



— RHYME AND REASON IN AWADHI —

The Opening Lines of the Rāmcaritmānas

राम तुम्हारा चरित स्वयं ही काव्य है ।  
कोई कवि बन जाय, सहज संभाव्य है ॥  
( मैथिलीशरण गुप्त, साकेत )

Though Maithilisharan Gupta insists that the innate poetic nature of Rāma's deeds will make a poet of any would-be rhymester, the breadth of Tulsi's poetic vision actually has no rival. Tulsi takes the unruly chaos of life and transforms it, through the alchemy of poetry, into something sublime, orderly, noble, cogent, and deeply imbued with meaning. The master-poet understood that at the heart of devotional experience, for all its agonies and ecstasies, lies a place of quietude and stillness where duality is transcended. In the Sanskrit *maṅgalācaraṇ* that precedes the Awadhi text, he tells us that he wrote the work 'for his own delight' (*svāntaḥ sukhāya*), and one can imagine the intense engagement with which he must have undertaken the great task of writing this poem. *Like a long-legged fly upon the stream / His mind moves upon silence* (W.B. Yeats).

In Hindi hagiography, Tulsi is portrayed in such an aura of eulogy that our sight is dazzled and his individual identity is hard to see. But if we read him carefully we find evidence of a unique personality, at once pious and creative, 'traditional' and innovative, conventional and subversive. These characteristics begin to emerge from the very opening verses of the *Rāmcaritmānas*; so let us observe him at work by analysing examples of his poet 'wit' (a word which, very appropriately, is cognate with the Sanskrit root *vid-* that we see in words such as *vidyā*). Here are the opening couplets of his Awadhi text in the first book, the *Bālkāṇḍ* :

जो सुमिरत सिद्धि होय गन नायक करिबर बदन ।  
करउ अनुग्रह सोइ बुद्धि रासि सुभ गुन सदन ॥ १ ॥  
मूक होइ बाचाल पंगु चढइ गिरिबर गहन ।  
जासु कृपाँ सो दयाल द्रवउ सकल कलि मल दहन ॥ २ ॥

नाल सरारुह स्याम तरुन अरुन बारज नयन ।  
करउ सो मम उर धाम सदा छीरसागर सयन ॥३॥

कुंद इंदु सम देह उमा रमन करुना अयन ।  
जाहि दीन पर नेह करउ कृपा मर्दन मयन ॥४॥

बंदउ गुरु पद कंज कृपा सिंधु नररूप हरि ।  
महामोह तम पुंज जासु बचन रबि कर निकर ॥५॥

The first couplet venerates Ganesh, the second and third Vishnu, the fourth Shiva, while the last, with a twist that we shall come to shortly, pays tribute to the guru. We'll begin with a literal translation:

1. May the elephant-faced leader of Shiva's troop,  
recalling whom yields accomplishment, bestow his grace:  
he, the epitome of wisdom, home of auspicious qualities!
2. By whose grace the dumb become garrulous and the cripple climbs a mighty mountain;  
may he, burner of all Kaliyuga's vileness, be moved to mercy!
3. Blue-lotus dark, with eyes like red lotus in first blush:  
may he who lies ever on the Milky Ocean make my heart his home!
4. Jasmine-fair of body, moon-fair, Uma's Lord, abode of mercy  
who loves the lowly and tramples Kamdev: may he show his grace!
5. I revere the guru's lotus feet – a sea of mercy, Hari in human form  
whose words are as thronged sun-rays to the massed darkness of delusion!

(In couplets 2 and 3, the pronoun सो is written with an adapted form of the Devanagari vowel, showing that it has to be pronounced as short: सौ. This useful graphic convention is borrowed from an old Banaras edition of the text.)

Tulsidas began composing his Rāmāyaṇ in 1574. Following the tradition of Awadhī epic verse established by Sufi poets such as Jāyasī and Manjhan, he used an alternating sequence of several *caupāī* quatrains and single *dohā* couplets as his compositional structure. But the *Bālkāṇḍ* begins with a different and special format, something wholly unique in the history of the literature; and by opening his text in this way, Tulsī prepared us for the fact that the *Mānas* would be no ordinary poem — just as its author is no ordinary poet.

‘Beginnings’ are important moments in any literary work, and nowhere more so than in the context of devotional narrative, whose opening lines are a portal into a world apart, a doorway to a sublime presence. The opening pages of the *Mānas* offer a rich orchestration of several complementary functions. They invoke the divinity of the poem’s subject; they seek blessings from divine powers; they introduce the metaphor of the *Mānas* as a ‘lake’ in which readers will immerse themselves in successive bathings; and last but not least they negotiate the role of Tulsi himself as the poet taking the radical step of writing the story of Rāma in the vernacular.

By beginning the text with a conventional Sanskrit *maṅgalācaraṇ*, Tulsi indicates that a moment of such extreme formality still requires the gravitas and ceremonial resonance of the classical language. Having started thus, his next task is to establish a transition from the formal decorum of the Sanskrit to the vernacular register of the Awadhī *caupāī-dohā* sequences. To achieve this, Tulsi composes a highly structured sequence of six couplets in *sortḥā* metre as a kind of rigidly built, foursquare pedestal on which the following text will stand. Structural formality is the key element here, and Tulsi uses a combination of three techniques as mortar to bind the *sortḥā* verses into a coherent unit.

The first compositional technique involves a unique adaptation of metrical form – a subtly augmented version of *sortḥā* metre. The *sortḥā* is an inverted *dohā*: the two feet of the *dohā* line are transposed, so that what was the end-rhyme of a *dohā* line becomes a caesura rhyme in the *sortḥā*. Here is an example from later in the *Bālkāṇḍ*, showing the traditional, *unaugmented* *sortḥā* format (with caesura rhyme at *dhīra/-bīra*, and no end-rhyme):

धरी न काहूँ धीर सब के मन मनसिज हरे ।  
जे राखे रघुबीर ते उबरे तेहि काल महुँ ॥८५॥

None remained composed: Kamdev had stolen the hearts of all!

Only those were then saved whom Raghuvir protected.

So much for the standard form of the *sortḥā* couplet, with its mid-line rhyme. But in his bid for decorous formality in his all-important opening couplets, Tulsi adds a *second*

rhyme at the *end* of the line, squaring off each stanza with a cadence that gives a formal sense of closure. Here are the **caesura rhymes** and the **end-rhymes**:

जो सुमिरत सिद्धि होय गन नायक करिबर बदन ।  
करउ अनुग्रह सोइ बुद्धि रासि सुभ गुन सदन ॥ १ ॥  
मूक होइ बाचाल पंगु चढइ गिरिबर गहन ।  
जासु कृपाँ सो दयाल द्रवउ सकल कलि मल दहन ॥ २ ॥  
नील सरोरुह स्याम तरुन अरुन बारिज नयन ।  
करउ सो मम उर धाम सदा छीरसागर सयन ॥ ३ ॥  
कुंद इंदु सम देह उमा रमन करुना अयन ।  
जाहि दीन पर नेह करउ कृपा मर्दन मयन ॥ ४ ॥  
बंदउ गुरु पद कंज कृपा सिंधु नररूप हरि ।  
महामोह तम पुंज जासु बचन रबि कर निकर ॥ ५ ॥

Fitted out with their pairs of rhymes, the *sortḥās* now breathe formality and balance, and form a distinctive sequence of an original kind. Their inner cohesion is deepened by Tulsi's second compositional technique, in which a sequence of relative-correlative constructions is threaded through all five couplets. Each *sortḥā* has either one or two **pronouns** flagging these structures:

जो सुमिरत सिद्धि होय गन नायक करिबर बदन ।  
करउ अनुग्रह सोइ बुद्धि रासि सुभ गुन सदन ॥ १ ॥  
मूक होइ बाचाल पंगु चढइ गिरिबर गहन ।  
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कुंद इंदु सम देह उमा रमन करुना अयन ।  
जाहि दीन पर नेह करउ कृपा मर्दन मयन ॥ ४ ॥  
बंदउ गुरु पद कंज कृपा सिंधु नररूप हरि ।  
महामोह तम पुंज जासु बचन रबि कर निकर ॥ ५ ॥

Complementing this formal sequence of grammatical structures, each of which establishes a descriptive link between a divine personality and his defining

characteristics, Tulsi adds a *third* compositional technique to bring yet more cohesion to the *sortḥā* sequence: this is the placement, in each of the five couplets, of a verb that ends in *-aii* :

जो सुमिरत सिधि होय गन नायक करिबर बदन ।  
 करउ अनुग्रह सोइ बुद्धि रासि सुभ गुन सदन ॥ १ ॥

मूक होइ बाचाल पंगु चढइ गिरिबर गहन ।  
 जासु कृपाँ सो दयाल द्रवउ सकल कलि मल दहन ॥ २ ॥

नील सरोरुह स्याम तरुन अरुन बारिज नयन ।  
 करउ सो मम उर धाम सदा छीरसागर सयन ॥ ३ ॥

कुंद इंदु सम देह उमा रमन करुना अयन ।  
 जाहि दीन पर नेह करउ कृपा मर्दन मयन ॥ ४ ॥

बंदउ गुरु पद कंज कृपा सिंधु नररूप हरि ।  
 महामोह तम पुंज जासु बचन रबि कर निकर ॥ ५ ॥

The sequence, however, is far from innocent: it contains a wonderful example of Tulsi's subversive wit. The first four *-aii* verbs are all straightforward third person imperatives, essentially wishing things into reality by saying 'may he show grace' etc. So far, so conventional. But with a brilliant sleight of hand, Tulsi retools the *-aii* form in the fifth occurrence as a *first-person indicative* verb: बंदउ गुरु पद कंज 'I revere the guru's lotus feet'. Thus by exploiting the homographic equivalence of two different verb forms, Tulsi achieves a seamless transition from an *impersonal* invocation of divine grace to his own *personal* involvement in the narrative of the text. Goswami Tulsidas has arrived, handing us the visiting-card of his genius.

When the *sortḥā* sequence ends, something quite miraculous happens: we discover that those *sortḥās* have another function in addition to providing a transition between the formality of the Sanskrit and the vernacular quality of *caupāi-dohā* composition. The constrained voice of the *sortḥā*, with its innovative end-rhymes couched in clipped short syllables, proves to be a perfect foil for the strongly contrasted, open, long-vowel rhymes of the *caupāi* :

बंदउ गुरु पद पदुम परागा । सुरुचि सुबास सरस अनुरागा ॥  
अमिय मूरिमय चूरन चारू । समन सकल भव रुज परिवारू ॥

I revere the very pollen on the guru's lotus feet –  
radiant, fragrant, sweet and lovely:  
a pleasing powder redolent with ambrosia's root,  
pacifier of the many strains of ills in the world.

It is as though someone who had been humming quietly to himself suddenly burst into full-throated song: listen to the resonant cadence of his long open rhymes, *-āgā / -āgā, -ārū / ārū* — we emerge from the low-ceilinged narrow passageway of the *sortḥās* into a great arching arena of magnificent *caupāīs*!

But there is more: Tulsi is not done yet. Again keeping his eye on progression and transition, Tulsi's first *caupāī* starts with a near-repeat of wording from his previous stanza, the final *sortḥā*: see how the *sortḥā* foot बंदउ गुरु पद कंज, which is completely devoid of long vowels, is reborn as बंदउ गुरु पद पदुम परागा, whose last word is artificially extended (*parāga* > *parāgā*) to initiate the long-vowelled *caupāī* rhyme that will now predominate through the entire text. Anaphora – the repetition of initial wording in successive lines – is a powerful rhetorical device: *say something once* and it means what it means, but *say something twice* and the repeat picks up extra expressive power. Tulsi adds yet *more* connectivity by beginning his new material with a repeat of the old: the anaphoric word *pada* is reflected in the next word *paduma* – whose alliteration then marches on within the rhyme-word *parāgā* before handing the alliterative baton to /s/ in the second foot.

In the *caupāī*, fully a *quarter* of each foot (four out of the total sixteen *mātrās*) is accounted for by these rhyme syllables; it is this energetic cadence that gives the *Mānas* its striding rhythm, equipping it so brilliantly for prolonged recitation.

बंदउ गुरु पद पदुम परागा । सुरुचि सुबास सरस अनुरागा ॥  
अमिय मूरिमय चूरन चारू । समन सकल भव रुज परिवारू ॥

The long epic journey has begun.

- Rupert Snell

\*A brief digression on the very first word of the Awadhi text — which happens to be a little problematic! (The text followed here is the ‘standard’ Gita Press edition.) How to parse the grammar of जो सुमिरत सिद्धि होय ? The usual meaning of सुमिर- relates to the devotee’s ‘remembering’ or meditating on God: thus literally ‘Remembering whom, *siddhi* (accomplishment, success) is born’. But this rather strains the syntax of जो, which such a construction would normally push into the oblique case – as with जाहि of *sortḥā* 4 (cf. Hindi जिस, जिसे, जिसको, and plural equivalents). Thus it is highly relevant that some recensions of the text read जेहि for जो.