

# Ramacharitamanas of Tulsidas — An Appreciation

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*Ramacharitamanas* of Tulsidas, written some 400 years ago, is an epic poem of great poetic merit on the Rama saga. It occupies a unique place in the entire body of Hindi poetic literature and has greatly influenced the social conduct, the values and ideals of the people of North India. In narrating the Rama story, Tulsidas' primary concern is to lay down the norms of social and moral conduct, *Lokadharm* and *Lokaniti*; but he is fully conscious of his role as a poet, and his greatness lies in maintaining a delicate balance between the poet within him and the preacher and the reformer. *Ramacharitamanas* is read and enjoyed both by the illiterate and the educated with equal relish; it serves as a source of inspiration, for a better and nobler life. Its influence is wide and deep and many of its verses, which express higher values and truths of life, have merged with and become part of the oral literature of the people.

*Ramacharitamanas*, though it follows the *puranic* tradition of handling the Rama theme and is actually a religious work portraying Rama as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, strikes the reader at the same time as an exceedingly sensitive and creative poem. It is Tulsidas' poetic sensitivity which has enriched many of the episodes of the story and made them moving. In his treatment of situations or characters he imparts to them a certain universality and it is this universalisation of various sentiments that makes his poetry great and of eternal value. He handles with great skill and sensitivity a large variety of situations and complex human relationships and portrays with equal insight and understanding a whole galaxy of characters. He does not limit the description to great heroes alone, but includes ordinary human beings, demons, animals and birds in his narration of the story.

Tulsidas has a grand design before him and he starts his epic poem with a grandeur aptly suited to the Rama saga, which has a noble and rich cultural content. He acknowledges his debt to the many sources of the Rama story, but also proclaims that he is writing the story in *Bhasha*, in the language of the people. He chooses *Avadhi*, one of the major dialects of Hindi. He says:

नानापुराणनिगमागमसम्मंत्यद्रामायणे निगदितं क्वचिदन्यतोऽपि।  
स्वान्तःसुखायतुलसीरघुनाथगाथा भाषानिबन्धमतिमंजुलमातनोति॥

"In many ancient circumstances,  
And other scriptures is recorded Rama's fame,  
And for my own delight in language choice and clear,  
I write in song the full account of Raghunath. . . ."

Every student of Tulsidas knows that he borrowed the story material and many poetic utterances from the *Valmiki Ramayana*, *Adhyatma Ramayana*, *Shreemadbhagavat*, *Hanumannatak*, and *Prasanna Raghava Natak*. But no one can doubt his originality and poetic stature. His command over the language is superb and his poetic insight is most unusual. His devotion to his epic hero has charged the entire poem with emotional intensity. He is very clear about the purpose and the function of poetry and its role in contributing to the good of the people. In a statement of eternal truth he says:

"Only that language, that poetry and that wealth is good, which does good to all the people like the holy Ganga."

कीरति भणित भूति भलि सोई।  
सुरसरि सम सब कर हित होई।

The Rama story was first immortalised by the poet Valmiki in his Sanskrit *Ramayana* written about 2000 years ago. For centuries the *Ramayana* theme continued to attract poets and artists. After the *Valmiki Ramayana*, there was a long and rich tradition of *Ramayana* poetry and plays in Sanskrit.

*A page from a manuscript of the Ramacharitamanas*

॥ अजो ॥  
॥ ११५ ॥  
राड ॥ १२६ ॥ चोपाड ॥ अजहं जासु उरसपने हुं का उ ॥ वसहिलसन  
मियरामवद्यऊ ॥ रामधामपयपाड हि सोई ॥ जोययपावकवहुसु  
निकोई ॥ तवरघुवीरश्रमि तसियजानी ॥ दिषिनिकटवटसीतला  
पानी ॥ तहंवसिकंदमूलफलघाई ॥ प्रातनहायचलेरघुराई ॥  
देषतवनसरसेलसुहाय ॥ वालमीकिअश्रमप्रसुअराय ॥ राम  
दीयमुनिवाससुहावन ॥ सुंदरगिरिकाननजलपावन ॥ सरन  
सरोजविटपवनफले ॥ गुंजतमंजुमधुपरसभूले ॥ यगमगवि  
पुलकोलाहलकरही ॥ विहरतवेरसुदितमनचरही ॥ दोहा ॥  
सुचिसुंदरअश्रमनिराधहरथेराजिवनेन ॥ सुनिरघवरअगम

वतकीन्हा ॥ आसिरवादविप्रवरदीन्हा ॥ दिषिरामअविनयनजु  
डाने ॥ करिसनमानअश्रमहिअने ॥ मुनिवरअतिथिप्राणप्रि  
यपाय ॥ कंदमूलफलमधुरमगाय ॥ सियसीमित्रिरामफलघाय ॥ ता  
वमुनिअसनदीन्हासुहाय ॥ वालमीकिमनअनेदभासी ॥ मंगल  
मूरतिनयननिहासी ॥ तवकरमलजारिरघुराई ॥ वोलवचनश्रव  
नसुषदाई ॥ तुम्हत्रिकालदरसीमुनिनाया ॥ विप्रवदरजिमितु  
म्हरेहाया ॥ असकहिप्रभुसवकथावयानी ॥ जहिजेहिभोतिदी ॥  
कवनरानी ॥ दोहा ॥ तातवचनपुनिमातुहितभाडभरतअसरा  
उ ॥ मोकहुंदरसतुम्हारप्रभुसवममपुन्यप्रभाउ ॥ १२६ ॥ चोपाड ॥  
दिषिचरनसुनिराजतुम्हारे ॥ भयेसुकतसवसुफलहमारे ॥ अत्रवा

Following the Sanskrit tradition, modern Indian languages also produced a considerable body of poetic and dramatic writing on this theme. Like the *Ramacharitamanas* of Tulsidas in Hindi, we have *Ramayanas* in other Indian languages. The better known ones are the *Kamba Ramayana* in Tamil, *Krittivas* in Bengali, *Ranganath* in Telugu, *Pampa Ramayana* in Kannada and *Adhyatma Ramayana* in Malayalam. The *Ramayana* tradition with its grand design and noble character is a vital element in the culture of India and has greatly influenced the life style of the Indian people and enriched the plastic and the performing arts.

The *Ramacharitamanas* also greatly encouraged and contributed to the development of the traditional theatre form *Ramaleela*, which is based on the Rama legend. The *Ramaleela* has a continuous tradition of more than four centuries and is performed in several styles all over North India. It is quite possible that in some form the tradition of *Ramaleela* existed even before Tulsidas. But there is no historical evidence of this tradition. It is believed that the *Ramacharitamanas* was used as the main text in *Ramaleela* during the lifetime of Tulsidas. Tulsidas conceived many episodes of the story dramatically and many verses of the epic poem are in dialogue form. This suggests that for the dramatic design of his epic poem he took inspiration from certain features of the *Ramaleela* as they existed in his time.

Apart from the *Ramaleela* in the Hindi region, some type of religious plays based on the Rama story had become prevalent by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in many parts of India. Some of the forms of the *Ramayana* theatre in various regions of the country gradually decayed or could not develop further. But the *Ramaleela* of the Hindi-speaking regions was further enriched and its tradition became firmer with the use of the rich text drawn from an epic poem like *Ramacharitamanas*.

The traditional *Ramaleela* is of a processional character. It is more like a pageant and has developed its dramatic form on the basis of a recitation of *Ramacharitamanas*. It is the recitation which commands priority and determines the structure of the performance. The recitation provides the base-line on which the dramatic structure of the *Ramaleela* is constructed. The recitation of the *Ramayana* has a religious significance. The theatrical form based on recitation was primarily evolved to propagate *Ramabhakti* and the word *leela* itself has a theological significance and metaphysical connotation. There is a group of singers called *Ramayani* attached to the play and they recite the entire text of the epic poem, sequence by sequence, stopping at various points of dramatic significance to give scope to the actors to present certain prose dialogues which are quite often a paraphrase of the verses. Gestures are an added element in the dramatic action.

The *Ramaleela*, as a theatrical form, evolving from the recitation of *Ramacharitamanas*, enters into the second phase of its development when the recitation is organised in front of the main characters of the story Rama, Lakshmana and Sita, called *Swarup*, who are seated on a throne. Such a grouping of the characters is called *Jhanki* or *tableau vivant*. In the *Jhanki* style of presentation of the *Ramayana* elaborate rituals and ceremonials are

observed, devotional songs are sung and the audience becomes an integral part of the performance. The *Jhanki* style of presentation of the Rama story is really not an enactment of the story, but certainly the *Jhanki* represents an art form which is semi-dramatic and which is also a step forward from visual art.

The *Jhanki* played an important role in the development of the traditional theatre, and, in particular, the religious theatre, *Ramaleela* and *Rasaleela*. The *Jhanki* or *tableau vivant*, as an art, is half-way between painting and drama. It encouraged and preserved certain basic elements of theatre. By adding 'living' actors and making them say the text and the singers recite it, a new theatrical dimension was added to the *Jhanki*. The *Jhanki* or *tableau vivant* is a dominant feature of all the mediaeval arts, that is to say both the performing and the plastic arts. It was in the *Jhankis* (presented as part of the processions and pageantry on various socio-cultural and royal occasions) that the basic principles of both painting and theatre were evolved.

From the presentation point of view there is a very interesting practice of the processional style of *Ramaleela* in places like Ramanagar. Several permanently built locales are utilised for the presentation of the story. The drama moves from one to another. The town is used as a theatre with permanently-built locales such as Dashratha's palace, Janak's palace and his garden, Chitrakuta, Panchavati, Ravana's palace and Ashoka Vatika, where Sita was kept in captivity. On the day when Rama leaves for the forest with Lakshmana and Sita, a large audience of nearly ten thousand follows them, sobbing with grief.

Apart from the dramatised episodes, there are many spectacles and processions presented on the streets and other public places as part of a *Ramaleela* performance. Rama's wedding, his exile to the forest, his battle against Ravana, the meeting with Bharata after his return to Ayodhya and his coronation are some of the episodes which are performed as spectacles. In some centres, there is a greater emphasis on floats, pageants and tableaux depicting scenes from the Rama story. These are taken out in a procession through the town every evening and some of these episodes are also enacted that very night. In some centres, the *Ramaleela* is performed in a large arena theatre. The scenes are mounted on carts which move in the arena while the audience squats on all the sides on tiered seats. The characters sitting on the floats often come down to present some of the action on the level-ground playing area.

The *Ramaleela* is a theatre of conventions. These conventions and practices are a continuation, often in an adapted or changed form, of the practices of the mediaeval and classical Sanskrit theatrical traditions. The whole approach to the dramatic presentation, to the conventions employed for the treatment of time and place and to dramatic speech, to the multiplicity and simultaneous nature of the action, to the alternation of prose and verse dialogues, and to their elaboration by impromptu dialogues, to using a group of singers for singing the entire dramatic text are some of the practices of the *Ramayana* theatre which truly represent the spirit of the Indian theatre.



*Rama and Sita as depicted in the Jhanki.*

The *Ramayana* is also performed in many other forms and styles of *Ramaleela*. One of the forms is the localised *leela* presented as a play on a curtained stage. In this form again the *Ramacharitamanas* is recited by a group of singers. This style of *Ramaleela* is greatly influenced by the professional Parsi theatre of the nineteenth century. The *Ramaleela* is also presented as operatic ballet, as opera and as drama proper.

The Rama theme is ideal material and it has attracted artists through the centuries. It served as an excellent theme for dramatic presentation. It has been extensively performed in a variety of theatre forms and dance styles in different regions of the country. Kathakali, (the classical dance-drama of Kerala), Yakshagana, (the highly stylised and developed operatic drama of Karnataka), Ankia Nat, (the lyric drama of Assam performed in the Vaishnava monasteries) and the Chhau dances of West Bengal, all deal with the Rama theme. The Rama theme is used in almost all forms of puppet theatre, namely, leather puppets, glove puppets, rod puppets and marionettes.

The *Ramayana* theatre is the richest and the most representative form of our traditional theatre both in terms of the story and the spoken-word

material, in terms of music and dance content and production styles. It is also an enduring and significant element of our traditional culture and represents the life of the people in its totality: their beliefs and ideals, their conduct and customs, their arts and crafts. The *Ramayana* theatre represents an integrated approach to theatre, incorporating elements of the literary, plastic and allied theatre arts. It is total theatre. The stylised costumes and make-up are integral to the total scheme of stylisation and provide a basis for a non-realistic approach to the theatre. The imposing head-gear and stylised make-up used in Kathakali and Yakshagana are extremely effective devices of stylisation. The masks and make-up of characters like Ravana, Hanumana and Garuda have attracted the greatest attention and inspired craftsmen to evolve stylised approaches, resulting in a variety of conception and interpretation of these characters. The embroidered *zari* mask of Ravana used in the *Ramaleela* in Ramanagar is a most exquisite piece of art.

Apart from enriching the traditional theatre *Ramaleela*, the *Ramacharitanas* has also inspired and enriched our traditional painting styles. Drawing inspiration from the *Ramacharitanas*, the *Ramayana* episodes were painted right from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in different styles of miniature paintings. The *Ramacharitanas* written in Avadhi, the spoken language of the people and one of the main dialects of Hindi, made the story so popular with the masses that the traditional artists readily responded to its appeal and painted the Rama story.

In the fifteenth century the practice of painting in Northern India was greatly influenced and enriched by the growth of poetic literature in Hindi. This poetic literature dealing with the love legend of Krishna, the *Nayak-Nayika* theme and the musical modes, *Raga Ragini*, served as excellent material for miniature paintings with their dominant lyrical character. The *Ramacharitanas* held a distinctive place in art along with the other literature in Sanskrit and Hindi painted by the artists.

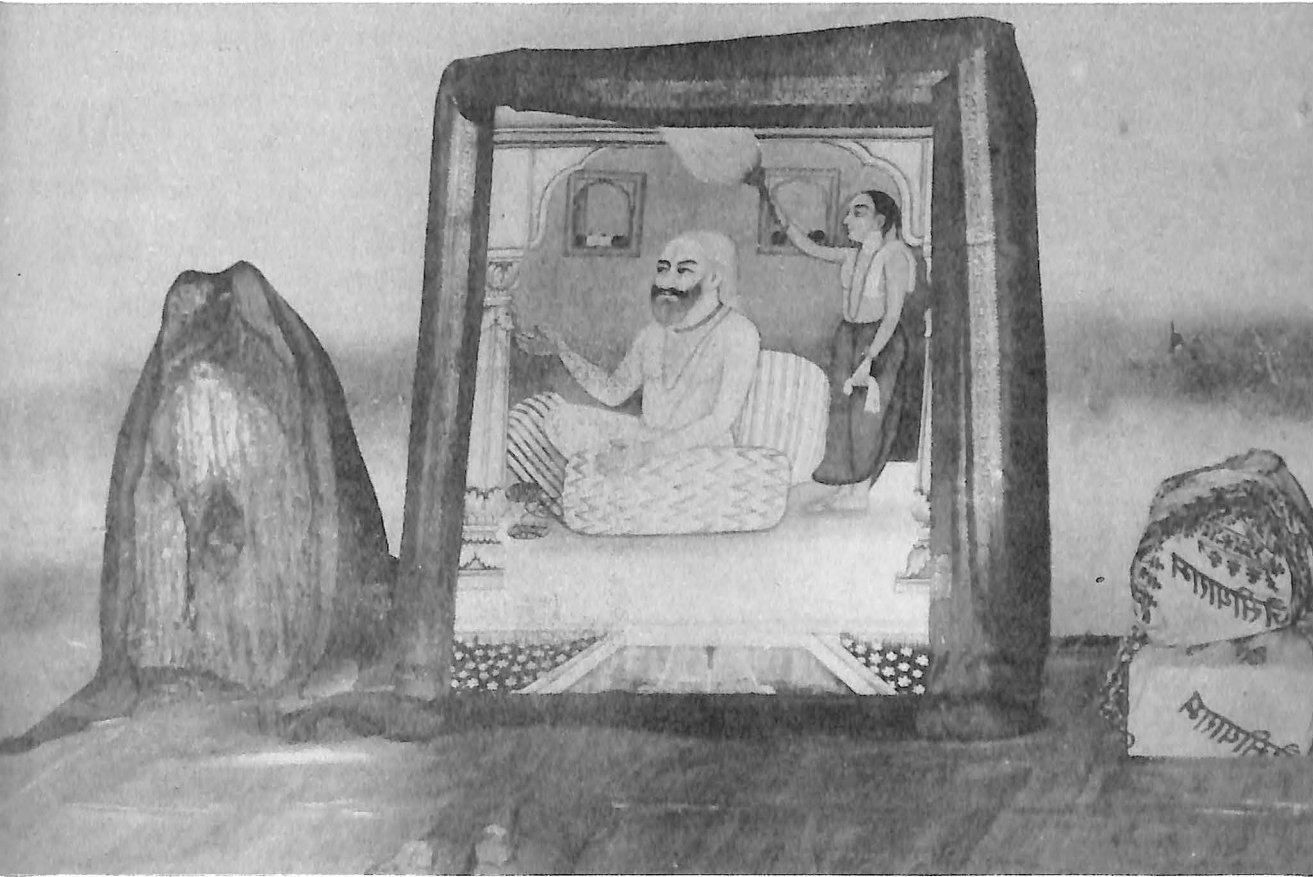
The *Ramayana* paintings have a special dramatic quality, and the pictures look like a dramatisation of the story. There is progression of action. There is a definite scheme and a pattern of organising the action and the scenic units. The artists seem to be primarily concerned with the telling of the story and relating it dramatically. The dramatic characters are kept at a focal point. It is always the characters in these pictures who attract our attention most.

Out of the several *Ramayana* series in different schools of painting, one that exists today in twenty-eight pictures belongs to the pre-Kangra school. These pictures contain on the reverse the verses from *Ramacharitanas*, describing the action portrayed in the picture. There are scattered copies of the *Ramayana* with paintings of the Mewar school, executed during the middle of the seventeenth century. There are some large-size paintings of the *Ramayana* done in the Kangra Kalam during the mid-eighteenth century. A copy of the *Ramacharitanas* illustrated at some period of time during the early nineteenth century is preserved in the palace library of the Maharaja of Ramanagar, near Varanasi.

In point of view of subject material the Basohli paintings are really known for illustrating the *Bhagawat Purana*, *Rasamanjari*, *Gita-Govinda* and *Ragamala* paintings. But the artists of this school also painted several episodes from the *Ramayana*. It seems that the artists used one of the rescensions of the *Valmiki Ramayana* for their paintings. These paintings were executed during the middle of the eighteenth century. The glowing colours and the feeling of abundance of the *Ramayana* paintings in the Basohli style confer on it a distinct character of their own. The landscape in these paintings, though decorative, seems to play a role in the drama.

Akbar got the *Ramayana* translated into Persian; the text was also illustrated. The Pahari artists seem to have taken the cue from the Moghul painters and chosen the *Ramayana* as a subject from the early seventeenth century onwards. While some artists painted only selected episodes or *Kandas*, the others painted the entire *Ramayana*. It is interesting to note that *Rama-charitamanas* was also painted in centres outside the Hindi-speaking regions. There are scroll paintings based on the *Ramacharitamanas* done during the early nineteenth century in centres outside the Hindi-speaking region.

*Supposedly a portrait of Goswami Tulsidas, painted in the nineteenth century*



As in the field of the performing arts so also in the plastic arts the *Ramayana* theme has always attracted artists throughout the centuries not only in India but also in many countries of South-East Asia having a strong *Ramayana* tradition. Apart from the *Ramayana* miniature paintings in North India, the theme was also popular with painters working during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries in Orissa, Bengal, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Mysore, Tamilnadu and Kerala. The artists painted individual miniature paintings depicting some of the important episodes or they illustrated a complete manuscript or one of the *Kandas*. In these illustrations sometimes the artists used the *Ramayana* in the language of the region. It was similar in spirit to the mode of the artists of the north who painted the *Ramayana* theme, drawing inspiration from the *Ramacharitanamas* of Tulsidas.

The artists followed the same principles and conventions for organising the various units of action as in *Ramaleela*. The problems and the solutions of treating time and space and organising the action are the same in painting as in theatre. These solutions were perhaps worked out in painting, sculpture and *tableau vivant* before they were adopted in the theatre.

This similarity of principles and conventions between the *Ramayana* painting and *Ramaleela* is of special interest both to the students of theatre and of painting. It may be difficult to determine as to who borrowed from whom, but there is no denying the fact that the *Ramayana* tradition co-existed in these two art forms and there was constant exchange between the two. We find a similar situation in the case of the Krishna paintings and the Krishna legend theatre, the *Rasaleela*, which co-existed for two centuries.

One of the main features of both the *Ramayana* theatre and the *Ramayana* paintings is the simultaneity of action and the multiplicity of locale. The main action portrayed in a painting or presented in drama is sub-divided into several action units. The dramatic locale is never static, and the play or the painting seems to move from one locale to other, from one action unit to another. We also find that the *Ramayana* theatre, *Ramaleela* and the *Ramayana* paintings use several levels for the presentation of action. This helps the artists both in the theatre and in painting to achieve simultaneity and multiplicity of action.

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