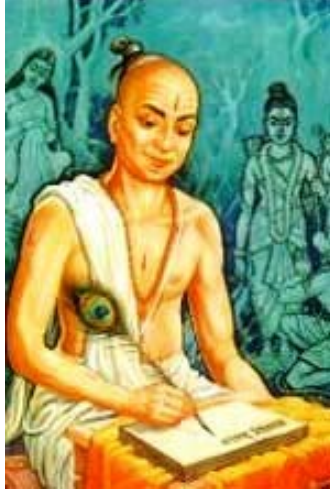


Sant TulsidAs



He was one of the best poets ever to have graced BhArat. His verses were written in BrajBhasha known today as Hindi and are accessible to everyone. He is well known for the work 'Ramcharit mAnas', which was referred to by Gandhiji, as the greatest book ever written. It is impossible to write a brief note about TulsidAs and be content about it. An in-depth reading of Ram charit mAnas is required for a deeper appreciation of TulsidAs, the person, the poet, the philosopher, the saint and, more importantly, the devotee of Lord Rama.

While there are always controversies from various scholars as to the time of any saint – due to lack of authenticity of available books – it is mostly believed that TulsidAs was born in the year 1532 to a brahmin family in the town of Rajapur. He suffered separation from his parents at a very young age and was on his own. He came into contact with some saints who advised him to surrender to Lord Rama. He got associated with a Hanuman temple and ate whatever was given to him. Not much is known about Tulsi's guru, but he met him in Sukarkheta. Since TulsidAs was not mentally equipped at that time for complex philosophies, his guru advised him to take up the path of devotion to Rama. As time grew on, Tulsi's love for Rama grew deeper and deeper.

However, in his youth, he got married to a beautiful woman named RatnAvali or Mamta bai. Once his wife went to stay with her parents for a while. Tulsi, not

being able to bear the separation, went to meet her. RatnAvali is said to have admonished Tulsi by saying 'I am just a bag of flesh and bones. Why are you so attracted to it? Why don't you love Lord Rama with the same fervor?' One wonders whether RatnAvali was herself spiritually inclined or whether God determined it was the appropriate time for Tulsi to leave the family life. Anyway, Tulsi contemplated on this remark and left all connections with the material world.

He lived in Chitrakut for a while and then migrated to Kashi. Scholars have rightly pointed out that Rama charit mAnas would never have been written if not for RatnAvali's remarks. Though he made several pilgrimages throughout the country, his permanent residence was in Kashi. He commenced writing Rama charit mAnas in Ayodhya but came back to Kashi.

Nabhaji, the author of Bhaktamala (1600), writes that TulsidAs was an incarnation of sage Valmiki born again to explain RAmAyaNaaa in the popular language for the benefit of the masses. This raise in his fame naturally created many enemies, who attacked his caste, his asceticism etc, but Tulsi does not seem to have been bothered by this.

Tulsi was a personification of humility. He declares in the MAnas that he is no poet, he is imperfect and only sings the excellence of Rama according to his poor wit and understanding. This is the case in his other works Gitavali (1571), Kavitavali (1612), BarvaiRAmAyaNaaa (1612) and in one of the best works, Vinaya Patrika (request to Rama). Tulsi, should not, however, be considered partial to Rama in exclusion to others. He appreciated the diverse tenets of Saiva, advaita and samkhya philosophies. He authored 22 different works. He never became attracted to miracles or money. Once the powerful moghal king offered him money in return for the performance of some miracles. Tulsi retorted 'Who needs money when one has the love of (and for) Rama ? What use is miracles before His glory ?'

In Kashi, he became the head of the monastery in lolarka kunda and was designated 'Gosain.' Tulsi passed away on the third day of the dark fortnight in the month of Shravana in 1623.

Ram charit mAnas

Having examined the life of Tulsidas, let us encounter the work 'Ram charit mAnas.' There is no book, which is considered more valuable than this by millions of devotees of Lord Rama in North India. The MAnas satisfies the divine thirst of millions of Indians whose companion is Tulsi's poetry. Many an average citizen utter Tulsi's kritis when idling or they hum his verses during monotonous work.

Tulsi is so magnificent in telling the episodes, whether it is Bharata's lamentation on arrival at Ayodhya, kaikeyi in the chamber, or the conversation of Narada and Rama, that it is extremely moving and coherent. Tulsi is so passionately devoted to Lord Rama that by the sheer liveliness of his poetic imagination, he brings into life Rama, not as a son of Dasartha but as a qualified incarnation of Vishnu and also as Brahman itself. Yes, the same Brahman which the vedas and upanishads struggle to define and comprehend and resort to negativity as 'neti neti' (not this, not this). The basic religious principle of Tulsi can be found in the UtTarakanda of the MAnas in the dialogue between Garuda and Bhushundi. As Tulsi points out, the name Rama means 'like a sun who dispels the darkness of ignorance.' Tulsi's Rama is thus Satchitananda. He is the all pervading Brahman and as Shiva says 'the story of Rama is an axe which fells the tree of Kaliyuga.'

Though bhakti in all its glory, it is also advaitic. Often, he lets debates and long verses interrupt the storyline to pour a whole philosophy of advaita. However, neither the integrity or the unity of the story is ever lost. Tulsi cries out 'I am the servant and He my master.. Hold fast to this doctrine and worship the lotus feet of Rama.' but in the same breath, he says 'I am That – this unbroken mental state is the flame which burns away the ignorance. No distinction is possible at this state.' When there is genuine faith in Rama, the material objects does not lead one astray. When the senses are controlled, discrimination is

cultivated. With discrimination, the essence of real and unreal is ascertained and with this and the Grace of Rama itself –mukti is obtained. Tulsi stresses the importance of loss of the individual in attaining the supreme state of bliss.

Some western scholars have alleged that this work is just a translation of the sanskrit RAmAyaNaaa by valmiki. One should remember that both Rama charita mAnas and RAmAyaNaaa are both biographies of Lord Rama. Naturally, there should not major changes between the two. Tulsi is an independent poet who creates a world using metaphors and similes which though overall consistent with Valmiki's rendition differs considerably in many places. For example, the utTArakanda in the MAnas does not even resemble the Valmiki's RAmAyaNaaa.

Some scholars have noted that TulsidAs is Kalidas of Hindi literature. Actually, he is much more. Kalidas was a great sanskrit poet, and there is no doubt of that, but he did not spread a social and bhakti movement. Whether it is in usage of rasa, similes or metaphors, TulsidAs parallels and even exceeds the versatility of Kalidas. Another issue is the use of various chandas (meters). Kalidas is a deft poet who in his Raghuvamsha literally plays with the language. Tulsi is not far behind, he also uses many meters including anushtubh, totaka, vamshastha, to name a few.

The MAnas abounds in metaphors. For example in the balakanda, the devotion of Rama is the season of rain, his faithful servants are the growing rice. Right thoughts are the earth and the heart a deep place within it. Vedas and Purana-s are the sea and the saints the clouds which rain down praise of Rama's glory in sweet, refreshing showers. The rain refreshes the rice-fields (and thus the life of his devotees). The cleansing waters falls on the earth of understanding and flows in one stream and fills the lake (mind) and settles there bringing it permanent bliss.

Tulsi, as many who preceded him like Abhinavagupta, holds that rasa is the main characteristic of a kavya. Among the many rasa (sentiments), the common ones are love (rati), grief (shoka), hasya (humor), krodha (anger), utasha (energy), bhaya (fear). He brings out the beauty of love when Rama and Sita

meet in the garden of Janaka, the grief in the separation of Rama from Sita, the energy when Rama encounters the demons, the anger in Kaikeyi, the fear when describing the evil spirits. These are just a small sample of the various rasa-s described by Tulsi.

Next is the use of similes. Rama's wedding, according to Tulsi, is in spring; his departure to the forest is in the heat of summer; a blessing to the gods is in the rainy season (indicating showering); the rule of Rama in the season of pleasantness – autumn; the character of Bharata is that of coolness (equanimity) etc. Even the constant repetitions of certain phrases like 'lotus feet', 'streaming eyes', 'quivering frame' etc have their use. Tulsi's RAmAyaNaaa is not meant for recitation or debating but for reading and rereading. It is an epic which moves the reader so much that one is marvelled by the skill of TulsidAs. He, not only provides hope and security in the midst of an ever-changing world, but also provides a sanctuary of love and peace. Tulsi shines like a lamp of divine guidance and by the light generated by MANas dispels the ignorance into knowledge and wisdom.

TulsidAs was not writing a biography of Rama, but expressing a love towards Lord Rama in his work. All of TulsidAs's Rama charita mAnas is inscribed on the marble walls of [Tulsi MANas Mandir](#) in Kashi. Even his sandals and couple of his minor possessions are preserved in this mandir. When I stood at the mandir, eyes closed and hands folded, I understood the real meaning of Rama charita mAnas, nay, life itself. Whatever the trials and tribulations, successes and elations the mind feels, they are all completely unreal and everything happens only due to the Will of Rama. But life is not just an abject surrender to the will of Lord Rama with a mere acceptance of both good and bad as consequence of karma but a positive affirmation of 'I am That.'