

Ramcharitmanas

The *Ramcharitmanas* ('Lake of the Story of Rama') is a devotional epic poem composed in the Awadhi dialect of Hindi and comprising seven chapters. Containing nearly 11,000 verses, its predominant meter is the *chaupai* (a type of quatrain). While the deep source of Tulsi Das's epic poem is the Sanskrit version of the Ramayana, his text was perhaps more clearly influenced by later medieval Ramayanas that had sought to harmonise the story of an epic hero with the growing popularity of devotionism (*bhakti*). The key shift is to present Rama as a manifestation of Visnu rather than as merely a human hero. Also, devotion to Visnu/Rama is the key theme of the epic, which includes conversations in which various characters express their love for god.

After a long invocation at the beginning, the story begins with an explanation of why Visnu incarnates himself in times of crisis, such as now when the demons are destroying the lives of men. Rama is born, becomes a prince and marries Sita, but is then banished to the forest. Sita is then stolen by Ravanna, king of the demons. Rama, with Hanuman's help, rescues her and kills Ravanna. The story then ends with the birth of Rama's two sons. This abrupt ending is another significant narrative change from most tellings of the Rama story, in which Rama forces Sita to undergo a purity test by entering a fire.

Ramcharitmanas is often called the 'bible of north India,' and certainly no other Hindi text matches the literary skill and cultural status of this epic rendering of the Rama story. Tulsidas transformed the Sanskrit text so thoroughly that recitation of his poem became (and still is) an act of worship. The influence of this text is underpinned by the fact that it is the textual basis for an immensely popular dramatic enactment of the Rama story in north India.

Character

Type Rama is a complex character in any version of the Ramayana, but he is especially so in Tulsi Das's epic poem. Here he is a hybrid, both divine and human, and subject to competing impulses and desires. On the one hand, Rama is the embodiment of wisdom and perfection: the ideal man, ideal husband and ideal warrior. At the same time, Rama is described as an ordinary human, who falls in love, feels lonely and shows anger. He is both a supernatural being who flies through the air and unleashed magical weapons and a flawed man who makes bad decisions. With this ambiguity in his character, Rama is both the embodiment of god and the perfected man. He is the object of worship not in spite of his complexity but because of it.

Activities In an early demonstration of his supernatural strength, Rama wins the hand of Sita in a bow contest. Various princes are invited to string a mighty bow, with the promise that anyone who can will marry the princess. Several candidates try and fail, before Rama steps up and actually bends the bow so far that it snaps in two. Later, when he is forced to leave the palace and enter the forest, he magnanimously allows his stepbrother Bharata to rule the kingdom in his absence. Later still, when Ravana, king of the demons, steals Sita, an eagle named Jatayu attempts to stop him but is mortally injured in the process. Rama then comforts the dying eagle in a show of compassion. Now Rama becomes a warrior, intent on killing Ravana, who has taken Sita to the island of Lanka. Mobilising an army of monkeys and bears, Rama builds a bridge to the island and crosses. In a series of battles over many days, Rama succeeds in defeating the giant demon and brother of Ravana, named Kumbhakarna. Next Rama kills another brother of Ravana named Indrajit, who possesses magical weapons. Finally, Rama faces his ultimate enemy, the ten-headed Ravana, who sprouts a new head each time one is cut off. In the end, Rama shows great courage and, firing an arrow given to him by Siva, achieves his goal of destroying the evil demon and rescuing Sita.

Illustrative moments One moment that clearly illustrates Rama's human-yet-divine character is his acceptance of his banishment to the forest. The situation is complex. His father made a foolish promise to Rama's stepmother that she could have two wishes. She uses one of those to have Rama sent away into the forest so that her own son could sit on the throne. Although his father pleads with

him to stay, Rama accepts this banishment because not to do so would compromise his father's integrity. That is, in order to uphold his father's promise he must give up his right to the throne. It is a supreme sacrifice, but one which he makes with consummate humility and equanimity. At no point does he criticise his stepmother or even hint at his father's foolhardy nature.

Another illustrative moment is his winning the hand of Sita in marriage. The royal princess is offered to anyone who can string the magical bow of god Siva. After several candidates try and fail, Rama steps forward and effortlessly strings the adamantite bow, and actually snaps it in two. The sound of the snapping bow disturbs the deep meditation of the sage Parasurama (another avatar of Visnu and form of Rama). Angered, the sage enters the scene and demands to know who dared destroy Siva's bow. Rama speaks softly to him, and the sage realises the divine nature of this character.