The Oral vs. the Written?
A Few Notes on the Composition of Tulsīdās’s Rāmcaritmānas*

Abstract

In the opening part of his seminal study of performing traditions of Tulsīdās’s Rāmcaritmānas, The Life of a Text, Philip Lutgendorf discusses the structure of the poem’s narrative realized through the series of four dialogues. His very apt observations bring to light the existence of the interface between the oral (as well as the aural) and the written. They also serve as a convenient starting point for an analysis of the relevant parts of the poem, set in a wider context of the Orality/Literacy Debate. Aiming at systematizing and broadening our knowledge of the composition of the Rāmcaritmānas and also of the factors behind its rapid spread in North India, this paper scrutinizes the opening passages of the poem, in which the process of the creation of the Rāmcaritmānas, its genealogy and its structure are revealed. In the analysis, the relevant features of the oral mentality thesis outlined by Walter J. Ong in his Orality and Literacy are referred to; an attempt to explore the social impact of oral residues in a chirographic, i.e. writing, culture is also made. In view of the problematic antithesis between the oral and the written manifest in Tulsīdās’s poem, as well as in view of its religious importance, it seems that this analysis may help to re-examine the Western understanding of the concept of “scripture”.

Keywords: Rāmcaritmānas, Tulsīdās, Orality/Literacy Debate, Walter J. Ong, Philip Lutgendorf, scripture

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This language, what it says and the way it says it, itself shapes the tradition that guides social behavior; in fact it becomes itself the tradition.

Havelock\(^1\)

One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its application and learn from that. But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing so. It is not a stupid prejudice.

Ludwig Wittgenstein\(^2\)

\section*{1. Introductory remarks}

Grzegorz Godlewski, a Polish theoretician from the Warsaw School of Anthropology of the Word,\(^3\) speaking of the significance of (Great/Grand) Literacy Theory,\(^4\) is right to note that during the last half century, few theories in the field of humanities have been worthy of such a label, i.e. “Great/Grand.”\(^5\) As is well known, its foundations were laid by the so-called Toronto School of Communication, i.e. Harold Innis,\(^6\) Marshall McLuhan,\(^7\) Eric Havelock,\(^8\) as well as Jack Goody\(^9\) and Walter J. Ong (with his most widely known work \textit{Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word}),\(^10\) to name the most important of its proponents. Without going into a detailed discussion of this theory and its criticism, referred to as the Orality/Literacy Debate,\(^11\) which would have to go far beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say here that all these scholars, coming

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Eric Havelock, \textit{The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present}, Yale University Press, New Haven 1986, p. 74.
\item \textsuperscript{3} The Warsaw School of the Anthropology of the Word – a group of anthropologists from the Institute of Polish Culture at the Faculty of Polish Studies, University of Warsaw.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Also called Communication Theory, Literacy Thesis and Orality/Literacy Theory.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Esp. Harold Innis, \textit{The Bias of Communication}, Toronto University Press, Toronto–Buffalo–London 1951.
\item \textsuperscript{11} For more see Khosrow Jahandarie, \textit{Spoken and Written Discourse. A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective}, Ablex, Stamford 1999 and Godlewski, \textit{Słowa}, p. 156.
\end{itemize}
from different fields, shared a culture-oriented bias in their works, the conviction that communication systems, which engage different media, structure human cultures and the human mind. As a result, these systems should be considered in relation to the effects they have on forms and practices of communication and cultural institutions as well as types of cultures generated by them and regulated by the requirements and potential of the media dominant in them.12

This significant theoretical position yielded an enormous body of work – from a critical stance as well – that is both theoretical and practical in nature and also concerned with the traditions of particular cultures.13 Taking into consideration the fact that, as observed by C.J. Fuller,14 India provides striking evidence for the debate on orality, literacy and memorization, as well as the fact – as this paper attempts to prove – that it is an outstanding example of a literate culture with a high oral residue,15 it is surprising that not much has been said about India in this regard. This is also true of North India and one of its most important cultural texts and perhaps the most influential religious text of the Hindi-speaking heartland, i.e. Tulsīdās’s Rāmcaritmānas, a sixteenth-century telling of Rāmkathā, or the story of the deeds of Rām, which is of primary interest in this paper. Let us note that the only exception with regard to this poem is Philip Lutgendorf’s seminal study of the performing traditions of the Rāmcaritmānas,16 in which he refers mainly to Richard Bauman’s classic Verbal Art as Performance.17

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it scrutinizes the opening passages of the poem, in which the process of the creation of the Rāmcaritmānas, its genealogy and its structure are revealed (from the beginning of Book One up to stanza 42). In the analysis, the relevant features of the oral mentality thesis outlined by Ong18 are referred to; an attempt to explore the social impact of oral residues in a chirographic, i.e. writing, culture19 is also made. It is hoped that such an approach will systematize and broaden our knowledge not only of the composition of the Rāmcaritmānas but also of the factors behind its rapid spread in North India “in the absence of printing and despite of the fact

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13 For the titles of some earlier works concerned with African, Chinese and Arabic oral traditions, see Ong, Orality and Literacy, pp. 28–29.
18 Ong, Orality and Literacy, pp. 31–56.
19 Ong, Orality and Literacy, p. 2ff.
of overwhelming illiteracy.”

Secondly, in view of the problematic antithesis between the oral and the written manifest in Tulsīdās’s poem, as well as in view of its religious importance, it seems that this analysis may help to re-examine the Western understanding of the concept of “scripture” traditionally conceived as written religious text but in fact appropriated and used by people most of whom could neither read nor write.

2. The Rāmcaritmānas as a Written Text

There is no doubt in the tradition of scholarship on the Rāmcaritmānas that the poem was composed and written down by Tulsīdās and the earliest, as well as later studies devoted to it, speak of manuscripts in the poet’s own handwriting.

In this context, it is important to note that the verb likh- “to write”, in seven different forms (likhata, likhana, likhā, likhi, likhia, likhita, likhe), can be found in six out of seven books (no occurrence in Book 4) of the poem, appearing twenty times in total. However, none of them, with one telling exception with which we will deal later, alludes to the process of the creation of the poem by Tulsīdās that would also involve the act of writing it down. Only one instance (likhia 1.7.6) refers to the act of writing in general, or re-writing/copying, as a pious act:

“Smoke that turns to soot in bad company
May be used as excellent ink to write a Purana” (1.7.6).

Otherwise the forms of the verb “to write” designate a notion of what is written in one’s fate (e.g. 1.68, 1.97 cha) or the act, and its result, of painting (2.84.1).

The only above-mentioned exception when the verb “to write” refers to Tulsīdās himself can be found in a passage in which he denies having any poetic skills and declares:

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21 Goody and Watt, The Consequences of Literacy; Goody, The Logic of Writing and Goody, The Interface; Graham, Beyond the Written Word and Fuller, Orality, Literacy and Memorization.
“I know nothing of poetry; I declare it to be true, Having written it on a blank piece of paper” (1.9.6).25

Thus, although it is clear that Tulsīdās knew writing, the written word is not particularly prominent in his composition. Instead, it is the “sounded word”,26 though – paradoxically – written down, or “frozen” in writing, that matters and as a result permeates the texture of the poem.

It seems justified to recall here Ludo Rocher’s remark about the Vedas. He notes that “even after the Vedas could have been written down, there are indications that this was not done nevertheless, because that would not have been the right way of transmitting them from generation to generation.” He also mentions Kumārilabhaṭṭa (8th century A.D.) who “says that knowledge of the Veda is useless, if it has been acquired from writing.”27 The idea that knowledge of the Veda is useless if it is acquired from a book is particularly significant. Of course, this extensive quotation is meant not so much to invoke the Rāmcaritmānas as the Veda, although they undoubtedly fall into the same category of “scripture.”28 Rather, the intention is to draw our attention to the fact that while in the Western world knowledge is “book-learning”,29 in India we face the seemingly low or suspicious status of the written word and the centuries-old conviction that “You know what you can recall,”30 and that is certainly without written prompts or aids.

3. The Rāmcaritmānas from the Oral/Aural Perspective

In the opening parts of his poem, Tulsīdās introduces his audience to the realm of the spoken word using such nouns as:

- _bacana_ (“speech, talk” e.g. 1.9.4), or even _bālabacana_ (“baby talk” 1.8.4);
- _bānī_ (“utterance; speech, talk” e.g. 1.10.3);
- _bhaniti_ (“utterance; speech, talk” e.g. 1.9, 1.10.2, 1.15.5, 1.15);
- _gāhā_ (“song, chant”, “narrative (poem)” e.g. 1.8.3);
- _kabita/kabitā_ (“poetry”, “poem” e.g. 1.9.2);
- _kathā_ (“story, tale”, “telling”, “narration” e.g. 1.9.3, 1.10 cha, 1.43 ka);

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25 *kabita bibeka eka nahi morē / satya kahaū likhi kāgada korē*. It may be noted here that the noun _kāgada_ is a phonetic adaptation of the Persian _kāgāz_. For more on Perso-Arabic lexis in the Rāmcaritmānas, see Danuta Stasik, _Perso-Arabic Lexis in the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsīdās_, “Cracow Indological Studies” 2009. 11, pp. 67–86.

26 Ong, _Orality and Literacy_, pp. 31–33.


29 Graham, _Beyond the Written Word_, pp. 9.

30 Ong, _Orality and Literacy_, p. 33.
sambāda (“dialogue” e.g. 1.43 kha);
śrotā (“listener, hearer” 1.30.3, 1.30 kha, 1.39).

The poet also uses different forms of simple verbs, e.g.:

kaha- “to say”: kahaũ (e.g. 1.9.6), kahihaũ (e.g. 13.5), kahi (e.g. 1.10 kha),
kabha (e.g. 1.33.1);
gāvā- “to sing”: gāvahī (e.g. 1.38.1);
bakhā- “to expound; to describe, to give account of”: bakhāne (e.g. 1.6.1),
bakhānā (e.g. 1.14.1), bakhānī (e.g. 1.21.4);
barana- “to describe”: baranaũ (e.g. 1.2.1), baranaba (e.g. 1.37.1);
suna- “to hear; to listen (to)”: sunihahī (e.g. 1.8.4), sunata (e.g. 18.6),
suni (e.g. 1.8), sunahī (1.10 kha).

There are also different forms of verbal expressions with the most common of them “to tell a story”, e.g. in the form of karaũ kathā (1.31.2) or karata kathā (1.34.1). This lexis, which is typical not only of the sections of the poem analyzed for the purpose of this paper, should leave no doubt that the poet thinks in terms of the word that is almost exclusively spoken, chanted, sung or recited, and listeners, as Tulsī himself puts it, receive it “through the channel of [their] ears” (śravana maga; 1.36.4).

The poet discloses how his composition could come into actual existence: the story, which he narrates, has earlier been spread by word of mouth, repeated over and over again by different tellers. It will also continue to exist in the same way and the poem itself encourages its audiences (present and future) to do so in a number of phalasrūtis, lit. “fruit-hearing”, i.e. the verses enumerating the benefits of such an act.31 This never-ending process of transmission-through-repetition is essential, because a composition that is not performed – which means it has no audience – does not really exist!32 The genealogy of the text of the Rāmcaritmānas can serve as an excellent exemplification of how this process has been realized.

“This story was created by Śambhu
Who, showing Umā his grace, told it to her.
Śiv passed it on to Kākbuṣṇḍi,
Recognizing in him Rām’s devotee, a person deserving it.
Yājñavalkya received it from him33
And then sang it to Bharadvāj.

(…)
Afterwards I heard that story from my guru, in Sukarakhet.
But then I was only a child too unconscious to comprehend it.

(…) 
Nevertheless, the guru repeated it time after time,
And finally I grasped it a little, as much as my wits allowed for.
And now I shall compose it in the popular speech34 (…).”

(1.30. 2–3. 30 ka. 1.31.1)35

This passage, first of all, reveals the pedigree of the text and the line of its oral transmission but it also gives us an insight into other interrelated characteristics of orally based thought and its expression.36 These verses draw our attention to the integrating function of the spoken word that binds a speaker and his listeners into a close-knit group – into a community.37 In this particular context, it seems justified to advance the thesis that this passage together with the verses following it in fact offer a mythopoetic vision of the beginnings of the emergence of a community in which learning and sharing the story of Rām’s deeds finally leads to, to use Ong’s phrase:38 “achieving close, empathetic, communal identification” with it. It is knowing the story, “getting with it”39, that holds Tulśidās’s audience together. When we look at this phenomenon from the point of view of the poem’s religious role, we may say that this is exactly what establishes satsaṅg (1.39.4), lit. “association with the good”, or a congregation of worshippers, who are always eager to understand the story better, to gain a better insight into it, to talk about and discuss it (amukathan 1.41.2), once they have listened to it.40 Finally, this passage also demonstrates that memorizing a text, repeating it, before one can even understand it,41 can be, and usually is, a long, laborious process. However, its effects are bound to last thanks to the high level of its internalization by a number of individuals and constant repetition.

This thread, i.e. the idea of lasting, of continuity rather than change, brings to mind very important remarks by Philip Lutgendorf.42 He briefly discusses the meaning of the

34 For more on the meaning of the word bhāṣā as used in this line of the Rāmcaritmānas, see Devakīnandana Śrīvāsta, Tulśidās ki bhāṣā, Lakhnaū Viśvavidyālay, Lakhnaū 1957, pp. 1–2 and Stasik, Perso-Arabic Lexis, pp. 67–68. Cf. Śaraṇ, Mānas-pīyūṣ, pp. 459–460.
35 sambhū kīnha yaha carita suāvā / bahuri kṛpā kari umahi sunāvā // soi siva kāgabhusaṇḍhi dīnḥā / rāma bhagata adhikārī cīnḥā // tehi sana jāgabalika puni pāvā / tinhā puni bharadvāja prati gāvā // (…) maī puni niха gura sana sunī kathā so sūk rakhe / samujhi nahi tasi bālapana taba atti raheū aceta // (…) tadapi kahi gura bārahī bārā / samujhi parī kachu mati anusārā // bhāṣābadha karabī maī soī (…).
36 Ong, Orality and Literacy, esp. pp. 36–75.
37 Ong, Orality and Literacy, p. 72.
38 Ong, Orality and Literacy, p. 45.
40 Cf. Ong, Orality and Literacy, pp. 72–73.
41 Rocher, Orality and Textuality, pp. 8–10.
42 Lutgendorf, The Life of a Text, p. 23.
concept of “originality” in a “traditional” society that discourages a radical departure from established norms. However, this does not mean that their original reassertion or even reinterpretation may not be highly valued. Having in mind a performative aspect of verbal art, Lutgendorf refers to Bauman, noting how important an “appeal to tradition” is in such a society. It is also “often accompanied by a ‘disclaimer of originality’ (at least as regards the content to be communicated),” and they both prepare the audience for a “display of verbal art.” Lutgendorf is very cautious when applying “the problematic but utilitarian notion of India as a ‘traditional society’, as contrasted to the equally problematic category ‘modern’.” Yet, especially in the context of verbal art, it appears that it would be much more helpful and stimulating to refer to the oral mentality thesis, which seems to offer a broader perspective in approaching different forms of verbal art, and in general – of communication. What is more, such an approach introduces us to India not only as a culture with a high oral residue but also as a culture that is “significantly word-attentive in a person-interactive context.” This very characteristic of the Rāmcaritmānas brings us to the most significant feature of its narrative. With far-reaching implications not only for the poem’s understanding and interpretation but also for viewing it as a product of a culture that knows writing but carries a high, if not massive (!), oral residue, it should be of major importance; nevertheless, it is not treated as such – it is relatively rarely discussed among specialists.

The poem’s narrative is realized through a series of four dialogues (saṁvād) that are conceived as four embankments (ghāṭs) of the lake. This is possible due to an extension of the metaphor into a comprehensive allegory, in which the poem’s text is equated with the Mānas Lake and its waters.

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43 See e.g. 1.30.1–31.2 where Tulsīdās puts himself in the position of someone who only repeats an already existing story.

44 Lutgendorf, The Life of a Text, p. 23.

45 Ong, Orality and Literacy, p. 66 (cf. also pp. 42–43). Ong contrasts this type of culture against an object-attentive type, noting, however, that “words and objects are never totally disjunct: words represent objects, and perception of objects is in part conditioned by the store of words into which perceptions are nested. Nature states no ‘facts’: these come only within statements devised by human beings to refer to the seamless web of actuality around them.”

46 Ong, Orality and Literacy, pp. 35ff.


48 It is worth noting here that the metaphor in which speech is seen as water is present as early as in Vedic thought. I would like to thank Joanna Jurewicz for bringing this notion to me. For more details, see her: Tātaḥ kṣarati aksaram. A History of an Abstract Notion, “Indologica Taurinensia” 2012, 38, pp. 105–121.
“Exceptionally beautiful, excellent dialogues, created in deep contemplation,
Are the four delightful embankments of this sacred, delightful lake.
The seven books are beautiful stairs;
Seeing them with the eyes of wisdom, the heart rejoices.”

(1.36–37.1)\(^{49}\)

Let us recall here\(^{50}\) that these four dialogues forming the narrative frames of the poem are between: 1) Śiv and Pārvatī, 2) Bhuṣuṇḍi and Garuḍ, 3) Yājñavalkya and Bharadvāj, and 4) Tulsidās and his audience (sants).\(^{51}\) Philip Lutgendorf, referring to the poem’s commentarial tradition, rightly notes that such a presentation of the narrative “exemplifies a traditional pattern in Indian literature: the presentation of a text as an oral narration by a particular teller to a particular listener, within a carefully delineated context.”\(^{52}\) This corresponds with what Walter J. Ong said about the word in its natural, oral habitat where it “is a part of a real, existential present. Spoken utterance is addressed by a real, living person to another real, living person or real, living persons, at a specific time in a real setting (…).”\(^{53}\) The text of the Rāmacaritmānas demonstrates a highly successful attempt on the part of its author to recreate such contextualized, real dialogic space for his past and present audiences.\(^{54}\)

The stairs of the poem’s seven books lead to the waters of the story of Rām’s deeds, i.e. the poem itself as a whole. The way Tulsidās interweaves this image into the structure of the poem and the message it conveys leave no doubt that to commune with its text, i.e. to recite, chant, sing and read it or listen to it, is in fact an idiosyncratic initiation, the way to reach the core of the secret of the Rāmkathā. The further the story goes, the closer one is to fathoming this mystery.\(^{55}\)

Based on the metaphor identifying the poem with the (Mānas) lake (1.36.1ff), Tulsidās introduces another very suggestive image. It refers to the natural phenomenon of the water cycle, which serves as a source domain for expressing the never-ending transmission of the poem’s text,\(^{56}\) substantiating thus the poet’s firm conviction, expressed in one of the subsequent passages in Book One:

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\(^{49}\) suṭhi sundara sambada bara birāce buddhi bicāri / tei ehi pāvana subhaga sara ghāta manohara cāri // sapta prabandha subhaga sopānā / jīnāh nayaṇa nirakhata mana mānā.

\(^{50}\) See passage 1.30.2ff quoted above.

\(^{51}\) For more on the discussion of the narrative frames of the Rāmacaritmānas, see Lutgendorf, The Life of a Text, pp. 18–28.

\(^{52}\) Lutgendorf, The Life of a Text, p. 22.

\(^{53}\) Ong, Orality and Literacy, p. 99.

\(^{54}\) Cf. the concept of Bakhtin’s dialogism.

\(^{55}\) For further details, see Danuta Stasik, The Infinite Story. The Past and Present of the Rāmāyaṇas in Hindi, Manohar, Delhi 2009, pp. 82–84.

\(^{56}\) For a detailed discussion of this passage contents, see Lutgendorf, The Life of a Text, pp. 20–22.
“Hari is infinite, his story is endless;  
All pious people tell it and listen to it in many different ways.  
The appealing deeds of Ramchandra  
Cannot be all sung even in myriads of eons.”  

(RCM 1.140.3)\(^57\)

This reference allows Tulsīdās to visualize the circulation of the Rāmcaritmānas throughout the world (like waters are circulated throughout the Earth and its atmosphere), and this can be conveniently diagramed as in Figure 1 (see the end of the text).

4. Conclusions

Summing up the foregoing discussion, let us once again refer to Philip Lutgendorf’s important work The Life of a Text. Lutgendorf, discussing the Rāmcaritmānas’s narrative frame in the form of (four) dialogues, suggests, among other things, “an intimate and unbroken connection between oral and written literature, and a continuing awareness of the former as a source and model of the latter.”\(^58\) As has already been demonstrated, Tulsīdās did write his poem but his text was not meant to be read in solitude; it was, first of all, meant to be heard recited, sung or read, especially by others.\(^59\) In the context of the foregoing analysis, Lutgendorf’s very apt observation brings to light the existence of the interface between the oral (as well as the aural) and the written – to invert the title of a well-known work by Jack Goody.\(^60\) The overlapping of the two in the Rāmcaritmānas (with the visible predominance of the oral) proves that juxtaposing the oral and the written and scrutinizing them from the point of view of a “great divide” is not a justifiable course of action. The interrelated issue of the oral dimension of written scriptures, i.e. such texts as the Rāmcaritmānas, examined by W.A. Graham, also comes to prominence,\(^61\) supporting the need “to remove the prejudice”\(^62\) and the “presuppositions of modern Western book and print culture” that “have diminished our capacity to grasp the meaning of scripture as an active, vocal presence in the lives of individuals and communities.”\(^63\)

\(^{57}\) hari ananta harikathā anantā / kahāhī sunahī bahu bidhi saba santā // rāmacandra ke carita suhāe / kalapa koṭi lagi jāhī na gāe.  


\(^{60}\) Goody, The Interface Between the Written and the Oral.  

\(^{61}\) Cf. Graham, Beyond the Written Text, pp. 7–8.  

\(^{62}\) Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, p. 116, see the quotation above.  

\(^{63}\) Graham, Beyond the Written Text, p. 8.
The Rāmcaritmānas = the Mānas Lake fed with the ocean [waters] of the Vedas & Puranas

- rain water = narrating the story of Rām’s glory / deeds
- clouds = sadhus / sants
- it falls into the lake = listening to all, whatever is heard, goes through the channel of the ears to the mind / heart (mānas); the cycle begins again

Figure 1