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The Sacred Landscape of the Ramcharitamanas: Nature, Dharma and Devotion in Tulsidas

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Abstract: This paper examines the place of the natural world in Tulsidas's Ramcharitamanas (1574), a text that for a very large number of readers in North India simply is the Ramayana, but whose treatment of nature has received little sustained attention. It argues that rivers, forests, mountains, seasons, animals and birds in the Manas are never mere scenery. They are witnesses, devotees, teachers and, at times, participants in the moral action of the story. Through a close reading of selected dohas and chaupais, the paper traces this across the major episodes of the epic: the blessing of every creeper and blade of grass at Chitrakoot, the Kevat episode on the banks of the Ganga, Rama's lament to the birds, deer and bees after Sita's abduction, the monsoon passages of the Kishkindhakanda in which nature itself teaches patience and humility, the death and funeral rites of Jatayu, the winds that join Hanuman's fire in Lanka, and the flourishing of the land under Ram Rajya. The paper also gives attention to the more complicated episode of the sea, where reverence alone does not win Rama his passage, and argues that the Manas presents not a sentimental gentleness towards nature but a relationship governed by dharma on both sides. It concludes that this relational way of seeing nature, as something one grieves with, bargains with and is blessed by, offers a cultural resource for environmental awareness in India that modern, resource-centred language often lacks.

Keywords: Ramcharitamanas; Tulsidas; environmental symbolism; dharma; Bhakti; ecocriticism; Hindu ecology

Introduction

In a great many Hindu homes in North India, a copy of the Ramcharitamanas is kept wrapped in red cloth somewhere high and clean, and taken down with a certain care when it is to be read. Tulsidas composed it in Awadhi in the sixteenth century, and in the four and a half centuries since then it has been read, sung, recited in unbroken akhand paths over twenty-four hours, and performed every autumn on makeshift stages in towns and villages. It is not an exaggeration to say that for a very large number of people in the Hindi-speaking world, the Manas is the Ramayana. Valmiki's Sanskrit epic is older and in many ways the source, but it is Tulsidas's Rama whom most people actually know.

Because the text is so familiar, it is also easy to stop noticing things in it. We read it for Rama, and for devotion, and rightly so, since that is what Tulsidas wrote it for. But alongside the story of Rama there runs a second, quieter layer that is very rarely discussed, and that is the place Tulsidas gives to the natural world. Rivers, forests, mountains, birds, monkeys, the sea and the seasons are not simply scenery in the Manas. They speak, they grieve, they are asked questions, they refuse and they help. In this paper I want to look closely at that layer, which I will call its environmental symbolism, and ask what it tells us about how Tulsidas understood the relationship between the human, the natural and the divine.

I should say at the outset that I write as an Indian and a Hindu, and I do not pretend to stand outside the tradition I am discussing. The connection between the sacred and the natural is not, for people like me, something learned only from books. It is part of how we were taught to see a river or a peepal tree. I think it is more honest to say this plainly than to adopt a neutrality I do not have, and the reader can correct for it as they see fit.

My aims in this paper are three. The first is to identify and read closely the natural elements that carry symbolic weight in the Manas. The second is to draw out the ethical teaching about nature that emerges from these symbols. And the third, which I will come to towards the end, is to ask whether any of this has something to say to us now, when the relationship between human beings and the natural world is in such obvious trouble.

Tulsidas and His Time

The date of Tulsidas's birth is still debated, and estimates range from 1497 to 1532 CE. The date of the Manas, however, we have from Tulsidas himself. In the Balakanda he tells us that he began the work in Ayodhya in Samvat 1631, that is 1574 CE, on the day of Ram Navami. This was a period of enormous change in North India, both political and religious, and the Bhakti movement had by then spread across much of the subcontinent with its insistence that devotion to God was open to everyone, and not only to those who had access to Sanskrit learning.

Tulsidas's decision to write in Awadhi has to be understood in this context. Sanskrit was the language of scripture and of the learned, and to retell the Ramayana in the everyday language of the Awadh region was a real departure, one for which he was criticised in his own lifetime. But it was precisely this choice that made the Manas what it became. A story that had belonged largely to pandits now belonged to anyone who could listen to it, and people did listen. The Ram Lila tradition, which Philip Lutgendorf has studied in great detail, grew around the text, and today Ram Lilas are staged not only across India but in Nepal, Trinidad and Tobago, Mauritius, Fiji and Suriname, wherever communities from the Gangetic plain carried the Manas with them. Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar have their own living Ramayana traditions as well, though these descend from other tellings. The point is that this is not a museum text. It is alive, and it is alive in ordinary people's mouths.

Nature as Sacred in the Hindu Tradition

To read Tulsidas's treatment of nature properly one has to remember the tradition he was writing from. In Hindu thought nature was never simply raw material. The Vedas address hymns to the earth, the rivers, the dawn and the wind. The Prithvi Sukta of the Atharvaveda speaks of the earth as mother and of ourselves as her children. In the Puranas, rivers are goddesses, mountains are the homes of gods, and certain trees, the peepal, the banyan, the tulsi plant after which Tulsidas himself is named, are worshipped in their own right. Prakriti, nature, is closely connected with Shakti, the feminine energy that sustains everything, and this is not only a philosophical idea. It shows up in daily practice, in the way a woman in a village will touch the ground before stepping on it in the morning, or in the way water from the Ganga is kept in almost every Hindu home.

Tulsidas inherits all of this and does not need to argue for it. What he does is weave it into the story so completely that it becomes difficult to separate the landscape of the Manas from its spiritual meaning. And perhaps the clearest example of this comes before the story even begins, in the very title. Ramcharitamanas means the Manas lake of the deeds of Rama. In the Balakanda Tulsidas develops this image at great length. His poem is a lake, the sacred Manasarovar, with its own ghats, its waters, its lotuses and its birds, and those who bathe in it are cleansed. So the text itself, from its name onwards, presents itself as a piece of sacred geography. The poet does not look at nature from outside. He borrows its form for his own work.

The Forest

The forest, or van, is the setting of the longest and in many ways most important part of the Manas, since Rama spends fourteen years of exile there. And the forest in Tulsidas is two things at once. It is a place of real hardship, full of danger and rakshasas, where the three exiles sleep on the ground and live on roots and fruit. But it is also,

again and again, a place of holiness. The hermitages of the rishis are in the forest. Rama meets Atri and Anasuya, Sutikshna, Agastya, and later Shabari, all in the forest. One is almost tempted to say that the forest, and not the palace, is where Rama's real kingdom lies during these years.

Chitrakoot, where the exiles stay first, is described with particular love. It is here that Bharat comes to plead with Rama to return, and one of the more striking dohas of the Ayodhyakanda turns the entire living world of Chitrakoot into a chorus:

Chitrakoot ke bihag mrig beli bitap trin jaati,
Punya punj sab dhanya as kahahin dev din raati.
(Ayodhyakanda, Doha 138)

The birds and beasts of Chitrakoot, its creepers, trees and grasses, are all heaps of merit; so fortunate are they, the gods say day and night.

What I find so moving in this is the list itself. Tulsidas does not stop at the deer and the birds, which one might expect. He goes on to the creepers, the trees, and even the grass. Everything that grows there is called fortunate simply because Rama has lived among it. There is no hierarchy in this blessing. The humblest grass is as blessed as the tallest tree.

The forest in the Manas is therefore not just a backdrop for trials, though it is that as well. It is a place where the divine is present in the most ordinary living things, and where the exiles, who have given up everything, turn out to be not poorer but closer to God than they were in Ayodhya.

Rivers

Rivers in the Manas are always more than water. The Sarayu, which flows past Ayodhya, holds a special place, and in the Uttarakanda Rama himself speaks of it when he tells his companions about his birthplace:

Janmabhumi mam puri suhavani,
Uttar disi bah Sarju pavani.
(Uttarakanda 4.3)

My birthplace is a lovely city, and on its northern side flows the holy Sarayu.

It is worth noticing that when Rama describes the city dearest to him, the river is one of the first things he mentions. The Sarayu is part of what makes Ayodhya Ayodhya. And it is the Sarayu, of course, that Tulsidas chose as the place where he would begin his own work.

The Ganga plays a different role. She appears at the moment of departure, when the exiles leave the kingdom behind and must cross her to enter the forest. The episode of the boatman Kevat, which I will return to below, takes place on her banks, and after the crossing Sita offers prayers to the Ganga and asks for her blessing for their safe return. The Ganga here is a mother who is asked for protection, and the crossing marks the point after which nothing will be the same again. In this sense the rivers of the Manas hold time as well as water. They are where journeys begin and end.

Mountains, Seasons and the Moral Life

Tulsidas's mountains are usually understood as places of stability and refuge, and Chitrakoot and Rishyamuk, where Sugriva hides from Bali, are both mountains of this kind. But the passage in which I think Tulsidas says the most

about mountains, and indeed about nature in general, comes in the Kishkindhakanda, in his description of the rains and then of autumn. Rama, separated from Sita, waits out the monsoon on Mount Pravarshan, and as he watches the season Tulsidas has him read a moral lesson in almost every natural sight. The rain falls on the mountain, and:

Bund aghat sahahin giri kaise,
Khal ke bachan sant sah jaise.
(Kishkindhakanda 14.2)

The mountains bear the blows of the raindrops just as the saints bear the words of the wicked.

A few lines later, the small streams swell with rainwater:

Chhudra nadi bhari chali torai,
Jas thorehun dhan khal itrai.
(Kishkindhakanda 14.3)

The little streams run full and burst their banks, just as a petty man swells with pride on a little wealth.

This whole section is a kind of catalogue of such comparisons, and it runs on for many chaupais. What interests me about it is the direction in which the comparison moves. We usually think of the poet using nature to decorate a moral point. Here it is closer to the reverse. Rama looks at the natural world and finds the moral order already written into it, and the mountain is patient long before any saint learns to be. Nature, for Tulsidas, is not merely a symbol of virtue. It is a teacher of it, and one that has been teaching longer than we have been listening.

Animals, Birds and the Vanaras

Animals and birds are not minor players in the Manas. The army that finally crosses the sea is an army of vanaras and bears, and the one who does the most for Rama, apart from his own brothers, is Hanuman. I have written separately and at some length about Hanuman's devotion, so I will not repeat that here, except to say that it is significant that the ideal devotee of the Manas is a vanara and not a king or a brahmin. Tulsidas does not seem to feel that there is any contradiction in this at all.

Then there is Jatayu, the old vulture, who sees Ravana carrying Sita away and attacks him, knowing perfectly well that he cannot win. Ravana cuts off his wings, and Jatayu lies dying until Rama finds him. What happens next is one of the most tender scenes in the whole text. Rama strokes the dying bird's head with his own hand, and after Jatayu gives up his body, Rama performs his last rites himself, as a son would for a father. Rama had no chance to perform his own father's funeral rites, since Dasharatha died while he was in exile. It is a vulture who receives them instead. I do not think Tulsidas wants us to miss that.

Earlier in the same Aranyakanda, there is a smaller detail that is easy to overlook. The golden deer that tempts Sita is in fact the demon Maricha in disguise, and it is this deer that draws Rama away from the hut. So the same forest that shelters the exiles also becomes the means of their separation. Even the animals of the Manas, in other words, are not sentimental figures. They are part of a moral world in which good and evil both move.

The Abduction of Sita and Rama's Grief

This brings us to what I think is one of the most important moments for any reading of nature in the Manas. After Sita has been taken, Rama returns to find the hut empty, and in his grief he goes through the forest asking everything he meets whether they have seen her:

He khag mrig he madhukar shreni,
Tum dekhi Sita mriganaini?
(Aranyakanda 30.5)

O birds, O deer, O rows of bees, have you seen Sita, the doe-eyed one?

It is a very simple line and it is very easy to read past it. But let us stop for a moment and look at what it assumes. Rama, who is God himself for Tulsidas, turns to the birds and the deer and the bees as if they were witnesses, as if they could answer him, as if they would understand his loss. He does not speak to them as a master speaks to animals. He speaks to them as one speaks to neighbours. I would suggest that this single line tells us more about Tulsidas's view of nature than any number of descriptions. In the world of the Manas, the natural world is not something that surrounds human life. It shares in it.

I would also suggest, though here I am reading somewhat more freely, that Ravana's act has a double meaning. He has violated Sita, but he has also violated the forest, which had been a place of peace and hermitages. Ravana's whole character in the Manas is one of taking what is not his, and it does not seem accidental that his great crime is committed in a sacred grove.

Crossing the Ganga: The Kevat Episode

I want to go back now to the crossing of the Ganga, because it is one of the most loved episodes in the Ayodhyakanda and one that ordinary readers of the Manas often know by heart. When Rama asks the boatman Kevat to take them across, Kevat refuses:

Magi naav na kevatu aana,
Kahai tumhar maramu main jaana.
(Ayodhyakanda 100.2)

He asked for the boat, but the boatman would not bring it. I know your secret, he said.

The secret, Kevat explains, is that the dust of Rama's feet turned a stone into a woman, which is a reference to Ahalya, and he is afraid that the same will happen to his boat, which is his only livelihood. So he will not let Rama step in until he has washed his feet. It is a gently comic scene, and Kevat is being clever, since what he really wants is the chance to wash the Lord's feet. But there is something else in it as well. At the very edge of the river, the one who seems to have the least power in the scene, a poor boatman, is the one who knows who Rama is, and it is he who holds the key to the crossing.

So the crossing of the Ganga is not only a passage from the kingdom to the forest. It is also a passage from the world of rank to a world where a boatman can bargain with God and win. The river is where that change takes place.

The Sea: Humility and Its Limits

The crossing of the sea to Lanka is usually read as a lesson in humility towards nature. Rama does not simply force his way across. He sits on the shore and prays to the sea to give way. That much is true, and it is important. But Tulsidas's own account is more complicated than that, and I think the complication is actually the more interesting part. Rama prays for three days, and the sea does not answer. And then comes one of the most quoted dohas of the Sundarakanda:

Binay na manat jaladhi jad, gaye teen din beeti,
Bole Ram sakop tab, bhay binu hoi na preeti.
(Sundarakanda, Doha 57)

The dull sea did not heed his humble prayer, and three days passed. Then Rama spoke in anger: without fear, there is no love.

Rama then takes up his bow, and it is only at that point that the sea appears in human form, begs forgiveness, and tells Rama that the vanaras Nal and Nila can build a bridge that his waters will bear. So the sea does become a bridge rather than a barrier, as has often been said. But it does not happen through reverence alone.

I think it would be dishonest to leave this out, and to present the Manas as simply preaching gentleness towards nature. What it presents is something closer to a relationship. Rama begins with respect and patience, and he gives the sea every chance. But the sea, too, has its dharma, and when it stands in the way of a righteous cause, Rama is prepared to insist. The final picture is one of cooperation, but it is cooperation arrived at after a real struggle, and on terms that are still respectful. The sea is not destroyed. It is spoken to, and in the end it speaks back. Whatever one makes of the doha about fear and love, and people have made a great deal of it over the years, it certainly does not describe a Rama who treats nature as something to be conquered.

The Burning of Lanka

The burning of Lanka happens in the Sundarakanda, well before the war itself, when Hanuman has found Sita in the Ashoka grove and been captured by Ravana's men. They wrap his tail in cloth soaked in oil and set it alight to humiliate him, and Hanuman leaps from rooftop to rooftop and sets the whole city ablaze. Tulsidas adds a detail that is significant for our purposes:

Hari prerit tehi avasar chale marut unchas.
(Sundarakanda, Doha 25)

At that moment, prompted by Hari, the forty-nine winds began to blow.

So the fire does not act alone. The winds join it, and they do so at the prompting of God. Fire in the Hindu tradition is both destroyer and purifier, it is Agni who carries offerings to the gods and Agni who consumes the body at death, and here it does both. It burns Ravana's golden city and it announces, before a single arrow has been fired, that the natural order is not on Ravana's side. It is worth noting too that in the whole city only one house is left standing, and that is the house of Vibhishana, Ravana's righteous brother. Even this destruction, in other words, is discriminating. The elements in the Manas are not blind.

Ram Rajya and the Flourishing of Nature

The last image I want to discuss is the return to Ayodhya and the beginning of Ram Rajya in the Uttarakanda. When Tulsidas describes the reign of Rama, a great deal of what he describes is the condition of the natural world:

Phoolahin pharahin sada taru kanan,
Rahahin ek sang gaj panchanan.
(Uttarakanda 23.1)

The trees in the forests are always in flower and in fruit, and the elephant and the lion live together.

He goes on to say that birds and beasts have forgotten their natural enmity and live in affection with one another, that creepers and trees drip honey when asked, that cows give milk as one wishes, and that the earth is always full of crops. One might read this as simple poetic celebration, and it is that. But there is also an idea underneath it that is quite old in Indian political thought, which is that the health of the land is a measure of the righteousness of the ruler. When the king is just, the rains come on time and the earth is generous. When the king is unjust, the land suffers.

We might find this idea strange today, since we are used to thinking of nature and politics as entirely separate subjects. But I am not sure we are right. When forests are cut and rivers are poisoned, it is almost always because of decisions made by people who hold power. Tulsidas's picture of Ram Rajya simply makes this connection visible. The flourishing of the natural world is not a side effect of good rule in the Manas. It is part of what good rule means.

Dharma and the Ethics of Nature

If I were to name the single principle that ties all of this together, it would be dharma. Dharma is a notoriously difficult word to translate. It includes righteousness, duty, moral law and the order of the cosmos, and it applies not only to human beings but to everything that exists. The sea has its dharma, as we have seen, and so does fire, and so does the vulture who dies defending Sita. Rama, for Tulsidas, is dharma in human form, and it is significant that his dharma, as it is lived out in the Manas, includes the way he treats rivers and forests and animals.

The exiles in the forest take only what they need. They eat roots and fruit and do not hunt for pleasure, apart from the ill-fated pursuit of the golden deer, which, it is worth remembering, is the very act that leads to disaster. They honour the rivers they cross and the rishis who live in the woods. Pankaj Jain, in his study of dharma and ecology among Hindu communities, has shown how this sense of duty towards nature is still alive in the practices of groups like the Bishnois and the Swadhyaya movement, and one can see where some of it comes from when one reads the Manas. The idea of ahimsa, of doing as little harm as possible, is not something the Manas preaches as a separate lesson. It is simply the way its heroes live.

Relevance Today

It would be too easy, and not quite honest either, to claim that a sixteenth-century devotional poem contains ready-made solutions to climate change or the loss of biodiversity. It does not. Tulsidas was not thinking about carbon emissions. But I do think that the Manas offers something that our current ways of thinking about the environment often lack, and that is a sense of relationship. Most modern environmental language, even when it is well-meaning, speaks of nature as a resource that has to be managed carefully so that it does not run out. The Manas speaks of nature as something one can grieve with, bargain with, argue with and be blessed by. The difference is not a small one. People take care of what they are in relationship with in a way they rarely take care of a resource.

It is also worth remembering how many people still read this text. The Ganga that Kevat's boat crosses is the same Ganga that is today one of the most polluted rivers in the world, and very many of the people who live along its banks know the Kevat episode by heart. I do not think it is naive to believe that the cultural memory carried by texts like the Manas could be a genuine resource for environmental awareness in India, perhaps more effective than many campaigns that speak in a language ordinary people do not recognise as their own.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that the natural world in the Ramcharitamanas is never merely a background. Tulsidas names his poem after a lake. His forests are both trial and blessing, his rivers mark the great passages of the

story, his mountains and seasons teach patience and humility, and his birds and animals are devotees, witnesses and, in Jatayu's case, martyrs. Rama asks the deer and the bees about Sita as if they were his neighbours, the sea resists him and then helps him, the winds join Hanuman's fire, and when Rama finally rules, the lion and the elephant live side by side.

What emerges from all of this is not a set of environmental rules but a way of seeing, one in which the human, the natural and the divine are bound together by dharma, and in which harm done to one is harm done to all. I have also tried to be honest about the places where the text is more complicated than it is sometimes made to seem, as with the episode of the sea, because I think the Manas is better served by close reading than by simple praise. It is, after all, a text that has survived four hundred and fifty years without needing anyone to make it simpler than it is. The least we can do is read it as carefully as Tulsidas wrote it, and perhaps, in doing so, learn to look at a river or a forest a little more carefully as well.

Note: All translations from the Awadhi are my own. Verse references follow the Gita Press edition. A doha is cited by its number, and a chaupai by the number of the doha it precedes followed by its own number within that group, so that Aranyakanda 30.5 is the fifth chaupai before Doha 30 of the Aranyakanda.

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