

*Danuta Stasik*  
*d.stasik@uw.edu.pl*  
(University of Warsaw)

## Following the Path of One's Duty: Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* as a Socio-Cultural Code

SUMMARY: The significant role of Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* (1574) in north Indian ethos cannot be overestimated. The story of Rām's deeds interpreted by the poet in agreement with the spirit of his times not only vocalizes its author's ideas and is one of the best testimonies of his times' world-view but, what is especially significant, it unhesitatingly supports the core values of the Hindu *varṇāśramadharmā*. As a result, throughout the centuries since its inception, the poem has enjoyed high moral status among Hindus, for whom it has set the model of life to be followed.

This paper forms an attempt at exploring the *Rāmcaritmānas* as a socio-cultural code that sets out the boundaries of "how things should be done", therefore the important term *maryādā / maryādīt* is first referred to. The focus of the analysis are the rules of conduct formulated in the poem, which aim at regulating the life of society, and the consequences caused by observing or breaking them.

KEYWORDS: Tulsīdās, *Rāmcaritmānas*, *varṇāśramadharmā*, north Indian ethos.

### 1. Introduction

As I noted in my previous publications (esp. Stasik 2009), the significant role of Tulsīdās's *magnum opus*, the *Rāmcaritmānas*<sup>1</sup> (1574), in north Indian ethos cannot be overestimated. The story of Rām's

---

<sup>1</sup> Henceforth abbreviated in references as RCM; all the references are to the text of the *Rāmcaritmānas* as constituted in the Gīta Press edition (Gorakhpur: Gīta Press, 1974).

deeds interpreted by the poet in agreement with the spirit of his times not only vocalizes its author's ideas and is one of the best testimonies of his times' world-view but, what is especially significant in this context, it unhesitatingly supports the core values of *varṇāśramadharmā* / *baranāśrama dharmā*.<sup>2</sup> As a result, throughout the centuries since its inception, the poem has enjoyed high moral status among Hindus, for whom it has set the model of life to be followed. And although the *Rāmcaritmānas* has also been severely criticised and accused of, among other things, backwardness, being reactionary, propagating the domination of Brahmins, promoting exploitation of women and low-castes, such criticism, quite paradoxically, testifies to the important role played by Tulsīdās and his work in shaping the countenance of North Indian society, as no one attacks works that are meaningless (see Stasik 2009: 88–89).

There can be no doubt that Tulsīdās's poem owes such a status to its protagonist who for centuries has been known as the archetypal king, an embodiment of moral merit, the paragon of propriety—the *maryādā-puruṣottam* ('the best among men [acting within] the limits [of social norms]').<sup>3</sup> This one of the most commonly used of the epithets of Rām highlights the fact that, from Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* onwards, he is seen not only as 'the best among men' (*puruṣottam*) but also as the one who acts within the bounds of the time-honoured custom and the one who determines their limits in this world. Such an understanding found a very straightforward expression in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* in the form of Hanumān's words addressed to Sītā:

<sup>2</sup> The concept of *varṇāśramadharmā* denotes particular socio-religious duties (*dharmā*) of members of each of traditional four *varṇas*, i.e. classes of Indian society, in their four stages of life (*āśrama*).

<sup>3</sup> *Maryādā* (Sanskrit > Hindi), meaning among other things: 'boundary, limit'; 'borderline, shoreline'; '[that what is within the] bounds of propriety / law / custom'; 'honour, good reputation, dignity'; *puruṣottam*—lit. 'the best among men'.

Lovely lady, Rāma is the guardian of the four classes of society.  
He is both the establisher and enforcer of the norms of social behaviour.<sup>4</sup>

This attitude towards Rām is very common and contemporary Indians often give utterance to it. One of its examples can be found on the flap of the cover of a book by Devdutt Pattanaik (Pattanaik 2008), a contemporary author, self-styled as ‘one of India’s foremost mythologists’.<sup>5</sup> It reads: ‘He is maryada purushottam Ram, the supreme upholder of social values, the scion of the Raghu clan, jewel of the solar dynasty, the seventh avatar of Vishnu, God who establishes order in worldly life.’

Taking into consideration the above-referred status of Tulsīdās’s poem and its protagonist, in my presentation, I will make an attempt to explore the relevant passages of the *Rāmcaritmānas* seen as a socio-cultural code that sets out the boundaries of “what should be done” (*ucita*) and “what should not be done” (*anucita*). The focus of my analysis will be the most important rules of conduct formulated in the poem, which aim at regulating the life of society, and the consequences caused by observing or breaking them.

However, it should be noted in this context that the just mentioned epithet—*maryādāpuruṣottam*—is absent from the entire text of Tulsīdās’s poem (it is also absent from Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*<sup>6</sup>). Its first component, the word *maryādā*<sup>7</sup> itself (in the following *tadbhava*

---

<sup>4</sup> *rāmo bhāmini lokasya caturvarṇyasya rakṣitā / maryādānām ca lokasya kartā kārayitā ca saḥ*; 5.33.11); *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* (1992). English translation after: *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* (1996: 201). The authors of this translation note that the second line of the stanza means literally: ‘He is the maker of the world’s limits and the one who makes others [observe them].’ They further add that ‘This construction of the social, as well as cosmic, function of Rāma is embodied in his characterization by Vaiṣṇava theologians as *maryādāpuruṣottama*’ *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* (1996: 438).

<sup>5</sup> <http://devdutt.com/book-of-ram/> (access 30.08.2011).

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 4. above.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. its derivative *maryādīt* ‘limited, restricted’.

forms: *marajādā* / *marajādā* / *marajāda*), occurs in the text six times (RCM 1.64.2, 1.84, 1.100.4, 2.228.2, 5.59.3, 7.23.5), and only one of them (RCM 5.59.3) refers to Rām as the one who set the boundaries of social order. This very interesting passage belongs to the most controversial and criticised lines in the entire *Rāmcaritmānas* and will be dealt with in greater detail in one of the subsequent parts of this paper.

## 2. *Varṇāśramadharmā*

The concept of *varṇāśramadharmā*, although omnipresent in the image of *Rāmcaritmānas*'s society, as a phrase does not figure prominently in the text of the poem—it appears in it only 3 times, in the *tadbhava* forms *baranāśrama* [...] *dharama* (RCM 7.20 and 7.102.4) and *baranādhama* (RCM 7.100.3). This is also true about the word *varṇa* itself used very rarely in the poem in the sense of any of the four classes of Hindu society (e.g. RCM 7.21.1, 7.22.2, 7.98.1, 7.100 ka). Thus it can be said that the social order of four *varṇas* is taken for granted by Tulsīdās, therefore there is no need to remind anyone of it. What one should be reminded of, however, are the duties and obligations traditionally ascribed to different classes and stages of life, fulfilling which brings about harmony in the entire creation.

The best example of such 'reminders', are two passages (RCM 2.172.2–173.2 and 7.127.3–4, 127), which I discussed elsewhere (Stasik 2009: 85–86 and 88–89). Suffice it to say here that they come as an interesting antithesis in two different places of the poem and in fact should be seen as a link between the opening parts of the poem and its end. Worth noting here is the fact that the first passage, which opens with the phrase *socia*, appears in the *Book of Ayodhyā* and is formed of the words of Vasiṣṭha addressed to Bharat after the funeral rites for his father Daśarath. It is uttered from a negative stance and indicates what is not proper, and thus not desirable, from the point of view of social harmony. Let me refer to it in its extended form.

Lament the Brahmin, who is deprived of the Veda,  
 Who discarded his own dharma and is engrossed in sensual enjoyment!  
 Lament the king, who does not know what political wisdom is,  
 And his people are not as dear to him as his own life!

Lament the Vaishya, who—although rich—is miserly,  
 Who neither knows hospitality, nor is devoted to Shiv!  
 Lament the Shudra, who is talkative, thirsting for recognition,  
 Proud of his knowledge and disregards Brahmins!

Lament, then, a wicked, quarrelsome and—  
 Wilful wife, deceiving her husband!  
 Lament the student who breaks his vow  
 And does not follow the instructions of his guru.

Lament the householder who, infatuated, rejects the path of duty.  
 Lament the ascetic who is engaged in worldly affairs and is deprived of prudence and detachment from the world.

Lamentable is the hermit  
 Who gives up penance and indulges in pleasure.  
 Lament the slanderer who gets angry without reason  
 And feels enmity for his mother, father, guru and friends.

Lament, in every respect, the one who harms others,  
 Takes good care only of his body and is very cruel.  
 Lamentable, in every respect, is the one  
 Who does not reject deceit and does not become a worshipper of Hari.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> *socia bipra jo beda bihīnā; taji nija dharamu viṣaya layalīnā./ socia ṅṛpati jo nīti na jānā; jehi na prajā priya prāna samānā./ socia bayasu kṛpana dhanavānū; jo na atithi siva bhagati sujānū./ socia sūdrū bipra avamānī; mukharu mānapriya gyāna gumānī./ socia puni pati bañcaka nārī; kuṭila kalahapriya icchācārī./ socia baṭu nija bratu pahiraī; jo nahī gura āyasu anusarāī./ socia grhī jo mohabasa karai karama patha tyāga; socia jatī prapañca rata bigata bibeka birāga./ baikhānasa soi socai jogū; tapu bihāi jehi bhāvai bhogū./ socia pisuna akārana krodhī; janani janaka gura bandhu*

The second passage, referred to in the tradition after its opening phrase as *dhanya*, the ‘Blessed’, appears in the last book of the poem in the form of the words uttered by Śiv teaching Pārvatī about the extraordinary qualities of the story of Rām.

Blessed is the land in which the Ganges<sup>9</sup> flows!  
 Blessed is the wife faithful to her husband!  
 Blessed is the king who governs rightly!  
 Blessed is the twice-born who gives not up his dharma!

Blessed is the wealth given to others!  
 Blessed is the mature mind engrossed in virtue!  
 Blessed are the moments spent in the company of the saints!  
 Blessed is the life of continuous devotion to Brahmins!

Listen, O Umā! Blessed is the family, holy and venerated by the world,  
 In which a humble man, devoted to Śrīraghubīr was born.<sup>10</sup>

The comparison of both passages reveals that they are opposed not only in their stance (one condemning, the other blessing) as well as length—the *socia* passage is two times longer than the *dhanya* passage—but also in their structure, which is reversed. In the context of their stance and length, a very apt observation by J. M. Macfie, one of the earlier Western commentators of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, comes to mind: “It is true that like other preachers he [Tulsīdās] is sometimes more eloquent when he is denouncing wickedness than he is commending virtue” (Macfie 1930: 181).

---

*birodhī./ saba bidhi socia para apakārī; nija tanu poṣaka niradaya bhārī./ socanīya sabahī bidhi soi; jo na chāri chalu hari jana hoī.*

<sup>9</sup> Lit. ‘the river of Gods’ (*surasarī*).

<sup>10</sup> *dhanya desa so jahā surasarī; dhanya nāri patibrata anusarī./ dhan-ya so bhūpu nīti jo karāi; dhanya so dvija nija dharma na taraī./ so dhana dhanya prathama gati jākī; dhanya punya rata mati soi pākī./ dhanya gharī soi jaba satasangā; dhanya janma dvija bhagati abhaṅgā./ so kula dhanya umā sunu jagata pūjya supunīta;/ śrīraghubīra parāyana jehī nara upaja binīta.*

The *socia* passage first refers to the obligations of four *varṇas* in descending order, beginning with a deplorable Brahmin who does not fulfil them. Then it proceeds with the obligations of the four *āśramas*, or the stages of life, but—very interestingly—first referring to women in the social position of wives, which draws our attention to the fact that Bhakti preached by Tulsīdās was open to all classes of Hindu society, both for men and women (Cf. Lorenzen 1995: 13–21, esp. 15). Finally, the passage brings up the family and individual level, referring to socially condemnable behaviours and features of character.

In comparison with the structure of the *socia* passage, the *dhanya* passage is almost entirely reversed. As has been already mentioned, it is twice as short, and as a result less exhaustive, e.g. it does not mention, among other things, the two out of four *varṇas*, namely Vaishyas and Shudras, and the stages of life, i.e. *āśramas*. Moreover, it alternates between the *varṇa* and the individual / family levels, instead of referring to them systematically. What is also very interesting, it is structured in the ascending order as it first speaks of women who should be *pativrata*, then of kings and finally of Brahmins. Thus, it serves as a kind of antithesis of the *socia* passage.

Both passages end in a similar way, standing in agreement with the entire poem; they are endorsed with the statements referring to the worship of Rām, which is seen as the basis of all success—both mundane and spiritual. They both graphically underline the fact that the *Rāmcaritmānas*, being undoubtedly a religious poem, is also designed as a source of social and ethical values to be applied in everyday life.

Although it is not evident from both these passages, it should be added that Tulsīdās throughout his work leaves no doubt that in the sphere of social conduct the most important authority for him is the Veda, but—very symptomatically—together with ‘the ways of the world’ (*loka / lokahū beda*). This is clearly stated in the only passage containing the phrase *baranāśrama dharama*, which comes from the description of *rāmrajya* (7.20):

All the people, obeying the rules prescribed to them by *varṇāśramadharmā*,  
ceaselessly follow  
The path of the Veda, enjoy happiness and are troubled neither by fear,  
nor sorrow nor sickness.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. The Bounds of Propriety

Although the *Rāmcaritmānas* can be (and in fact is) seen as a code of social behaviour, as has been just demonstrated, this by no means denotes a normative text with clearly formulated rules. Nevertheless, in all the crucial moments in the lives of the poem's numerous characters, it contains a number of guidelines allowing for the harmonious coexistence on different levels of the social whole. They either take the form of very short, formula-like, statements or longer, cumulative utterances, and we have referred to their most vocal exemplifications in earlier parts of this paper.

Let us now deal with the words *ucita* 'proper; appropriate' and *anucita* 'improper; inappropriate' featuring in a number of these statements. It seems that the analysis of the *Rāmcaritmānas* seen as a code of social behaviour can be most fruitfully pursued by means of scanning the occurrences of these most relevant words in our discussion.

In the entire text, the word *ucita* is used 38 times<sup>12</sup> and the word *anucita*—23 times,<sup>13</sup> out of which only one usage<sup>14</sup> belongs to an entirely

<sup>11</sup> *baranāśrama nija nija dharama nirata beda patha loga;/ calahī sadā pāvahī sukhahī nahī bhaya soka na roga.*

<sup>12</sup> 1.59.2, 1.65.4, 1.77.1, 1.90.1, 1.102 cha, 1.222.3, 1.240.4, 1.286.3, 1.321.2, 1.328.4, 2.9.3, 2.18.4, 2.43.3, 2.56.2, 2.67.4, 2.88, 2.99.3, 2.174, 2.175, 2.176, 2.177.1, 2.181.4, 2.203.4, 2.207, 2.229.1, 2.231.2, 2.246.1, 2.248.4, 2.263.2, 2.268.4, 2.271.3, 2.278.3, 2.278.4, 2.285.1, 2.290.3, 3.2, 4.30.5, 5.37.4, 7.50.2 (cf. Callewaert, Lutgendorf 1997).

<sup>13</sup> 1.62.1, 1.238.2, 1.253.1, 1.258.2, 1.273, 1.276.4, 1.277, 1.278.2, 1.285.3, 2.10.4, 2.45.3 (in the form *anucitu*), 2.96.2, 2.97.4, 2.174, 2.175.3, 2.177.2, 2.180.4, 2.229.4, 2.231.2, 2.283.4, 2.297.3, 2.306.4, 6.104.6 (cf. Callewaert, Lutgendorf 1997).

<sup>14</sup> 1.238.2.



different context (a comparison referring to Sītā's face) and as such does not speak of behaviour desirable or undesirable from the social point of view. What is very revealing, in the majority of occurrences both words appear in Book 2 (*ucita* 24 times and *anucita*—13 times) and, in a slightly lesser number, in Book 1 (*ucita* 10 times and *anucita*—8 times); they all are present in the situations that have a lot of bearing on the social functioning of the poem's characters. It brings to mind the observation of F. Whaling pointing to the fact that Book 2 "brings out the reality of Rāma's manhood in a more systematic way than the rest of the work" (Whaling 1980: 243; cf. Stasik 2009: 240). For example, *ucita*, i.e. appropriate for the occasion and befitting one's status, should be one's decisions and actions resulting from them, one's words,<sup>15</sup> the place one dwells in,<sup>16</sup> seats assigned to one's guests<sup>17</sup> as well as blessings given to others.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the words *anucita*, or *ucita* with the negation *na*,<sup>19</sup> refer to speech and behaviour undesirable in any society, as it brings about chaos and causes a lot of suffering.

Finally, let us come to the earlier mentioned passage featuring the word *marajādā*, which graphically demonstrates that the order of things is determined by Rām. It comes in Book 5 (5.59.3), when he tries to persuade the personified Ocean to subdue its waters and let Rām's army cross over to Lankā. The Ocean does not give in to his persuasion, so Rām reacts angrily and resorts to threatening the Ocean with his frightful arrow of fire. As a result, the intimidated Ocean yields to Rām and asks for his forgiveness. He also says the following words:

Lord, you did the right thing to teach me this lesson.  
After all, this order of things has been determined by you.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> E.g. 1.77.1, 1.90.1, 1.286.3, 2.67.4, 2.99.3, 2.175, 2.248.4, 2.263.2 or 2.278.3.

<sup>16</sup> 1.65.4, 2.88.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. 1.240.4, 1.321.2, 1.328.4.

<sup>18</sup> 1.102 cha, 2.246.1.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. 2.175.3.

<sup>20</sup> *prabhu bhala kīnha mohi sikha dīnhī; marajādā puni tumharī kīnhī.*

In these lines, Rām figures as the one who acts as the guarantor of the bounds of propriety and it is he only who has the power to alter or suspend the binding rules, for example by forcing the Ocean to compromise with his own nature and subdue his waters. However, after this absolutely clear diction, the Ocean continues with the words that make numerous authors, especially modern ones, take pains to explicate them convincingly:<sup>21</sup>

A drum, a yokel, a Shudra, an animal and a woman—  
They all deserve beating.<sup>22</sup>

This passage, especially for contemporary audiences, is an incontrovertible proof of Tulsīdās's being a misogynist and anti-low-caste who also despises simple minds and is cruel to animals. Not going into a detailed discussion of such an appraisal of these lines, which from the present-day point of view is undoubtedly both a proper and at the same time also an anachronistic reading, as it takes them out of its correct historical time, let us observe that these words are uttered by the Ocean forced by Rām, who acted in the situation of absolute necessity, to obey to what was demanded from him. However, although they contain offensive (or speaking euphemistically—'politically incorrect') language, in their primeval sense they are meant to underline the educational quality of punishment, which is justified by a good cause for the sake of a society. After all we beat the drum so that it resounds with tunes expected by us!

Summing up this brief analysis of the relevant passages of the *Rāmcaritmānas* and the poem's lexis that best exemplify its role of a text concerned with social obligations, we may say that Tulsīdās teaches his audience that following the path of one's duty, resulting from one's social status and stage of life, results not only in social harmony but also makes the entire world free from suffering and safe from any danger. In fact, this is the very concept of *rāmrājya* so attractive

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Śaraṇ 1998: 432–438 or Munṣī 1993: 83–86.

<sup>22</sup> *dhola gavāra sūdra pasu nārī; sakala tāranā ke adhikārī.*

to many generations of Indians, interpreted and adopted by them—including such important political figures as Mahatma Gandhi—the ideal of a social contract guaranteed by a righteous and mighty ruler, who himself and his people know very well that:

Disgrace to a man of honour  
Is like a fearful fire of myriads of deaths. (2.95.4)<sup>23</sup>

## References:

- Callewaert, W. M. and Ph. Lutgendorf. 1997. *Rāmcaritmānas Word Index*. Delhi: Manohar.
- Lorenzen, D. N. 1995. Introduction. The Historical Vicissitudes of Bhakti Religion. In: D. N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India. Community, Identity and Political Action*. Albany: State University of New York Press: 13–21.
- Macfie, J. M. 1930. *The Ramayan of Tulsidas or the Bible of Northern India*. Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark.
- Munṣī, M. 1993. *Rāmcaritmānas: vividh sandarbh*. Dillī: Navoday Sels.
- Pattanaik, D. 2008. *The Book of Ram*. Delhi: Penguin Books.
- RCM = *Rāmcaritmānas* 1974. Gorakhpur: Gītā Press.
- Śaraṇ, A. 1998. *Mānas-pīyūṣ*. Vol. 6. Gorakhpur: Gītāpres.

---

<sup>23</sup> *sambhāvita kahū apajasa lāhū; marana koṭi sama dārūna dāhū.*

---

Stasik, D. 2009. *The Infinite Story. The Past and Present of the Rāmāyaṇas in Hindi*. Delhi: Manohar.

*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki. An Epic of Ancient India*. 1996. Vol. 5, *Sundara-kāṇḍa*. Introduction, Translation and Annotation by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

*Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa. Text as Constituted in its Critical Edition*. 1992. General editor Ramkrishna T. Vyas. Vadodara: Oriental Institute.

Whaling, F. 1980. *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

**Internet sources:**

<http://devdutt.com/book-of-ram/> (access 30.08.2011).