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TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONVENTIONAL IMAGE OF GOD IN TULSIDĀS' RĀMCHARITMĀNAS

Abstract:

Tulsidās is one of the prominent poet-saint of India and *Rāmcharitmānas* is one of his masterpieces. It has been translated in many Indian and non-Indian languages. The success of the work can be measured with its utmost popularity even today, and it can be found even in non-Hindu families. The work is a treatise on the utopian society and governance that deals with the general socio-political and religious issues that are still the same. It connotes the theologies that prove guidelines to the ruler as well as the ideal citizen. It emphasizes the duty that needs to be performed by an individual in the society. It even throws light on the prevalent vices of medieval era that are almost the same even today. It projects the novel image of God, unlike the one that had been projected by the earlier upper Sanskritized class of the society. Tulsidās presents the protagonist Rāma of *Rāmcharitmānas* as an ideal. His God differs from the earlier one that lived in the high temples covered in to precious jewels. In sharp contrast to this, Tulsidās present Him as the God of common man. This transformed image of God affected a lot to the contemporary scenario.

Key Words: Transformed image of God, Sanskritized class, utopian state. Vernacular, Vedic religion.

Introduction

Rāmcharitmānas is often hailed as the bible of India. The time when this masterpiece was written faced many socio-religious and political upheavals. Social and political ways of medieval era were very much overshadowed by the religious ways as propagated by the Sanskritized class

of the time. As noted in the works of Romila Thapar, religion was degenerated and needed reform. Hence, the medieval Indian history is marked by the hidden stream of social reformation and change. Mainly the literature of the time reflected this scenario. The main two divisions of reformers were Āchārya tradition and Poet-saints. They belonged to different strata of society who mainly endeavoured to simplify the religious philosophies and tried to clear the mist that had darkened the religious theologies and were difficult to understand by the common man of society. Tulsidās' *Rāmcharitmānas* is one such attempt that is denotatively a religious gospel but connotes the notion of a social treatise. While reading Tulsidās' creations one can find that for him term 'Religion' had a profound meaning, as he realized that religion was the only medium that could be successfully utilized as a hidden weapon in the reformation of social life that mainly relied on the traditional Vedic religion, for it could not be easily challenged. Tulsidās knew that the most important factor that had affected the socio-religious scenario was the role played by Sanskritized upper class of society. There were many philosophies in Sanskrit that were not the cup of common man. Some of the main issues that had darkened the mist around religious theologies were formed God and formless God, Shālvāits and Vāshnavāits conflict, caste bias and untouchability, etc. had already perplexed the medieval psyche.

Tulsidās tried to resolve the issues in his *Rāmcharitmānas*. He tried to resolve the long discussed conflicts of theologies and gave midway. His only intention was to shift the focus of people from such trivial issues that hindered their path of devotion. Instead he emphasized on the devotion by true heart. He marginalized the means of devotion and made people concentrate on the devotion of God. The best of his contribution was in reshaping and representing the image of God in a new way that was the God of common man. Unlike conventional Sanskritized ceremonialism he advocated devotion with guileless heart. In his writings he never questioned the authenticity of ancient scriptures.

Removing the sway of the Sanskritized monopoly

Tulsidās' main intention was to remove the sway of Sanskritized class that had made religion their monopoly and utilized it for their narrow selfish ends. For this, he utilized vernacular that was the language used by common man, as a result the religious philosophies very much simplified and could be easily understood by the common man of the medieval society. However, the best of his contributions is the transformation in the conventional image of God presented by the Sanskritized class of society, making it very earthly in form. As noted by S.P.Bahadur,

“Godliness Manifested into Worldliness”.² The God that was above the understanding of common man, and that was praised in the complex Shlokas or Mantras was made handy by the help of simple hearted devotion. The image of God in the works of Tulsidās was the God of common man that dwelled in the forest with the untouchable tribes, accepting even the leftovers of forest dwellers i.e. Shabri. In *Rāmcharitmānas*, Tulsidās described the exile of Rāma in the forest, where He met Kevat, Guhurāja, Sugriva, Hanumān, Sabri, Jatāyu, etc. They all belonged to different tribes that were deprived the equal status in the regular civilization. In *Rāmcharitmānas*, Rāma meets them and embraces them equally. There is not a slight reference of prejudice by Rāma for them. This in fact, indicated the pivotal change that was needed in the contemporary society as the vices of untouchability and rigid caste bias had clutched the overall growth.

The Image of Rāma by Tulsidās

The image of Rāma as presented by Tulsidās is very much humane. While reading *Rāmcharitmānas* one can find that the protagonist Rāma suffers from domestic, social, religious problems accepting them to resolve. Often he is found fixed in the different frames of relationships i.e. son, husband, brother, king, father, etc. Performing these roles assigned to him with utmost accuracy. He is endowed with the virtues that can be guidelines for the reader, at the same time this makes him more humanistic in tone. The message of Tulsidās is very clear that though being an incarnation of almighty, Rāma was bound by the duties according to roles assigned to Him. According to Tulsidās, every individual has duty to be performed in order to create a utopian state.

Bhakti as the simplified mode of worship

Along with the transformation in the image of God, Tulsidās also shows the path of devotion as the correct mode of worship. He presents different characters that are the devotees of Rāma and worship Him in whatever way they please. All these ways are very much simple done with guileless heart, offering him their services and simple gifts. By this he suggests that God does not impress with complex ceremonies or precious gifts. Neither has he divided his creation in to narrow walls of castes or creeds. This entire universe is his creation and he loves all equally. This tone of equalitarianism in his theology affected a lot to the people of the time. Many poet saints from down trodden class and even great women saints came forward with the masterpieces that are praised even today with the same zeal. Tulsidās gave the concept of nine types of Bhakti that he termed as नवधा भक्ति and emphasized on Bhakti by service to God or दास्य भक्ति. He even exemplified these form through the characters of Hanumān, Bharata, Lakshmana, etc. For he

believed that true devotion is doing all worldly affairs with complete detachment and by keeping God at the centre offering the same to almighty. Tulsidās also states that means of devotion may be different but one should not focus on the means, as they just help us to unite with God. They are like different way that reaches to the same destination. In stead one should concentrate on the upliftment of soul through purification of heart. Hanumān's worship that later developed into the form of music known as हनुमंत मत्³ that advocated worship of God in a form of musical recitation, in the same manner Lakshmana worshipped Rāma by offering his services, Bharata's anchoretic way of living, Gugurāja's guileless offerings, Sabri's simple hearted devotion, etc. At the end all such efforts detached the mode of worship from its straightjacketed conventional ceremonialism transforming the image of God presented by the Sanskritized class of society. It was gradual evolution in the image of God and the mode of worship. The Vedic Gods were mainly related to nature and their mode of worship was done mainly in group under the observation of Purohites. Later the image also changed as the Gods became more realistic and humane. The mode became individualized especially after temple tradition.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that the complexity of labyrinth presented by the Sanskritized class of the medieval society had created mist around religious theologies, as a result the image of God became more authoritative. People worshipped with fear instead of devotion. The rigid caste bias had worsened the scenario. The rise of Buddhism, Jānism, Islām promoted monotheism and their ideal of universal brotherhood attracted the downtrodden class of Vedic Brhamanic religion. This compelled the saints of Vedic Brahminic religion to retrospect and reform. Soon there was zeal of reform and earlier religious philosophies were drastically simplified along with the image of God that was a God of common man as presented by Tulsidās in *Rāmcharitmānas*.

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