Ramacharitramanasa: the Rewriting of a Sanskrit Epic

Vijay C. Mishra

"Sambhu Prasad sumiti hiye julsi Ramacharitramanasa kabai Tulsi"

"Through the grace of Shiva, Tulsi was inspired and he became the poet of Ramacharitramanasa (or through the grace of Shiva and because of Ramacharitramanasa, Tulsi became a poet)."

It is almost 400 years since Tulsidas began his Ramacharitramanasa, a bhakti re-writing of Valmiki’s Sanskrit epic. To the indigenous Hindi speaker, Tulsidas has never really posed a problem either of interpretation or of reputation. Indeed, North Indians have always accepted George Grieson’s later contention that Tulsidas was India’s finest poet. Nor have they wavered in their approval of the RCM in spite of later, and especially 19th century, attempts to ‘return’ the Indian religious consciousness to the Vedanta; the RCM or the Ramayana, as it is universally known, continued to fascinate Indians and to establish itself as a codified system of religious and ethical order not unlike the Christian Bible. Written in a period when a strong bhakti impetus was evident, resulting in fact in the gradual occultation of Rama and Krishna, and influenced no doubt by the works of poets such as Kabir, Surdas and Mira.
Bai, the RCM abundantly manifests these influences and quite unashamedly (and unequivocally) presents the case for bhakti, for personal devotion that is as a superior method of coming closer to Godhead. The merits of bhakti yoga as such, its reaction against the Vedantic monism of Sankara and its philosophic basis within Hinduism and its interpretation of a significantly saguna Brahman (the Brahman who is also avataric) are questions which must be explored at some length, but unfortunately they lie outside the immediate scope of this paper. It is nevertheless important to remind ourselves that Tulsi was not ignorant of Sankara’s theory of knowledge nor of the later Ramanuja’s modified ‘non-dualism’. This is particularly evident in Tulsi’s poetic handling of the whole concept of maya which he interprets as something akin to the great Sankara heresy (as a “force” co-existent with Brahman Himself) but which needs further analysis and definition. It is not to be confused with the concept of maya as “illusion” somewhat sententiously described as the principium individuationis by Schopenhauer and taken by Nietzsche to mean that the entire phenomenal reality was suspect from the start. To Tulsidasa, maya remains a problem to the end but the answers which he posits belong ultimately to the world of poetry and experience, to image and symbol, to linguistic constructs and artefacts, to even fine twists of phraseology and these are some of the concerns of this paper; an attempt, that is, to show how Tulsi demonstrates in art (and through art) the superiority of bhakti and to suggest that one way of reconciling the irreconcilable is through poetry. This does not mean that I wish to overlook the very large religious statements which Tulsidasa makes in the RCM; on the contrary my aim is to show how in moments of significance Tulsi is just as capable of finding an answer in the poetic image as he is in epistemology.

The argument of this paper, an attempt in fact to return RCM from ideology to poetry, naturally assumes that Tulsi the poet is as important as Tulsi the philosopher or Tulsi the bhakti. This assumption, however, cannot be developed in isolation as
Tulsi constantly charges his poetry with a dialectic between opposing concepts, especially those which are antipathetic towards devotion. And this dialectic often assumes some kind of tension between opposites, between *vidya* and *jnana* and *avidya* and *vijnana*; between *vairagya* and *moha* and so on.

The *Ramcharitamanasa* itself is an extraordinarily well-written work and Tulsidas spares no time in drawing one's attention to it as poetry. Yet he draws one's attention in a rather negative manner. We hear him disclaiming any poetic skill and in fact emphasising simplicity:

"Kabi na hau nahi bachan prabina
Sakal Kala sab vidya hinu"

One feels, however, that Tulsi's objection is not so much to poetry (which is after all transcendent) as to his own ignorance (*vidya hinu*) and his *sakal kala*, his simple art. Tulsi could be doing two things here: echoing an established tradition of poetic self-effacement; or hinting at the superiority of simplicity over the lugubriousness of Sanskrit style, of simple minds over the proclaimed *gurus*. Some five verses (or fifty *ardhalinis*) later we come across yet another reference to the poet's *vani bhaddi* ('uncouth tongue'):

"Kabi na hau nahi chatur kahawau
Mati anurup Rama gun gau"

"I am no poet, nor am I called clever (I, 12, 5) without intelligence (lacking in these) I sing Rama's praise".

The emphasis here is obviously on the mind, the absence of which takes the poet to Rama. In subsequent lines, almost simultaneously, Tulsidas tries to avoid the identification of the *Manas* with the *act* of poetry and is aware of the popular appeal of the life of Rama, and, as a result, he tries to bring metaphysics down to the level of the proverbial image, as is evident from the following analogy whose meaning has recently been brought to light by Dr. Vasudeva Agarwal.8
"I tell the truth and I write a blank page" is, according to Dr. Agarwal, a metaphor borrowed from the legal language of time. "To write on a blank page" means that you accept the good and the bad (words) of your opponent. In the case of the Manas, Tulsi is perhaps implying that the written criticism of his verse must be accepted first. That he uses an expression from legal jargon, however reinforces his contention that art must not be totally removed from the 'typical' social consciousness of the time. In a way this aspect of his self and his poetry manifests itself in Tulsi's literary sources. True, the Valmiki Ramayana remains the absolute work against which RCM must be read. But in the transformations of the Sanskrit epic, the examples Tulsi draws from are often the Puranas, a body of exegetical and mythical writing which grew around the 12th century onwards and which made "personal" deities important. It is also not insignificant that whenever Tulsi had to choose between Kalidasa's Kumarsambhava and the Puranas he almost invariably favoured the latter.9

The poetic possibilities in RCM may be further seen in the way in which, especially in the prolegomenal section of the work, Tulsi employs literary devices with which to enlarge what would finally become the larger considerations in the RCM. These are: the relationship between satya (truth) and vivek (knowledge), between saguna and nirguna bhakti; the correct code of behaviour or niti; the need for Rama nama; the incarnation of Vishnu and the ascendency of Vishnavism over, in particular, Shivaism (though these are indicated to be co-existent); the pervasiveness of divine order and pattern; the struggle between maya and bhakti; the essential dharma of man. Often the universality (or the need of it as such) is emphasised by imperceptible intrusions of foreign words in the fundamentally Middle Hindi diction. Words such as "garib", "newazu" and "sahib" are Arabic and/or Persian in origin and the juxtaposi-
tion of these with words such as “nama” (obviously “Rama nama”) results in situations such as the following:

Rama sukanth Bibhishan dowu
Rakhe sharan jan sab kowu
Nama garib anek newaze
Lok bea bar birad biraje

(I, 25, 1)

“The world knows that Rama saved Sugriva and Bibhishan but the name of Rama has saved countless poor souls.” The implication here is that just as the monkeys and the demons found grace through Rama so the poor (“garib”) and the infidel (“newaz”) can also find salvation through him. By using Arabic and Persian words Tulsi is suggesting that the Moslems can also find similar peace. The usage is almost surreptitious, yet its significance remains inescapable and profound. Similarly, the importance of the word, in a way the “verbal icon”, finds expression in the recurrence of Rama nama throughout the RCM, though in all fairness it should be added that the great monist devotee Kabir had used precisely this expression some years before Tulsiidas. The Rama of Tulsi is not the Unknown Brahman or the epic hero of Valmiki. He is made into someone who is both part of Brahman and beyond him. It is really the times, Kaliyuga, which has made this pre-eminence essential. According to the Vedas Brahman is eternal and unfathomable. Rama is also infinite as he reincarnates himself in every Tretayuga. In Kaliyuga (our age) only his nama and his katha remain and for us these symbols are our only means of mukti. To Tulsi Rama nama also becomes a kind of shakti, an energy, a force which is redemptive. Against the Upanishadic Brahman who is fixed and nirguna (though through maya, ineffable) Tulsi contends that Brahman through his avatari form is also saguna, that is able to be perceived as a personal God. Inasmuch as Rama is indistinguishable from Brahman he is nirguna; insofar as he has human form he is saguna. There is then no contradiction between the Upanishadic monistic thrust and the theism.
of the *RCM*, and, indeed, once the identification between Rama and Brahman has been asserted, a corresponding deification can simply be assumed.

For Tulsidas, then, there is a close and inalienable relationship between the concerns of the bhakti, as devotee, and the verbal expression of that devotion. The argument here is that Tulsi uses verses not only to enlarge upon the major considerations of bhakti yoga but also to offer answers to seemingly irreconcilable problems. This feature is of course presented throughout the *Rama-avata-bhakti* as the medium through which *mukti* or *moksha* can be achieved. In stressing this Tulsi had to consider other modes of apprehending the numinous, or exploring the self for these really amount to the same thing (knowledge of the self is knowledge of Brahman said the *Upanishads*), especially those found in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Perhaps having found in *Rama nama* a solution to the opposing claims of Sankara and the fundamentally pantheistic *Upanishads*, Tulsi exploits the incantatory potential of the recurrence of *Rama nama* in the *RCM* to demonstrate that in the chanting of the name of Rama one finds not only fulfilment but also the return of multiplicity into the Undifferentiated One, the *brahmasutrata* for *saguna* and *nirguna* aspects of Brahman do tend to coalesce in Rama.

It is possible to explore the ideas raised in the foregoing by a close analysis of one of the major sections of the *RCM*. We have drawn enough of our material from the First Book of the *RCM* (the *Balakandh* and the preliminary invocation) and here I wish to consider the middle portion of the *RCM*, the search for *Sita* in the *Kishkinda Kandh*, the fourth and shortest book of the *RCM*. In particular I wish to explore the figure of Hanuman, the monkey-warrior in whom Tulsidas develops an archetypal figure of the Rama bhakti, Rama's devotee.

Upon meeting Rama, Hanuman asks him if he is a god incarnate, born to save mankind: *teen manuj avatar*—echoing perhaps those well-known lines from the *Gita* in which Krishna quite explicitly tells Arjuna that He comes to redeem mankind whenever there is a cancerous growth of evil (IV, 7). Further-
more, structurally, a person so removed as Ravana, the apotheosis of moh and ahankar (ego), has also questioned Rama’s mortality and in his memorable lines to his sister Shunmekha had in fact suggested that if Rama indeed is avatari then death by his hands would surely lead to moksha. Similarly, Rama’s own reply to Hanuman had already been pre-figured, at least linguistically, by Narad Muni who in fact had told Himavanta that there is something inevitable about ‘that which had been “written”’. Rama fondly, for the words do have a strange charm about them, speaks of “vidhikā likha” (the written word) and “metanhar” (cannot be cancelled) in the same way in which Narad had spoken of vidhi likha and metanhar. There is then a conscious effort towards structural unity and continuity on the part of Tulsi who realises that such poetic techniques will better achieve the overall aim of the RCM.

What is equally important is that Rama rather nonchalantly puts aside Hanuman’s anxiety; he simply explains his own banishment, like any mortal (dramatically it is important for Rama to ‘seem’ so at this stage), in terms of the omnipresence of the written word. It is only towards the end of the sixth book, the Lanka Kandh, that we find any real deification equivalent in temper at least to that of Krishna in the Mahabharata. In their respects the gods call him the “supreme one”, the “all-knowing, the undying, the unchanging”, whose mind is beyond the flux of phenomenon. They also make one of the more explicit references to the chain of reincarnations of Vishnu (the fish, the tortoise, the bear, the man-lion, the dwarf and Parshuram) which had preceded Rama. Krishna, Buddha and Rama himself, are, of course, the other three. The tenth is yet to come.

Of bhakti itself little is actually said by Hanuman but his own example indicates that the bhakt begins from a state of humility, accepts his involvement in moh and subservience to ahankar and is willing to devote his entire mind and body to Rama. We have to go to the earlier book Aranya Kandh) to discover nine bhakitis which are essential for salvation. To the
aboriginal Sabari, Rama explains these quite explicitly. They emerge as re-statements of the essentially Vishnuite positions held by the Brahmancial orthodoxy and demonstrate, among other things a belief in karma which recognises caste stratification. Sabari's own position is that as a Shudra she performs the duty of the Shudra caste impeccably. At any rate, the chanting of the mantras, a denial of evil deeds and an acceptance of one's dharma and the need for self-contentment (santushti) are the major tenets of bhakti.

The bhakt then must not only believe in Rama, he must also uphold certain values, certain social codes. When later in the Kishkinda Kandh, Bali lies mortally wounded at the hands of Rama and appeals to Rama's renowned impartiality (as God) and his present action in some of the most beautiful lines in the RCM:

\[
\text{Dharma hetu awatarhu gosai} \\
\text{Marehu mohe vyadh ki nahi} \\
\text{Mei beiri Sugriva piyara} \\
\text{Karan kaun nath mohe mara.} \\
\text{(IV, 12, 3)}
\]

Rama replies not by stating categorically that as a follower of dharma Bali had erred, but by putting some of the considerations of niti within an equally powerful poetic framework. He refers to Bali's "evil" deeds but the sound semantically hollow, they lack the force of Bali's almost heroic lines, they are sustained by repetition, by rhyme and not by meaning or ideation, yet they have their desired effect and to this day is a set-phrase used to disparage all who have moved away from the paths of righteousness. Like much of the RCM, Tulsi often finds the poetic moment and the use of metaphorical suggestiveness irresistible. Some dozen or so chaupais earlier Rama had spoken of "fidelity" in friendship and the difference between "sewak" and "kapiti mintra" whom he had equated with a "sul", a sharp needle. He had in a way established the necessary "atmospheric" qualities for his confrontation with Bali whom he kills
at the request of his "friend" Sugriva, Bali's brother.

Bali himself, like Ravana and Maricha, is aware of the fact that death at the hands of Rama leads to mukti, to salvation, and he refuses life when Rama offers him. Comparing his position to those mystics who meditate for generations without finding salvation he says that his position is superior to theirs for now the most elusive has in fact come within his grasp. Echoing perhaps the line from the Gita—tyagac chantir anan taram (XII, 12)—Bali's cry becomes similar to those ascetics who have found peace through bhakti, through renunciation of the self and the acceptance of the "new" life in Rama.

The next major point I wish to refer to arises once again from the Kishkinda Kandh. To Tara, Bali's wife, Rama is able to offer consolation by referring to the impermanence of body and the eternal nature of the soul, not unlike Krishna's opening words to the distraught Arjuna. Rama tells Tara:

Chiti jai pawak gagan samira
Pancharachit yeh adham sharira
Pragat so tanu tab age sowa
Jiva nitya tum kahi lagi rowat

(IV, 14, 4-5)

Without stating it explicitly, Rama is implying here the distinction which must be made between the world of phenomenon, maya, the ever perishing samsara, and the world which the bhakt grasps through bhakti. Tara, therefore requests Rama the "gift" of bhakti and she is given her request. Shiva, in relating the importance of this, tells Uma (Parvati):

Uma Rama sam hitu jagmahi
Guru pitu matu bandhu kowu-nahi
Sur nar muni sab ki yeh ritti
Swarath labh kare sab priti

(IV, 15, 1)

Shiva is making a much more "modern" commitment for Rama here, saying that Rama's is a selfless love, a love unlike
those even of the rishis whose love has some gain, some immediate object in mind. In selfless love of the sort found in Rama and achieved one assumes through an identification through bhakti with Rama one finds that eternal solace of which the Vedas and the Puranas had spoken. But maya is a matter of some consequence to Tulsidas and he spends a number of chaupais on this. In the Bhagavad Gita, XII, 13, we read that the yogi transcends maya, he overcomes nirmano niramkara, the thought of "I" or "Mine" and in such selfless overcoming he finds peace with Godhead. Shiva in speaking of Rama to Parvati in the passage referred to above also finds in Rama the symbol of totality, the presence in a Being of Oneness without any striving towards the distinctions between 'I', 'You', 'Me', and 'Mine'. In the early portions of the Aranya kandh (the Third Book) Rama has a brief dialogue with Lakshman. Like most important conversations in the Ramayana it is strategically placed and comes just before (at least dramatically as seasons do intervene between the chaupais) the arrival of the demon princess Shupnekha who desires sexual favours from the brothers and whose "humiliation" at the hands of Lakshman (she loses her nose in fact!) precipitates the next turn of narrative.

The 'I'/ 'Mine' desire is also a manifestation of moh from which one finds escape in meditation. Lakshman asks Rama the means by which he can become a true devotee of Rama, and especially the relationship between jnana (knowledge), Vairagya (asceticism), maya (illusion) and bhakti (devotion). He also seeks the secret (bhedh) of God and the Soul. To this Rama replies:

\[
\text{Thorehu mah sab kahhu bujhi}
\text{Sunahu tat mati man chitlai}
\text{Mei aru mor tor tei maya}
\text{Jehi bash kinhe jiwa nikaya}
\]\n
(III, 25,1)

The soul has imprisoned maya which is simply an extension of the Me/Mine, You/Yours Fancy. Rama goes on to tell
Lakshman that the desire to know (jagā man jayī) is in itself an aspect of maya and its two expressions are vidya (knowledge) and avidya (nescience). The one avidya is destructive and enslaves the soul, the other vidya exists only through the grace of the Lord, through his instigation alone and not in its own right. True knowledge (śuddhi jnana) is selfless (man rahit) and the upholder of such knowledge is like Brahman himself. He is the one who leaves the three guṇas of prakṛti or nature, the three guṇas of sattva (goodness), rajas (energy), and tamas (dullness), implying perhaps that he is also beyond caste for each of these three guṇas embody a Hindu caste and he becomes a vairagi, an ascetic. Hence the person who is not subject to maya is beyond the body and the Lord is he who is not subject to maya but who is both the prompter and destroyer of maya. Rama recalls that the Vedas narrate that dharma leads to asceticism and that devotion (yogi) leads to knowledge (jnana) and knowledge in turn leads to moksha. But all this (if I read the line jate vēji drava mē bhāt, so mān bhākti, bhākti sukhdai correctly) leads to a communion with Me (the Lord) and hence the road to the ascetic, to the yogi, to jnana (knowledge), is another manifestation of my bhākti. Yet, and as we have intimated earlier, though bhākti is swatantra (independent) and though jnana, vijnana (knowledge and science) are dependent upon it, it comes only when the devotee is ready. And this readiness is not just a question of meditation, it is also an expression of a belief in the nine bhaktis, a code of ethical behaviour which demands acquiescence to one’s dharma (and, naturally, to the caste system). The person who does these things, says Rama, finds eternal peace (tīkē hriday kamañ mah) and becomes one with him.

The relationship between jnana and bhākti must have been an important “theological” concern for Tulsiṣa as he returns to it again at the end of the seventh book of the RCM, the Uttara Kandh, in the lengthy conversation between Bhusundī, the crow, and Garur, the king of the birds. In that section the statements concerning knowledge and bhākti made by Rama
are further enlarged upon but the conclusions are not specifically different. Bhusundi agrees that the distinction is largely an academic and historical one and gives an answer which once again uses poetic possibilities. Bhakti he contends has an advantage over \textit{maya} because both are feminine. \textit{Jnana}, \textit{viragya} (asceticism), \textit{yoga} and \textit{vijnana} (science) are masculine and therefore more susceptible to \textit{maya}. In this way the triumph of \textit{bhakti} over \textit{maya} is asserted and its identification with Sita emphasised. It would be recalled that Sita remains unmoved by \textit{maya}, existing in a way beyond its influences. Throughout the \textit{RCM}, except perhaps for the momentary lapse in the forest when she persuades Rama to kill the deer (Maricha), Sita remains beyond \textit{kam}, \textit{krodh}, \textit{lobh} and \textit{ahankar}, beyond what Christianity was to call the Seven Deadly Sins. In stressing the superiority of \textit{bhakti} Bhusundi again uses a poetic image and calls \textit{maya} a “temple dancer”:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Maya bhakti sunahu prabhu dowu}  
\textit{Nari barg jane sad kowu}  
\textit{Puni raghuwirahi bhakti piyari}  
\textit{Maya khal nartiki bichari}
\end{quote}

(VII, 119, 2)

For \textit{maya} is \textit{khal} i.e. deceitful and a \textit{nartaki}, a temple dancer. And as she is also “lexically” feminine, it is only something feminine in gender which can triumph over it. From a gender distinction alone, though, Tulsi advances the image of the female dancer, not because, I should think, there is something inherent in the semantics of \textit{maya} which would make “her” a dancer, but because Tulsi finds the irony irresistible.

We began this section by indicating the archetypal character of the \textit{bhakt}, Hanuman, and pointed out that the \textit{kishkinda kandh} dramatically unfolds the special relationship which ultimately develops between Rama and Hanuman, between the Lord and his \textit{bhakt}. In the \textit{Bhagavad Gita}, Section 12 to which reference has already been made, Krishna reiterates the love that exists between the \textit{bhakt} and the Lord: \textit{Yo madbhaktah sa}
me priyah, "My devotee is dear to me". This line, with some variations is repeated some half a dozen times in the course of Krishna's comments on the means by which mukti can be achieved. But in the Ramacharitramanasa the position of the devotee becomes singular in importance; he becomes in fact co-existent with Godhead and indistinguishable from him. Just as Rama nama, the name of Rama, becomes in itself a complete mantra which is chanted by the bhakt, so the devotee himself becomes somehow one with Rama nama. Throughout Tulsi's manas, the two are forcefully developed and used not only as a theological principle but also as a narrative device. The rocks float on water because Rama nama is inscribed on them, Hanuman discovers another devotee in Bibhishan, the righteous brother of Ravana, because he has Rama nama written on his door. In a way the success of the RCM, at least to the North Indian religious consciousness, lies in the way in which the Ramayana is always able to translate issues of large metaphysical concern into almost proverbial statements and images. The force with which that impact has been made upon the Indian mind can be seen, for instance, in the way in which a much more powerful experience such as that of Yudhishthira in the Mahabharata where his dharma is questioned throughout fails to gain prominence whereas the simplicity of the bhakt Hanuman is easily understood and mythologised.

All this takes us back to our initial remarks that the strength of Tulsi's RCM lies perhaps foremost in the way in which he has put across his "message" by using images and symbols, by employing incantatory verse, which, like the rhymes of oral poetry, impinge upon our consciousness so much more readily. As poetry, therefore, the RCM emerges quite possibly as the finest work in Middle Hindi. Nothing in it is quite so beautiful as the constant interweaving of statements of powerful intent into a poetic image or the movement of narration from the visual to the intellectual. After the more violent events surrounding the death of Bali in the Kishkinda Kandh to which reference has already been made, we arrive at passages of upmost
serenity, a kind of world-view where a unified perception prevails. This is evident in a chaupai such as the following where the need for bhakti is infused into the lines in such a manner that the metaphor reiterates the much more weighty statement present in the first two lines:

*Kahat anujsan katya aneka*
*Bhakt virati niripiti bibeka*
*Varsha kal megh nabh chaye’*
*Garjat lagat param suhaye*

(IV, 16, 4)

The first two lines have a purely epistemological basis (katha aneka, narrates many things) and one assumes that Rama is telling Lakshman the many areas of human knowledge with which he should acquaint himself. Yet the use of the thunder, the coming rain (varsha kal megh nabh chaye), is within the overall methodology of Tulsi and of Middle Hindi poetics generally where seasons are equated with momentous happenings. In the *RCM* the marriage of Shiva and Parvati takes place in hemant ritu (winter), the birth of Rama is celebrated in shishar (end of winter); Rama’s marriage takes place in vasant (spring); he is banished in grisham (summer); the war with the demons occurs in varsha (rainy) and Rama returns to his kingdom in sharad ritu (autumn). Given the tradition, however, there is room for specificity in Hindi poetry and in the ensuing chaupais Tulsi (or Rama) makes a further series of observations about nature: the thunder is again recalled as are the lightening and the overflowing river and in a rather poignant passage the memory of the estranged Sita (she had been abducted by Ravana) is evoked: priya heen darpat man mara. Along side these observations, aspects of moh, its transience (the imagery here is obvious), and the strengths of bhakti are given prominence. What all this suggests is the possibility that *RCM* remained for Tulsi first and foremost a work of poetry and only incidentally a work belonging to the mainstream of Vedanta. Often we get the feeling that an effect has been achieved less through insis-
tence upon the part of Rama or Shiva than through the overall incantatory language employed by the poet.

Given this interpretation, however, it should not be assumed that the RCM does not raise important “theological” issues or that, because art can be so ironic, it doesn’t come up with affirmative statements about certain issues. It is clear from the foregoing that bhakti as meditation and its relationship to Godhead remain a powerful consideration throughout and that bhakti is asserted as the only means by which the ever changing samsara can be transcended. The Bhagavad Gita had spoken of the abandonment of the fruits of action, the karma phala yoga, and in his denial of jnana (through Sabari, through Bhusundi), Tulsi had emphasised the relationship between this abandonment and moksha, the attainment of oneness with Brahman. In this way the devotee finds liberation in the practice of devotion itself and the end becomes something simple, almost unsought for. For the unbeliever, however, Tulsi leaves behind the ever-present image of the fruitless bet which “refuses” to flower even under a shower of amrit, the rain eternal:

Phule phale na bet
Yadhai sudha varshani jalad
Murakh hriday na chet
Jo guru milahi viranchi sama

(VI, 17, Soratha 3)

And it is salutary for this paper that he does so, that is for him to use again a “basic” image from everyday life—the example of the bet is only too obvious—to express the final and inalienable relationship between the bhakt and Brahman and the corresponding absence of any redemption for those who refuse, like the murakh, the idiot, the possibility of moksha through bhakti.
1. Ramacharitrmanasa, I, 36, 9 (Book I, Section 36, Chapai 9) See note 7 below for further explanatory notes. All quotations have been taken from Ramacharitrmanasa (Ramayana) edited by Pandit Govindji, Delhi, Ratan & Co. Bookellers, n.d.

2. Valmiki’s great Sanskrit epic (The Ramayana) was written possibly in the third and fourth centuries B.C. Tulsidas borrows heavily from this source; he does not change the narrative in any significant manner though he does add an extra book glorifying the exploits of Rama’s children, Lava and Kush. Tulsidas’s Ramacharitrmanasa (The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama) thus has as Book VIII the Lava Kush Kandh. He also changes the name of Book VI from Yudha Kandh (The Book of Var) to Lanka Kandh (The Book of Lanka, Ravana’s Kingdom).

Valmiki Ramayana

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<td>Bala Kandh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Ayodhya Kandh</td>
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<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Aranya Kandh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Kishkinda Kandh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Sundra Kandh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Lanka Kandh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>Uttar Kandh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>Lanka Kandh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. George Grierson’s comment (The Medieval Vernacular Literature of Hindustan, Calcutta, 1889, p. 20) quoted from Jagvansh Kishor Balbir’s translation of Charlotte Vaudeville’s Etude sur les Sources et la Composition du Ramayana de Tulsidas, Pondichéry, Institut Français D’Indologie, 1959, p.v. I am indebted to this work and especially to Balbir’s lucid and extremely readable translation and this indebtedness should be evident throughout this paper.

4. Vaudeville op. cit, p. vii ff comments on popular stories of encounters between Surdas and Tulsidas. It has been said that Mira once wrote to Tulsidas as well. Kabir was, of course, dead by this time but his influence was, even at that early stage, such that even Tulsidas would not have been immune to it.

5. See George Thibaut’s valuable introduction to his translation of The Vedanta Sutras of Badarayana with the commentary by Sankara
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In RCM I, 23, 1 we find “Agun sagan dui Barhma surupa”: “the One and the many are the two aspects of Brahman”.


7. RCM, I, 9, 4.

The Ramayana is normally divided into “verses” or sections of four (sometimes more) chaupais and a doha or a svoratha or chando depending upon which one (or two or all) of these ends the section.

A chaupai is made up of four pad (or four lines) and each pad has sixteen matras i.e. unaccented “phonemes”. The four pads are, however, normally written as 2 lines and hence a given line is half a chaupai and is called an ardhchaupai (artha=half) chaupai.

For further analysis, see Vaudeville op. cit., ix ff.


9. Kalidasa’s Kumasambhava (“The Birth of the War God,” 4th Century A.D.) is a work which also deals with many of the cosmogonic “myths” raised in RCM, I (the Balakandha). However, it is clear from Tulsi’s versions of these “myths” that he always preferred “popular” (here the Puranas) to purely literary sources.

10. RCM I, 68, Doha.

Kah Munish Himavanta suvo
Jo bidhi likha illar
Deva danuj nar nagmuni
Kau na manthanar

11. RCM III, 48-51

12. RCM IV, 12, 4

Aun jadha bhagri sat nari
Sama shat ye kanya samuchari
Indi kudristi bilokey joi
Tahi bidhi kachh pap na hoi

RCM III, 26, 1