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by

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Language, Memory And The Vernacular: The Power Of The *Rāmāyaṇa* In India's Epic Culture

Heeraman Tiwari¹

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ABSTRACT:

What happens when a vernacular literature represents a 'Great Tradition' in a different time in history? Does it signal the end of a great tradition, or an extension, proliferation of that tradition? Take for example, the case of the Indian epic, the Rāmāyaṇa. Composed about three thousand years ago in Sanskrit the lure of this royal story hardly requires an introduction: the story of Prince Rāma, the protagonist of the epic, replicated in hundreds of languages, the vernaculars of India and beyond over the last two millennia. One such Rāmāyaṇa is in Awadhi (a variation of Hindi), the Rāmcaritmānas, arguably the most popular among all other versions of the story. This essay attempts to discuss the grammar of genealogy, the structure of the narrative and the power of the story in the vernacular. Is it the vernacular, like Awadhi, which has turned the story into the proverbial narrative of the houses of millions of Indians? Or, is it the majesty of the story of Rāma itself, which makes the Rāmcaritmānas so popular? The essay argues that power of the vernacular works at three levels: the nature of language, the memory or the structure of the story and the felicity of the medium; the connecting thread at these levels I argue is the tradition of storytelling.²

When I was small I was drawn in my village to the rhythmic chanting of a text which I knew then as the *Rāmāyaṇa*; the sound of cymbals, drums (*ḍholak*, as it is called in most part of north India) and, sometimes, also harmonium, which often accompanied the orchestral chanting, beckoned many of us village folks. This was one singing to which nobody in the community objected as a moral digression; it was considered not merely a religious prayer but a sound that would purify the space of the village,

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² Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the International Conference, *Reconstructing and Deconstructing the Epics*, 26 & 27 March 2010, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and the South Asia Institute Kolloquium, Heidelberg, on 3 November 2011. I am most grateful to Professor Subrata Mitra for his insightful comments and to Professor Monika Boehm-Tettelbach for her observations on my paper. I wish also to thank the two anonymous referees of the journal whose comments have enriched my paper.

as far as it reached. Organising the chanting (or *pāṭha*) of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was considered a good deed (*puṇya*); it would be an act of ‘thanksgiving’ on various auspicious occasions: the birth of a male child, tonsure ceremony of a male child, acquiring good marks in an important exam, landing a good job, wedding ceremony, a rich harvest, a victory in a law suit and so on.

It is not that the people in the village knew no other Hindu rituals or did not bother to perform them; from their point of view, all prescribed rituals for the respective occasions were given their due importance; but the *Rāmāyaṇa* recitation, as I would learn later, was very special indeed; also, perhaps, the recitation or chanting of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, as Tulsīdās named his *Rāmāyaṇa*, requires no elaborate rituals, no priest, no paraphernalia; the host, at the most, may enlist a group of chanters, if he or she doesn’t wish to do it solo. The *Rāmāyaṇa* was in Awadhi, the language of my village, and it was treated with great reverence and awe; it was considered holy, and it was singable. I would learn later, too, that the magic of this *Rāmāyaṇa* was almost universal in what is known as the ‘Hindi Heartland’ of India; the book was almost like a living encyclopedia, providing solutions to many predicaments of life. The recitation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by a school-going kid without a fault or fluff would be an index of a good, prospering mind; chanting it melodiously was a bonus; committing to ones memory, even a few lines (*caupāi*) of it, a gift.

Why? The answer to this question could be neither singular nor easy. As I will try to explain shortly, the Tulsī *Rāmāyaṇa*, it has been claimed, represents what has been called in the early part of the twentieth century the “cultural consciousness” of India; some have even called it the “national consciousness” of the people of India. Let me approach to answer the above question in two-folds: one, an assertion of an identity of a civilisation through its cultural heritage; and two, a cultural attempt to bring about the so-called lost order in a society. Like any learned person of his time Tulsīdās, a brahmin of the medieval, Mughal India, was alive to the cultural heritage of his country, and could, therefore, assess the power of the psychedelically mesmerising, idealistically desirable, world represented by the legendary Sanskrit epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the stories of which have always been the source of inspiring proverbs of common Indian discourse. It acted as a fountain of inspiration for hundreds of epics and poems in the many languages of India; Tulsī’s Awadhi Ramayana is only one of them. Most of the great Sanskrit poets composed their respective works on the various episodes of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The other Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*, is no less important in the cultural, intellectual, literary and social life of India; and one can narrate a similar story around the Mahabharata, too.

LANGUAGE, MEMORY AND TRADITION

It is a well-known fact that the passing on of knowledge in ancient India depended for centuries, even millennia, entirely on oral tradition or memory, which included both individual and collective tradition. The structure of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for example, suggests levels and narrators at various times in history. The legend has it that Vālmīki, the original composer of the story, gets it from Nārada and then makes Lava and Kuśa, the children of Rāma and Sītā, memorise it, who in turn recite it at the court of Rāma. In an oral tradition the same narrator or teller may continue to repeat one story on every occasion, or, alternatively, choose to change the character and repeat the same plot, as it has been brilliantly shown by A.K. Ramanujan in his

study of the *Māhābhārata*.³ However, when an information or knowledge is to be transmitted through a disciplined process of memorising, it becomes a deliberate memory, which “thus appears to be a specialisation of the more natural process of acquiring knowledge and techniques that, religious or otherwise, unconsciously determine a person’s membership in a particular tradition.”⁴ Such a membership then becomes essential in the interest of continuity of tradition. When writing is a luxury, the knowledge is preserved, if it is to be preserved, through oral tradition (*deliberate* and *disciplined* memorisation). Accuracy in memorising this becomes essential, particularly for the religious texts or the exegeses which represent the tradition and identity of a society. In ancient Greece, Homer was learnt by heart; the reciter of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* from memory to the public audience was rewarded by the ruler and admired by the society.

In ancient India, too, the story was not very dissimilar; Vedic scholars were specialists in memorising the *Vedas*. Even today, oral recitation (chanting from memory) is valued, particularly of religious texts. Memorising of religious texts is extolled as a good deed, *punya*.⁵ In this way the past is resurrected by the means of recitation; recitation merges past into present. Both the reciter and the hearer fuse into one to become tradition.⁶ Time and change are immaterial to memory; remembering is the backbone of tradition. “To learn,” Ramanujan wrote, “is to remember, (whether it is the self or the *Vedas*), and to remember is to know the self, to forget is to be unaware of the self.”⁷ When memory is committed to scriptural texts, it takes the form of authoritative tradition.

In the case of Tulsī it is clear that he was aware, too, of the inapproachable, lofty status of the Sanskrit epic; Tulsī laments that the society of his time was going through a cultural crisis, the *Kali Age*, as he called it: “the norms of the Hindu society were breaking down; people were burning bridges, taking to crimes, facing deprivation, disease, fear, grief and sorrow:” (*bhaye baran saṃkara kali bhinnasetu sab log/ karahin papa pāvahin dukha bhaya ruja soka biyoga// Rāmcaritmānas* 7.100–102); at least, that is what Tulsī wants his audience to believe.

“The idea of a perfect society,” writes Isaiah Berlin, “is a very old dream, whether because of the ills of the present, which lead men to conceive of what their world would be like without them – to imagine some ideal state in which there was no misery and no greed, no danger or poverty or fear or brutalizing labour or insecurity – or because these Utopias are fictions deliberately constructed as satires, intended to criticise the actual world and shame those who control existing régimes, or those who suffer them too tamely; or perhaps they are social fantasies – simple

³A.K. Ramanujan. ‘Repetitions in the *Mahābhārata*,’ in *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadkar. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999, pp. 163-183.

⁴Phillippe Borgeaud. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Eliade, Mircea, Vol. 9: 366, entry *Memorization*.

⁵Krsna says in the *Bhagavadgītā*:

ananyacetāhsatatamyomāsmaratinityaśah/

tasyāhamsulabhahpārthanityayuktasyayoginah// (The Bhagavadgītā, 8.14)

“One who constantly and single-mindedly remembers none but me is an ever disciplined *yogin*; I am always available to him.”

⁶ See Gabrielle M. Spiegel. ‘Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time,’ in *History and Theory*, 41, May 2002, pp. 149-162.

⁷A.K. Ramanujan. ‘The Ring of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting in Indian Literatures’, *Uncollected Poems and Prose*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p. 94.

exercise of the poetical imagination.”⁸ Tulsīdās, is absorbed, it seems, by this Utopia and, therefore, attempts to motivate the people in the direction of a well-ordered society that was; his obsession with the undesirable influence on the society of the so-called *Kali Age* is remarkable; he reminds the reader of this throughout his *Rāmāyaṇa*; in fact, Tulsī seems to have given up on the society. The *Rāmcaritmānas* is, therefore, like his desperate, almost a clarion, wake up call; because he wants people to turn to the story of the ideal prince Rāma which, he believes, will guide them back to the right path; after all, even Vālmīki, the first poet, the original composer of the story of Rāma, was assured by none other than the god Brahmā himself that the holy deeds of Rāma, when recited among the people of the world in fine verses, will have an everlasting impression on them. It is not surprising, therefore, that Professor Robert Goldman, the modern interpreter of the tale of Rāma, chose as a motto, for the first volume of his English translation, those prophetic words of Brahmā: *yāvad sthāsyanti girayaḥ saritaś ca mahātale/ tāvad rāmāyaṇa kathā lokeṣu pracariṣyati//* “As long as the mountains and the rivers shall endure upon the earth, so long will the story of *Rāmāyaṇa* be told among people.”⁹ I shall come back to the story of these prophetic words later.

IS THERE AN UR-RĀMĀYAṆA?

Before I attempt to answer the second fold of my question, let me digress here a little and ask this: Is there an *Ur-Rāmāyaṇa*? Perhaps, there is; perhaps, there is not! What one can say with some degree of confidence is this: ‘there is a story of a prince called Rāma who on the day of his succession to the throne was suddenly exiled by his father to the forest for fourteen years; the prince left for the forest without questioning the rather unexpected, cruel decision of his father. There in the forest he suffered many hardships including the abduction of his beloved wife by a demon, which resulted in a massive war and much bloodshed. Upon his return from the exile the prince retrieves his rightful throne and rules the kingdom to the absolute satisfaction of its subjects.’ At least, this version of the story of the ideal prince, Rāma, is known to everyone: from Vālmīki to Kampan to Kṛttibāsa to Robert Goldman; Tulsī is no exception. (We should also not forget here the J L Brockington’s version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*; perhaps, a few centuries down, people will ask the same question with the ‘Brockington *Rāmāyaṇa*’.)

A.K. Ramanujan has famously said in the last century: “In India... no one ever reads the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. The Stories are there, ‘always already’”¹⁰ In that sense every version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* would be unique; even translations and paraphrases would be what Ramanujan calls “indexical”; for example, Goldman’s translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, explains Ramanujan, “is in English idiom and comes equipped with introductions and explanatory footnotes, which inevitably contain twentieth-century attitudes [...] and symbolic, in that they cannot avoid conveying through this translation modern understandings proper to their reading of the text [...] And we accordingly read

⁸Isaiah Berlin. *The Crooked Timer of Humanity: Chapters in the history of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, London, 1990, p. 20.

⁹Robert P. Goldman. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Ancient Epic of India, Volume I, Bālkāṇḍa*. Introduction and Translation by Robert P Goldman; Annotation by Robert P Goldman and Sally J Sutherland. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1984, p. vi.

¹⁰A.K. Ramanujan. “Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation.” In the Collected Essays of AK Ramanujan, Gen ed. Vinay Dharwadker, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999, p. 158. (Originally, in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Delhi, 1991.)

them for different reasons and with different aesthetic expectations.”¹¹ Tulsī’s *Rāmāyaṇa* is, therefore, both faithful to the original tale of the legendary prince and also different from every other version of the same story; but we can certainly gain a sense of the original Vālmīki from Tulsī as much as we do it from the English translation of Goldman. Narayan Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam have recently suggested: “Authority, and the right to produce history, are dispersed within the body of the social group, which seems less suspicious than certain other traditions. [...] In other words, the authority that guarantees the accuracy of transmission is vested in the image of a person who is by definition a repository of complete cultural knowledge.”¹² And Tulsī has to be seen as one such authority.

Tulsī makes it absolutely clear at the outset that his *Rāmāyaṇa*, though based on the original Vālmīki, contains much more: *nānāpurāṇanigamāgamasammataṃ yad rāmāyaṇe nigaditaṃ kvacid anyato ‘pi/ svāntahsukhāya tulasī raghunāthagāthābhāṣānibandham atimañjulam ātanoti//* “This Bhāṣā version of Tulsī *Rāmāyaṇa* enhances the beauty [of the story of Rāma] for it is inspired by the various Vedic, Purāṇic and other auxiliary religious literature as well by some other sources.”¹³ Tulsī refers not only to the various versions of the story of Rāma -- from the Vālmīki to the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*: the latter seems to be his main inspiration and from which he borrows much of his oeuvre -- but he also refers to a common pool of non-Sanskrit, vernacular *Rāmāyaṇas* from where he has drawn the material for his work: (*je prākṛtakavi paramasayāne/ bhāṣā jinh haricarit bakhāne*: “I gratefully acknowledge] those clever vernacular poets who have related to the world the story of Rāma”¹⁴. We therefore read Tulsī not only how much he resembles the *Vālmīki* or the *Adhyātma* but also how much he digresses from them, what is novel in him; similarity and differences may have been engines to the popularity of Tulsī’s version of the story. We can also talk in the same way of Vyāsa’s (viz. the *Mahābhārata*) *Śakuntalā* to Kālidāsa’s *Śakuntalā* to Romila Thapar’s *Śakuntalā*; all are ‘indexical’. Various versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* may appear different but the gene pool of the story remains the same, much like the human inheritance.¹⁵

The American Indianist, Philip Lutgendorf, has done an extensive study of the *Rāmcaritmānas* and its influence over the large population of India over the centuries. His book, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*,¹⁶ is richly endowed with various aspects of the role Tulsī’s *Rāmāyaṇas* played, how it has been used, appropriated, also rejected, by various groups in India for various reasons and agendas. So I will not repeat here the frame of the story, narrative structure, and the paradigm shift that the *Rāmcaritmānas* may have caused in Indian society.

Let me now go back to the second fold of my answer to the question I had posed above: why did Tulsī prefer to compose this beautiful story in the language of

¹¹ A.K. Ramanujan. “Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation.” In the Collected Essays of AK Ramanujan, Gen ed. Vinay Dharwadker, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999, p. 157. (Originally, in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Delhi, 1991.)

¹² *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600-1800*, Velcheru Narayan Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Delhi, 2001, 95-96.

¹³ 1.7th Introductory Verse.

¹⁴ 1.13.5

¹⁵ I owe this scientific interpretation to my wife, Anu, who has keenly read and reread this paper and made several valuable suggestions.

¹⁶ Philip Lutgendorf. *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991. (Indian Edition, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1994.)

the villagers? As I have mentioned above, Sanskrit was not the language of the masses; and without bringing the masses into one fold, it would not possible to bring about the kind of order that Tulsī may have had in his mind. It is clear from the assertions he makes in his *Rāmāyaṇa* that Tulsī was disturbed by the disintegration of Hindu society into various camps, groups and sects, not to mention his understanding of the rule that prevailed during his time. He may not have been sure about the intellectual risk he took by challenging the supremacy of the language of the gods and brahmins, but he was supremely confident about the content of his cause; admittedly, he was also certain about the power of the story of Rāma (*bhāga choṭ abhilāṣu baḍ karaun ek visvās/ paihahin such suni sujan sab khal karihahin upahās. bhaniti mori sab gun rahit bisvabidit gun eka/ so vicāri sunihahin sumati jinhke bimalabibeka*)¹⁷: “My pool of good deed (*bhāga*) may be tiny but I have a lofty ambition; I am certain of one thing, though: when good people will hear it (i.e. the story of Rāma), they’ll enjoy it; only the wicked will make fun of it. I am aware, too, that my language is raw and lacks all poetic tropes, but it celebrates a singular, world-famous merit; realising that alone the intelligent and the pure-minded people will pay heed to it.” He further justifies: “Just like people drink the milk of a black cow (*syāmasurabhi*), because it is pure and rich in proteins; similarly, the wise will surely like to hear and narrate the story of Rāma, even though it may be written in the language of the peasants” (*syāma surabhi paya bisada ati gunada karahin sab pāna/ girāgrāmya siyarāmajasa gāvahin sunahin sujāna.*)¹⁸

Tulsī thus seems to have succeeded in his mission of bringing about a unity among the Hindus of various sects, most importantly, the two major factions of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, because his *Rāmcaritmānas* is the first medieval devotional work, which attempted the unity, the synthesis, between the two warring factions of the Hindus. Needless to add, for his devotional moorings Tulsī was inspired by the *Bhāgavata* tradition, which is evident from not only his *Rāmāyaṇa* but also from his other two famous treatises, the *Kavitāvalī* and the *Vinayapatrikā*. “A similar rapprochement,” Lutgendorf says, “is affected between the *nirguṇ* and *saguṇ* traditions -- between worship of a formless god and of a god “with attributes.””¹⁹ There is, however, in Tulsī a very clear preference for the worship of a god ‘with attributes’. For want of time, I shall not go into the details here.

TULSĪ ON LANGUAGE AND GRAMMAR

It is here that I feel Tulsī anticipates the importance of language, for it is often said that language is the first creation of this universe; Indian and non-Indian mythologies regarding the origin of the universe speak of the primacy of language and speech. And, without going into any of those mythologies, one can safely say that the relationship between language, speech and the world is all too important for any discussion on culture and society. And any discussion of language will automatically lead one to focus on the grammar of the language. By grammar here I do not just mean the simple, morphological analysis of the word order, sentence construction in relation to meaning. What I mean by grammar here is the grammar as an authoritative paradigm in reading, in ordering and structuring, or even restructuring, the world. As David Shulman and S. La Porta have remarked recently,

¹⁷ 1.8 & 9

¹⁸ *Rāmcaritmānas*, 1.10b. *The Śrīrāmcaritmānas of Tulsīdās with the Commentary of Hanumānprasād Poddār*, Gorakh, Gītāpress Edition, 1947.

¹⁹ Philip Lutgendorf. *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsīdās*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, p. 10. (Indian Edition, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1994.)

“grammar serves as a culturally privileged mode for cognitive mapping, ”because “ordinary language is incapable of expressing or containing the truth underlying richness of experience. The only hope lies in repackaging and reordering the linguistic materials, sometimes in a trans-semantic mode. ‘For Plato as for many others, rather than in language, the true grammar of the universe resided in the all-embracing harmony of music and number that represented the world order as it really is.’”²⁰ Therefore in the beginning of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, Tulsī expends a lot of energy in justifying the language and the grammar of his oeuvre. He also expresses there a quiet confidence that the underlying deeper structure of the world of the *Rāmāyana* will ensure the success of his poem: *bhaniti mor sab gun rahit visvabidit gun ek/ so vicāri sunihahin sumati jinhke bimalbibek/* “My language may be lacking all the qualities [of a richly structured form] but it does have one world-renowned merit. And those who possess a clear intellect and good mind will be able to hear it [and see its hidden, true grammar].”²¹ Tulsī is here referring to that hidden grammar and its structure of which several ancient Indian theologians and philosophers of grammar, e.g. Bhartrhari (c. 5th c.), have spoken. In fact, the entire endeavour of the Mīmāṃsā hermeneutics is to suggest the deep structure of language and its grammar which helps the creative work of art to surface. The whole idea in India of hearing or reciting of certain religious text grammatically and properly, in our case also the *Rāmcaritmānas*, was also to suggest the power of healing from the ills of life, both physical and spiritual. Even for a literary work, one of the objectives has been suggested in the tradition as the means to remove the evils of life (*śivetaraksataye*). Mammata, the Sanskrit poetician, (c. 12th c. A.D.) opens his work, the *Kāvya prakāśa*, enumerating the purpose and reason for composing and/or listening to poetry: “*kāvyaṃ yaśase rthakṛte vyavaharvide śivetaraksataye/ sadyahparanivṛttaye kāntāsammitatayopdeśayuje/*”²² “When poetry (*kāvya*) is created or received, it does the following: it brings about glory, money, knowledge of civility, eradicates evils (of the body and of the society), arouses undifferentiated, supreme joy, and works on us like a beloved; also, it “is capable of transporting us beyond ourselves, beyond everyday world”²³ (*lokottara-varnanā-nipuna-kavikarma*). And Tulsī’s work, too, boasts with all these qualities of his sacred poem; also, Tulsī was not the first one in repackaging and reordering the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, scholars have also argued successfully that “anything can be literature,” as the famous literary critic of modern time Terry Eagleton has done. Sheldon Pollock says while commenting on critics like Eagleton: “literature is not some permanent and essential feature of a text but a way the reader relates to it. Texts come into and go out of literary being (as when Plato is read as drama and Homer as history) depending on what we want to do with them. In this ‘literature’ is like ‘weed’: one person’s pest is another’s flower and yet another’s dinner.”²⁴

²⁰ David Shulman and S. La Porta. *The Poetics of Grammar and the metaphysics of Sound and Sign*, Brill, Leiden, 2007, pp. 9-10.

²¹ *Rāmcaritmānas*, 1.9

²² Mammata, *Kāvya prakāśa* 1.1.

²³ See David Shulman. “How to Bring Goddess into Being Through Viable Sounds,” in S. La Porta and D. Shulman (ed.) *The Poetics of Grammar and the Metaphysics of Sound and Sign*. Brill, Leiden, 2007, pp. 305-341.

²⁴ Sheldon Pollock. “Introduction” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock. Berkeley: University of California, and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 9. Pollock refers to Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1983, 6ff. To justify literature also as history, Pollock quotes M. M. Bakhtin: “After all, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven. Every specific situation is historical. And the growth of literature is not merely development and change within the fixed boundaries of any given definition; the boundaries themselves are constantly changing.” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr.

Tulsī was also very concerned about the traditional order of Hindu society which, according to him, had become fractious owing to *Kali Age: śrutisammata hari bhaktipathasanjut viratibibeka/ tehi na calahin nara mohabas kalpahin panth aneka//* (7.100b) “Deluded people have fallen out of the path of devotion, prescribed by the Vedas, endowed with knowledge and detachment, renunciation, and have begun to seek various other ways of life.” It is here that Tulsī becomes more controversial for modern democratic India. His belief in the *varṇāśrama* system seems to be unflinching, and the supremacy of brahmins is something he never forgets to remind his audience. He often criticizes brahmins but always with velvet gloves, i.e. when he perceives them to have fallen from the prescribed path of the system. Throughout his *Rāmāyaṇa* Tulsī seems to exhort his audience to go back to the Vedic way of life. His views on the ideal ruler or a king, again, have attracted criticism; but, at the same time, Tulsī has been most successful in drawing many twentieth century reformers towards his idea of a just rule, or *Rāmarājya*. No less a figure than Mahatma Gandhi was quite taken in by this concept; Mahatma Gandhi’s attachment to Tulsī’s *Rāmāyaṇa* and the ideal ruler and the state it prescribes is too well known to be repeated here except to mention that the young Gandhi was “enraptured by” the singing of the *Rāmāyaṇa* which he claims had “laid the foundation of my deep devotion to the *Rāmāyaṇa*,” and later he regarded “the *Ramayana* of Tulsidas as the greatest book in all devotional literature.”²⁵ Gandhi was not only too comfortable with the language of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, he emphatically endorsed Tulsī’s choice of the peasant’s tongue as “our language”, “because Tulsī Das was writing for you and me;”²⁶ and even wondered whether any modern thinker or writer has the power and vision to present us “today anything like what Tulsidas”²⁷ has given us.²⁸

WHO WROTE THE RĀMĀYAṆA? THE CONSPIRACY THEORY?

Can we also say that the Brahmins conspired to deny Vālmīki the copyright to his first authentic biography of Rāma. Vālmīki, a sage with a suspicious past both in his deeds and genealogy, brahmins tell us, was a reformed criminal, was unlearned; his lineage, too, was questionable -- some have even suggested that he was a *śūdra*, an untouchable. And Vālmīki was coerced into writing the story of Rāma in the language of the gods which had burst forth of his mouth and which incidentally he was unable to recognise. Vālmīki was intrigued, panicked, it is said, and also frightened to have uttered those moving words in the divine language; suddenly, the celestial Brahmin duo, father and son, Brahmā and Nārada, descend before the sage and say this to him: now that you have articulated the language of the gods and

Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981, p. 33. See also, Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 22.

²⁵ M. K. Gandhi. *An Autobiography, or The Story of My Experiment with Truth*. In *Gujarati*, 2 vols., 1927-29. in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume XXXIX (1970)*. Delhi: GOI Publications, 1970, p. 32.

²⁶ M. K. Gandhi. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Delhi: GOI Publications. Vol. 90. 1984, p. 255: “We are all devotees of Tulsidas. You will be surprised to know that he ... just picked up the words spoken in the streets and used them because Tulsidas was writing for you and for me. He was not writing for the few speaking Sanskrit. The language of Tulsidas therefore is our language.”

²⁷ M.K. Gandhi, M. K. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume XVII (1920)*. Delhi: GOI Publications, 1965, p. 302.

²⁸ It may sound only as a matter of detail here, but in over one hundred volumes of Mahatma Gandhi’s *Collected Works* there are only nine or ten volumes where the mention of Tulsī is missing; and this I say only on the basis of perusing indices of these volumes.

Brahmins, you might as well go ahead and write a story suitable to the status of the language; Nārada even suggests that Vālmīki choose the legendary prince Rāma of Ayodhyā as the subject of his poem. Vālmīki makes a desperate plea, we are told, to the pressing duo saying that he was a mere mortal, poor sage, not at all trained to write a biography of a divine prince born in the dazzling family (*sūryavaṃśa*). The father and son eventually do manage to convince the reluctant sage to compose the biographical poem. In other words, Brahmā and Nārada sponsor the project and make Vālmīki the first biographer of Rāma; incidentally, Vālmīki remains till today the very first biographer in the history of human kind.

Happy that the innocent, timid sage had fallen into their design Brahmā says to Vālmīki: “Don’t worry, O Brahmin! In fact, it was I who had asked Sarasvatī, the goddess of high learning, to enter your heart and mind [only to issue forth from your mouth in the form of this divine language]; so please compose, O the best of sages, the entire story of the deeds of Rāma”: *mac chandād eva te brahman pravṛtṭeyam sarasvatī/ rāmasya caritam kṛtsnam kuru tvam ṛṣisattama*/(1.2.30). We must note also that Brahma addresses Vālmīki here as a ‘Brahmin’, and ‘the best of sages’; he further assures him: “I promise you [O Vālmīki!] Once you begin to compose this sacred and delightful story of Rāma, fashioning in *śloka* verse, not a single syllable of your speech will be untrue”: *na te vāganṛtā kāvyē kācid atra bhaviṣyati/ kuru rāmākathāṃ puṇyāṃ ślokabaddhāṃ manoramāṃ*/²⁹. Like Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, Brahmā encourages, entices, even cajoles, this quivering and shivering sage -- quivering because he managed to do the unthinkable, i.e. he uttered the words in the divine language; and shivering because of the daunting prospect of taking up the lengthy project of writing the story of Rāma -- into taking up this massive responsibility; and thus Brahma says to Vālmīki: if you do as I say and compose this beautiful poetry, I give you my word that: “as long as the mountains and the rivers shall endure upon the earth, so long will the story of Rāma be told among people,” *yāvat sthāsyanti girayaḥ saritaś ca mahītale/ tāvad rāmāyaṇakathā lokeṣu pracariṣyati*/³⁰. When he heard this suggestion from me (in a private conversation) the singularly reputed *Rāmāyaṇa* scholar Robert Goldman reacted by saying that it would be a rather strong reading of the text; but, then, it is possible. Also, Romila Thapar told me in the same conversation that we can construct and deconstruct, even reconstruct, the ancient Indian texts to suit our argument. What both Goldman and Thapar were suggesting, perhaps, is that the elasticity of the poem has allowed various readings of the origin of the story with one exception that the figure of Rāma would remain gripping in all versions.

WAS VĀLMĪKI’S RĀMĀYĀṆA IN FACT THE SĪTĀYANA?

Or could the genesis of the *Rāmāyaṇa* be this. Saddened and disturbed by the heart-wrenching story of queen Sītā, whom he had given a shelter in his *āśrama*, sage Vālmīki was pacing up and down at the banks of the river Tamasā the next morning. The plight of Sītā was pressing on his mind: how an unblemished woman was humiliated not once, not twice, but three times – first a wicked demon abducted her, then her husband demanded proof of her chastity by forcing her to walk through the raging fire, and, finally, she was thrown out of her house at the most critical time of a woman’s life, when she needed her husband most: during an advanced stage of her pregnancy. Vālmīki, it is said, had somehow managed to motivate the despondent Sītā out of her resolve to commit suicide and then heard engagingly the vicissitudes, the travails of her life. As if this emotional burden was not enough, Vālmīki

²⁹ 1.2.34.

³⁰ 1.2.35.

witnesses further an unimaginable outrage against yet another female: now a Krauñca bird, whose beloved mate was brutally murdered in front of her eyes. Vālmīki can no longer bear the sight of the wailing, wretched female bird; his bottled up emotions leak out as a cruel curse in the form of a moving verse: *mā niṣāda pratiṣṭhām tvam agamaḥ śāśvatīsamāḥ/ yatkrauñcamithunād ekam avadhīḥ kāmamohitm*// “Never shall you attain a respectable status in the society, O Butcher! for you have killed only one of the inseparable couple in love.”³¹

Much has been written about these moving lines since. Long ago, I had read in Hindi poem that the tears issued from the eyes of a man by the force of an unbearable sorrow turn into an indelible ink for his maiden poetry: *viyogī hogā pahlā kavi āha se upjā hogā gāna/ umaḍkar ānkhoṃ se cupcāpa bahī hogī kavitā anjān*//:³² “The first poet, *ādikavi*, must have been the person with the supreme knowledge (of sentiments), for his poetry issued forth through a particular pain, which unbeknown to him welled out of his eyes as a beautiful poem.” Could it not be that Vālmīki thus decides to write the story of Sītā, as narrated by Sītā? In the process, inevitably, he writes also the first biography of Rāma. And Bhavabhūti has shown how the *Rāmāyaṇa* could be heard, read and seen from Sītā’s perspective. I believe that by composing his great work, the *Uttararāmacaritam*, Bhavabhūti may have championed, deliberately or unwittingly, the cause of the feminist reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa*; the drama begins and ends with Sītā in the forefront; in fact, the entire play is on Sītā’s vicissitudes as the wronged queen; the legends of Rāma are the necessary fillers of the plot.

TULSĪ’S QUEST FOR THE RIGHT PATH?

Tulsī’s quest for the traditional *varṇāśrama* system did have very serious implications on Indian society; his views about the lower castes and the women flow in the face of a modern liberal system; even an ardent admirer of Tulsī’s will find it difficult to justify what he has had to say about these sensitive issues. But, then, Tulsī did not have to live in today’s society either. Like many, who read and/or seek guidance and inspiration from the proverbial and aphoristic verses of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, Mahatma Gandhi, too, had difficulty in justifying the many controversial statements of Tulsī; and Gandhi suggested, halfheartedly, it would appear, that the passages that seek to endorse “evil customs should be ignored,” because Tulsī “merely stated a common belief.”³³ Gandhi also cautioned that in determining the meaning of a *Sāstraic* text “one should not stick to its letter, but try to understand its spirit, its meaning in the total context.”³⁴ Whether such a justification, or justification through ‘a common belief’, is good enough is difficult to say, but the story of Rāma and the legends related to it continue to inspire, thrill many even today. As one of my colleague at JNU, M.S.S. Pandian, has argued, appropriation and rejection converge in a single individual or context, as it did when

³¹ 1.2.14

³² Sumitranandan Pant. *Ānsū*, in *Pallava* (1926), *Sumitranandan Pant Granthāvalī*, Vol. 1. Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 1979, p. 183.

³³ M.K. Gandhi. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume XXIX* (1925). Delhi: GOI Publications, 1968, p. 318.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 318. “The support which the work seems to lend to evil customs should be ignored. Tulsidas did not compose his priceless work to teach geography. We should, therefore, reject any erroneous statements of a geographical character which we may find in it.”

the South Indian reformist leader Periyar appropriated Gandhi's ideals at once rejecting Gandhi's source of idealism, i.e. Rāma.³⁵

THE MAJESTY OF THE CLASSICS: IN INDIA IT ALWAYS THRIVES

Few would argue, however, that Tulsī has through his *Rāmcaritmānas* brought the story of the *Rāmāyana* to the houses and the huts of millions of Indians and beyond for whom the legends of this ancient literary and religious super hero were wrapped in the largely inaccessible, lofty language of the gods, although one could argue convincingly that the power of the story and the structure of the epic had already affected story-tellers in all major languages of India and abroad. Many *Rāmāyanas* are being written even today, as indeed they have been written ever since Vālmīki brought this touching, complex tale to the listeners and the readers. In this respect, there has never been a crisis in India's classics, much that Sheldon Pollock's interrogative article may try to convince us.³⁶ In fact, India's classics have never looked back; one only needs to look at the volume and quality of work produced in Indian vernacular languages. One can go on giving example after example for such optimism, whether it is Sūryakānt Tripāthī Nirālā's *Rāmki Śaktipūjā*³⁷ or many other such works in Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Gujarati, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu and even in Tamil. So if one takes this vast volume of vernacular *vāṅmaya*, either as an extension, an impression or as a representation of the tales made available by the Sanskrit epics, it would appear that India's classics have only expanded, grown and prospered, this despite the successive colonial pressures on Indian classics and vernacular languages.

The great classical literatures of some other civilisations may not have been either so resilient or lucky to withstand such external pressures, as Pavan Varma makes a point by referring to his conversation with the Kenyan Nobel Laureate Wangari Mathai who said that "it was only the colonials who understood the importance of language. That is why it was the first thing they took away from us. Tragically, the victims are the last one to know what they have lost."³⁸ In this respect, one may also point to one of the momentous decisions taken by Oxford University in recognising importance of a language in colonial India. When Colonel Joseph Boden decided to bequeath his wealth, earned during his military services in India, to establish the first Sanskrit Chair in an English university, he wrote in his 'will' (dated August 15, 1811) how the Boden Professorship in Sanskrit at Oxford should further the cause of the British colonial endeavours in India: by learning the ancient language of the Indians missionaries will be better equipped "to enable his countrymen to proceed in the conversion of the Natives of India to Christian Religion",³⁹ and this will be done, Colonel Boden suggested, by promoting "the translation of the [Christian] Scriptures into Sanskrit,"⁴⁰ and therefore "the study of

³⁵ MSS Pandian. Paper presented at the International Conference, *Reconstructing and Deconstructing the Epics*, 26 & 27 March 2010, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

³⁶ Sheldon Pollock. "Crisis in the Classics," in *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, vol. 78, No. 1, 2011, pp. 21-48.

³⁷ Sūryakānt Tripāthī Nirālā. *Nirālā Racanāvalī, Vol. 1: Poems 1920-1938*. ed. Nanadkishor Naval, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 329-338.

³⁸ Pavan K. Varma. *Becoming Indian: The Unfinished Revolution of Culture and Identity*. Allen Lane, New Delhi, 2010, p. 73.

³⁹ Monier Monier-Williams. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1899, p. ix.

⁴⁰ Monier Monier-Williams. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1899, p. ix. See also, Richard Gombrich, *On Being Sanskritic: A Plea for Civilized Study and the Study of Civilization, Inaugural Lecture for Boden Professorship at Oxford University*.

Sanskrit and the vernacular languages as well as the production of dictionaries and other resources was often explicitly placed in the service of the proclamation of the Christian gospel,⁴¹ because Monier-Williams, one of the Boden Professors of Sanskrit at Oxford, was convinced that Indian cultural and religious concepts “ought to be led beyond their own limitations to a perfection and fulfilment which the Indians were themselves incapable of seeing without being awakened to it by the Christian missionaries.”⁴² Monier-Williams did prepare an *English-Sanskrit Dictionary*, a “pioneering work”, in his own words, “never before attempted”,⁴³ which was published in 1851. The message and the goal was clear: “All religions wait for their fulfillment in Christianity,”⁴⁴ and for centuries India’s saints and philosophers have been “longing for” Christianity which will bring “inner fulfillment of the deepest aspirations of Hinduism”⁴⁵ and nudge them out of the darkness of their Vedanta.

S. Gopal has said that colonising the “mind and spirit of the people fortified imperial rule; and missionaries did what they could to help in the process of damaging the identity of the people; [...] they saw as their duty to ensure that the Christian faith and European thought prevailed over all else. Christianity having been vouchsafed the highest truth as yet known to humanity, there was no question of accommodation to other faiths or patterns of thought.”⁴⁶ However, India has been relatively fortunate in that its classical languages, and more importantly its great literary and cultural traditions, have not only survived these testing periods of history but have successfully passed on their rich literature to the many vernacular traditions that have been prospering alongside the classical or what A. K. Ramanujan has famously called the “Great Traditions” of India. The irony of it all was, as S. Gopal has famously put it, that “Christianity did not make the empire Christian, the empire made Christianity political.”⁴⁷ Tulsi’s is just one great, albeit most influential, epic narrative in the long tradition of Indian classics. A similar case can be made out for non-Sanskrit classics of India, viz. Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam, where, too, so much literature is being produced by every generation of poets and writers.

The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1978. For interesting debates over elections to the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit at Oxford, see Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Scholar Extraordinary: The Life of Professor the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Muller, PC*. Chatto & Windus, London, 1974, pp. 220-238.

⁴¹Wilhelm Halbfass. *Indian and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*. State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988, p. 49.

⁴²Ibid. p. 51.

⁴³Monier Monier-Williams. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1899, p. ix-fn.4.

⁴⁴T.E. Slater, Quoted in Wilhelm Halbfass. *Indian and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*. State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988, p. 51.

⁴⁵The views of J. N. Farquhar, missionary and Indological scholar of twentieth century, has been quoted and discussed in detail in Wilhelm Halbfass. *Indian and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*. State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988, p. 51-52.

⁴⁶S. Gopal. *Radhakrishnan: A Biography*. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989, p. 4.

⁴⁷Ibid. p. 3.

GLOSSARY

Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa: The fourteenth century Sanskrit version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Awadhi: A version of Hindi vernacular, spoken in the major area of the Ganga valley in Uttar Pradesh, India. Tulsī's *Rāmāyaṇa* is composed largely in Awadhi language.

Chaupāi: a Hindi couplet meter consisting of roughly sixteen syllables in each of the two lines of the verse; Tulsī composed his *Rāmāyaṇa* in this meter; in medieval India Chaupāi was used extensively by many saints and poets of various persuasions.

Kampana: The legendary twelfth century Tamil Poet, best known for composing the Tamil version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* or *Irāmāvatāram*.

Kṛttibāsa: The sixteenth century Bengali poet, who composed what is known as the *Bengali Rāmāyaṇa*.

Rāmarājya: A Utopian Kingdom, a perfect society, espoused by the *Rāmāyaṇa* Tradition in India. Mahatma Gandhi and a few other leaders of India's Freedom Movement also referred to this utopian, just rule perfected by the epic hero, Rāma.

Sūryakānt Tripāthī Nirālā: Twentieth century Hindi poets who, like many other vernacular poets before and after him, composed several of his poems on the various themes of the two Indian epics.

Tulsī: 16th century composer of the most famous Hindi *Rāmāyaṇa*, entitled the *Rāmcaritmānas*.

Uttararāmacaritam of Bhavabhūti: Seventh Century Sanskrit drama based on the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. I consider it as another version of the epic.

Vālmīki: The legendary composer of the original *Rāmāyaṇa* in Sanskrit in c. 900 BC. Tradition also holds him as *Ādikavi* or the 'First Poet' of India.

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