Lord, just before the narration of his epic acts starts.

The same stanzas can be found in another of his works, the *Chandmālā*, being a treatise on metrics in which he explains a new set of metres with definitions and examples that might serve to the poets who want to use Braj Bhāṣā for their poetic compositions. The verses from the *Rāmcaṇḍracandrikā* are also reported in the *Chandmālā* as examples of each metre (e.g. *Rāmcaṇḍracandrikā*

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<sup>43</sup> Probable hint to the logic of violence that prevails in the Era of Damnation (*kaliyuga*).

<sup>44</sup> *jaba saba beda purāna nasaihaiṁ / japa tapa trīatha madhya basaihaiṁ / so upadesa ju māri ki bārai / taba kali kevala nāma udhārai.*

1.8 = *Chandmālā* 1.5;<sup>45</sup> *Rāmcandracandrikā* 1.12 = *Chandmālā* 1.8;<sup>46</sup> *Rāmcandracandrikā* 1.13<sup>47</sup> = *Chandmālā* 1.9).

As for the verses, Keśavdās and Vālmīki discuss the merits of celebrating the name of Rāma and his story because no other is as pure and redeeming as his.

(*śrī chand*) (Muni)

Prosperity [and] success [is the name of Rāma]!

The name of Rāma [is] the truth and the law.

Of which use is any other name?

(...)

I will describe with my words [what is indescribable], he is the shelter of the world.

The son of Raghu is the root of bliss; the world praises him as the ‘Friend of the world’ (1.8–1.10, 1.12–13).<sup>48</sup>

Notwithstanding the solemnity of the dialogue, that—as we saw—represents a kind of literary investiture to retell the story of Rāma by Vālmīki himself (cf. paragraph 1.1), these verses show again the complex multi-layered relation that Keśavdās had with the figure of Rāma. Even being so deeply imbued in the literary tradition celebrating Rāma as the supreme god, still the author keeps a

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45 Explaining the metre called *śrī*, formed by monosyllabic words each made of one long vowel (SSSS), before giving the example taken from the *Rāmcandracandrikā*, Keśavdās gives its definition in *Chandmālā* 1.5. as follows: ‘When putting one long syllable, the word is pleasant, / As an auspicious treasure for the world, that is called *śrī* metre’ (*dīrgha eka hī barana ko dījai pada sukhakanda / maṅgala sakala nidhāna jaga nāma sunahu śrī chanda*). Cf. Keśavdās, *Chandmālā*, in *Keśav Granthāvalī* (khaṇḍ 2), ed. Viśvanāth Prasād Miśra, Ilāhābād: Hindustānī Ekeḍemī, 1955, p. 431 and Sinha, *The Historical Development of Medieval Hindi Prosody*, p. 35.

46 Explaining the metre called *taraṇijā*, formed by *na gaṇa* (III) + one long (S) in each hemistich (IIIS IIIS IIIS IIIS), Keśavdās gives its definition as such: ‘The metre with one *na gaṇa* and one long vowel at the end is known as *taraṇijā*’ (*nagana ādi guru anta hai chanda taraṇijā jāni*); Keśavdās, *Chandmālā*, p. 432. Maheshwari Sinha (*The Historical Development of Medieval Hindi Prosody*, p. 35) describes it as a subdivision of *praṭīṣṭhā* having four syllables in each of the four *pādas*.

47 Explaining the metre called *māyā*, defined by Keśavdās as formed by two short syllables (II) + the *ra gaṇa* (SIS) (IISIS IISIS IISIS IISIS), he gives its definition as: ‘The metre with one *ra gaṇa* at the end and two short [vowels] at the beginning is described as *māyā*’ (*ragana anta dvai ādi laghu māyā chanda bakhānu / kesavadāsa prakāsa so pañcabarana paramānu*). Keśavdās says, this can be of five kinds. Cf. Keśavdās, *Chandmālā*, p. 432.

48 *sīdhī / rīdhī // (sāra cand) rāma nāma / sātya dhāma // aura nāma / kona kāma // (...)* (*taraṇijā*) *baranibo barana so / jagata ko sarana jo // (māyā) sukhakanda haim raghunandajū / jaga yom kahai jagabandajū*.

dynamic relation with him, leaving scope for literary creativity that sometimes spills over into playful wit.

## 5. Conclusion

Notwithstanding with his personal religious perspective, Keśavdās has a very secular, albeit articulated relation with Rāma and the *Rāmkaṭhā* in his works. The way Rāma's character is portrayed demonstrates the versatility of his figure. From a god, to a *dhārmik* king to the exemplary seeker for salvation, he embodies and encompasses three conditions that are completely different on the ontological plan. As already pointed out by Sheldon Pollock, much of his aesthetic power derives from being an 'adaptation of an ancient mythopoetic morpheme (...) that requires the existence of a new life-form to destroy extraordinary evil'. Rāma is not simply a god or a man but a 'combinatory being that draws from and transcends the powers of both realms'.<sup>49</sup>

On the one hand, Rāma represents probably a unique example in the Hindu pantheon, which highlights how the tradition reinterprets its own elements with plasticity, in concomitance with new historical and cultural conditions. Both in the trend of vernacularization and in the new balance of power between Hindu and Islamic rulers from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, the *Rāmāyaṇa* entered the realm of public political discourse because it offered a conceptualization of divine political order that could be narrated as the stronghold against a 'fully demonized Other [that] can be categorized, counterposed, and condemned'.<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, the figure of Rāma represents an excellent vantage point for appreciating the literary freedom of an author like Keśavdās who, thanks to such a polysemic character, could adapt and reinterpret the classical tradition to the new historical, cultural and linguistic context in which he lived and that is reflected in his works.

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<sup>49</sup> Sheldon Pollock, 'Ramayana and Political Imagination', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1993, p. 282.

<sup>50</sup> Pollock, 'Ramayana and Political Imagination', p. 264.

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