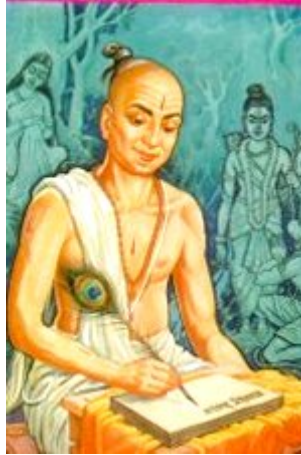


Tulasidas



'Tulasi Ramayana' is a very famous and great epic of North India. It relates the story of Sri Rama.

It was written by Goswami Tulasidas. (Goswami means one who has renounced the world and has become a sanyasi, that is, an ascetic.) That is why it was popularly known as Tulasi Ramayana.

Tulasidas gave it the title, 'Ramacharitamanasa'.

Valmiki, the first poet, told the story of Sri Rama in his 'Ramayana'; after him hundreds of poets have retold it in their own way. 'Tulasi Ramayana' is one of the most popular and venerated Ramayanas.

Many poets of India were saints. They were great scholars as well as great devotees. They lived as Rishis or Sages. Goswami Tulasidas too was a great scholar well versed in Vedic lore, philosophy and mythology. People say that Tulasidas, by virtue of his perfect devotion, was so fortunate as to meet Anjaneya, the renowned servant of Sri Rama. It is said Anjaneya helped him to see with his own eyes Sri Rama and Lakshmana. Tulasidas declared: 'Bhakti is the only way leading to God's grace. Sri Rama is the

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Supreme God (Parabrahma). He is the ideal man. And he is the Lord of this world. His words and deeds themselves form the code of human conduct in this world.'

In his 'Ramayana' Tulasidas has narrated the story of Sri Rama; he has also taught the principles of right living through different characters. The lessons taught in that work are valid to this day.

The epic gives beautiful pictures of the right relation between father and children, and of the affection among brothers. It also shows how the husband and the wife, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, should conduct themselves. Tulasidas describes the affection of a teacher for his disciples and the respect of the disciples for their teacher. But his poem is not just a moral piece. Tulasidas has narrated the story of Sri Rama in a moving and delightful way. As we read it we feel as if we see Rama, Seetha and Lakshmana before our very eyes.

Opinions differ regarding the exact date and place of birth of Sri Tulasidas. The majority of scholars hold that Sri Tulasidas was born in Rajapur of Uttar Pradesh in the year 1544 of the Vikrama Era (that is, 1488 A. D.). Some scholars say that he was born in 1532 A. D. Others mention different other dates also.

Atmaram Dube of Rajapur was a great scholar in Vedic literature and astrology. His wife was Hulasibai. They were happy in every way but had no children. They worshipped Anjaneya and, prayed to him with devotion to bless them with a son. One auspicious day Hulasibai gave birth to a beautiful baby son.

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The newborn baby started saying 'Ram, Ram' instead of crying. So it was given the name Rama Bola (one who said Ram). So goes a story.

Tularam was a baby of a few days when he lost his mother. His father also forsook him. People give many reasons for this. Here is one story. Pandit Dube cast the horoscope of his son. All the planets were favorable. But the child's star? The star was 'Moola'. The father thought, 'This is a bad star. It will bring me bad luck. I must go away. Otherwise I am doomed.'

He left the town once and for all. The unfortunate child was brought up by his old grand-mother. Thus Tularam lost the love and the care of both the father and the mother.

He became the favorite of all his neighbors. They tended him, and played with him, gave him something to eat and blessed him.

When Tularam was able to stand on his legs, he began to go round the town begging for food. He lived on whatever he got.

In one of his songs Tulasidas recalls how exceedingly difficult it was for him, as a boy, to get even four grains of gram.

After a few years his grandmother passed away. Then he became the child of the whole town. The devotees gave him to eat whatever was offered to God and that was his daily food. "The temple is my shelter. God is my father and mother," Tulasidas has said. "Anjaneya is my father who fed and brought me up" says Tulasidas recollecting those childhood days; he then actually lived in a temple of Anjaneya and every day partook of the food offered to God there.

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Naraharidas was a reputed scholar, philosopher and storyteller (he gave discourses on mythological stories of devotion). Once he came to Rajapur. He stayed in the temple of Anjaneya. At the request of the people he began a series of discourses on the Ramayana.

Tularam was filled with pleasurable excitement. Discourses of this type, which blended music and literature, were a feast to him. He used to attend them every day without fail. Devotion to Rama lay like a seed in his heart; as he listened to the discourses, it began to sprout.

Every day the boy sat right in front of Naraharidas and listened to the discourse with rapt attention. and also the boy joined the general Bhajan, singing melodiously. Naraharidas grew interested in the lad. He saw the boy's handsome looks, his delicate figure, large eyes and prominent forehead, and the bright radiant face. He recognized the mysterious power in the boy. He pitied him when he learnt that he was an orphan. One day he asked the boy. "Will you be my disciple?" Tularam touched his feet with reverence and burst into tears.

Naraharidas lifted him up and patted him on the back.

From that day Tularam became a disciple of Pandit Naraharidas. In one of his songs Tulasidas has said of this incident, 'I got for my Master God Parameswara Himself in human form.'

After his discourses in Rajapur, Naraharidas set out for another place. Tularam bowed to Lord Anjaneya and followed his master.

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Wherever Naraharidas went Tularam went with him. His duty was to sing Ram Bhajan before any discourse began. He sang melodiously. The whole day was spent in studies. The master taught him various subjects like the Vedas, the Upanishads, philosophy, mythology and languages - Sanskrit and Prakrit. Bhajans were held at night. Thus they traveled far and wide for fourteen years and came to Soro in Uttar Pradesh. By that time Tularam had mastered all subjects. He was acquainted with the life of the people. He could sing much better than his master. He could not only give discourses on the Ramayana, but also compose poems. Naraharidas felt extremely happy at his disciples, accomplishments.

Tularam had attained scholarship in all branches of learning; the teacher Naraharidas himself arranged for his marriage.

Tularam married Ratnavali, a very beautiful and accomplished daughter of a Brahmin by name Deenabandhu Pathak.

Parting from his master who loved him more than a father was very painful to Tularam. Yet bound by the master's wish and his own duty he became a householder.

Tularam had everything-good looks, youth, education, honor and a good income too. Rich people used to invite him now and then to their houses, honor him and offer him money.

His wife Ratnavali was a beautiful and a virtuous girl. Tularam loved her very much. They led a happy life. No wonder that, in his state of joy and contentment, he thought less and less about God.

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He loved his wife so much that for years he did not send her to her parents' house at all.

One day Pandit Tularam went to neighboring village to give a discourse.

The same day Ratnavali's brother came to see her. Ratnavali had not as much as glanced at her parents' house ever since her marriage; when she saw her brother she remembered her parent and began to weep.

The brother in fact had come only to take her home. He comforted his sister. He said, "Come, let us go home sister you can stay with us for a few days and come back. Mother is longing to see you". Ratnavali loved her parents' home so much that for a moment she decided to go. But she hesitated. She said, "My husband is not at home. How can I come without his consent? Besides he cannot bear to be without me event for a short time. Let him come home; you can talk to him about this. I too will request him. Then we can go."

But the brother argued with her and persuaded her. She locked up the house and left the key with the neighbor and said: "Please give this key to my husband when he comes home, and tell him that I am returning the day after tomorrow." She then went with her brother.

It was dark when Pandit Tularam came home. When the neighbor gave him the key and his wife's message, he became very angry. Without his wife the house looked bleak as a cave. Every hour his boredom grew. He lay down but could not sleep. It was past

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midnight. He' decided to go to his father-in-law's house. And he started at once.

It was the month of Shravana. The sky was heavily overcast with clouds. It was dark all around. He had just stepped out of his house when there was a heavy downpour of rain accompanied by thunder and lightning.

But Tularam did not change his mind. He walked on getting wet in the rain, and came to the banks of the river Ganga. The river was in full floods. He asked the ferryman to take him across the river.

"What? You wish to cross the flood, in this rain and wind? Impossible," said! the ferryman.

At the sight of the racing waters of the Ganga in floods, Tularam's heart sank. But the infatuation for his wife drove him on. He gathered courage, tucked up his dhoti firmly and jumped into the river. He swam against the current and reached the other bank.

He did not stop even to wring –his clothes.

He raced to his wife's house and shouted, 'Ratnavali, Ratnavali'.

Ratnavali wondered who could have come in such heavy rain. She opened the door and there stood Tularam! His clothes were all wet and water was dripping. He was shivering with cold.

Ratnavali was amazed. She was also happy to think of his intense love for her. At the same time she pitied his condition. Could he not stay alone for one day? How foolhardy it was to swim across the river in high floods! The thought made her angry.

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She said, "What can I say, my lord? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You have come running after me! If you had the same intense love for Sri Rama, He Himself would have appeared to you. Then you would have been saved from the cycle of births."

These words of his wife struck Tularam like a thunderbolt. Drenched in the rain he was shivering, but now he began to perspire. His mind reeled and his heart was in turmoil. The veil of attachment that had covered his devotion was torn asunder.

He went away without looking back even once.

What happened to Ratnavali after, Tulasidas left her? We do not know. Tulasidas has not mentioned her name anywhere in his books.

'Is there another fool like me? Entangled in the love of my wife, I forgot Lord Rama and I have just wasted all my time! Never again shall I forget Sri Rama and never shall I think of woman. Sri Rama is everything to me. So resolving, Tularam became 'Tulasidas' from that day.

What his master had been saying in his discourses came back to his mind: 'Sri Rama is all merciful and all-powerful. He is so magnanimous that he will never forsake his devotees.'

-Well, then will Sri Rama forsakes me?

Tulasidas's, mind was made up. He now traveled to Chitrakoota.

On his way he visited many holy places. He was in the company of devotees and saints.

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What worry could an ascetic have? Where he halts is his town, where he rests is his home. The devotees of Rama are his relations. The earth is his bed and the sky is the roof.

Tulasidas formed a brotherhood of the devotees of Rama. He sang and composed songs. He wrote books and preached to people.

Though he was learned in Sanskrit, he composed poetry in the languages the people spoke. They were only different dialects of Hindi used in North India. He wrote for the common man and not for the learned, it was in the languages actually used by the people that he gave talks and discourses glorifying Bhakti.

'Sri Rama is the Parabrahma. He is all-powerful. He is Purushothama (The Man Supreme). His deeds, word manners and conduct alone are the models of an ideal life. Singing hymns in His honor as his servants is the on way to attain His grace and a salvation. Knowing Him to be their master, the duty of human beings is to offer their services to Him.' This is the sum and substance of the Bhakti cult of Tulasidas.

After some time Tulasidas began to think of leaving Chitrakoota. This was because he had a feeling that he would not be able to see Sri Rama there. So he went to Ayodhya, the birth place of Rama. For a long time he did 'tapas' (leading a very strict life, giving up all pleasures and devoting all the time to the contemplation of God) there. But even there he did not get the vision of Sri Rama. His mind was not at ease. Day by day his desire to see Sri Rama grew more and more intense.

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One day it suddenly flashed to his mind that God Anjaneya's grace 'was essential for him to see Sri Rama. Yes. Anjaneya was the greatest devotee of Sri Rama. Only he could help Tulasidas see Sri Rama. So the first thing was, to see Anjaneya.

People say that Tulasidas got the opportunity of seeing Anjaneya because of the help of a Brahmarakshasa (a spirit under curse).

Kashi (Banares) is a holy place on the banks of the sacred river Ganga. The famous temple of Lord Vishweshwara is in Kashi. And it is also the home of Hindu culture. In one part of Kashi there was a temple of Anjaneya. Tulasidas made it his home. He used to bathe in the Ganga every day and then go to the Vishweshwara temple to offer prayers; thereafter for hours he would be immerse in meditation. In the evening he gave discourses. In this way a few years passed.

One day as usual Tulasidas poured water out of his vessel at the foot of a tree.

As Tulasidas was returning with his head bowed, suddenly a Brahmarakshasa appeared before him, and saluted him.

The water was sanctified by the touch of Tulasidas; it fell on the rakshasa and he was freed from a curse. Full of gratitude the liberated spirit said to Tulasidas, "Please tell me, sir, what I can do for you."

There was but one wish that haunted Tulasidas day and night and that was to see Sri Rama by winning the grace of Anjaneya.

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So he said to the Brahmarakshasa "Please help me to meet God Anjaneya."

The spirit said: "An ugly old man comes to listen to your discourses in the temple every day. Probably you have not noticed him. He is the first to come and the last to go. His looks are disgusting. But he is none other than Anjaneya. Look for him."

So Anjaneya himself had been attending his discourses! Tulasidas jumped with joy.

In the evening Tulasidas went to the discourse hall full of devotion.

The ugly old man was already there in a corner.

Tulasidas felt like running to him, and falling at his feet and crying out, "Show me Lord Sri Rama." But he checked himself. The discourse began.

The entire discourse that evening seemed to be meant only for that old man. All the time Tulasidas's eyes were fixed on him.

The discourse concluded with Ram Bhajan; the audience dispersed. The old man also slowly got up and began to walk away. Tulasidas followed him.

The old man left the main road and took a path leading to a forest. Tulasidas noiselessly walked behind him, praying within himself to Anjaneya.

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They were now in the heart of the forest. Tulasidas suddenly ran up to the old man and fell at his feet, praying: "My master, please show me Sri Rama. Lord Anjaneya, have mercy on me."

The old man pretended to know nothing. Shaking him off he said, "What is all this? I am not Anjaneya. Let go my feet."

But Tulasidas persisted.

I know it all now. You are Hanumantha, the trusted servant of Sri Rama. I won't leave your feet unless you reveal your true self to me and fulfill my wish, come what will. Even death" said Tulasidas. He implored and entreated him in several ways.

Then Anjaneya appeared in his true form and said, "Look, hide yourself behind this bush. Sri Rama and Lakshmana will come this way shortly. Then you can see them."

There are several stories about how Tulasidas saw Sri Rama and Lakshmana.

Tulasidas felt immensely happy and once again touched Anjaneya's feet in reverence. He danced in ecstasy chanting Sri Rama's sacred name and crouched behind the bush as directed by Anjaneya. He was all eyes as he watched.

Tulasidas waited and waited. Two princes on horse-back passed that way. Tulasidas sat there, his mind fixed on Lord Rama. But Sri Rama and Lakshmana did not come at all. After a long, time

Anjaneya appeared in the disguise of the same old man. Tulasidas once again clasped his knees and prayed: "Lord Anjaneya, I have waited so far, but Sri Rama and Lakshmana haven't come

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Don't you pity me even now? Won't you show me Sri Rama and Lakshmana no at least?" Anjaneya said with a smile: "Did you not see two princes on horseback? They were Sri Rama and Lakshmana." Tulasidas was very unhappy as he realized his own ignorance. "Miserable that I am, my own eyes turned out to be my enemies," he said weeping. Once again he prayed to Anjaneya.

He seemed to hear Anjaneya speaking from the sky: 'Go to Ayodhya; you will have darshan of Sri Rama, Seetha and Lakshmana in their gracious form.'

There are other stories also about how Tulasidas was able to see Sri Rama and Lakshmana.

It is said that after some years Tulasidas had another opportunity of seeing Sri Rama; it is also said Sri Rama asked him to put a mark of sandal paste on his forehead.

There is an episode in the 'Ramacharitamanasa'. When, after crossing the river Yamuna, Sri Rama, Seetha and Lakshmana step into Chitrakoota, a young hermit prostrates at their feet. He is overcome with devotion and forgets himself. Seetha Devi bestows her blessings on him.

It is said that, at this point, Tulasidas recalls how he had seen Sri Rama; the young hermit, it is said, is Tulasidas's picture of himself.

Tulasidas left Kashi and went again to Ayodhya. While he was in Kashi he seems to have composed two poems; 'Janaki Mangala' and 'Parvathi Mangala'. In Ayodhya he did rigorous tapas in, utter

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solitude for some time. Then he' made up his mind to write the 'Ramacharitamanasa'. He himself saw Sri Rama, Seetha and Lakshmana in this epic; and he enabled the readers, too' to see them.

Tulasidas has depicted most effectively in his 'Ramacharitamanasa' how by his own example Sri Rama, the God born as man, set an ideal before the people of this world. Just as Sri Rama is sketched as an ideal leader and king, Seetha Devi is portrayed as a gem of ideal womanhood. She shines as a bright lamp placed on the threshold, illuminating two homes - that of her parents and that of her husband. She was dear not only to her parents but also to her servants.

At the time of sending her to her husband's house, all the queens and their companions were sad. The very parrots in golden cages cried, "O, where is Seetha?"

This is just one example to show how Tulasidas's picture of the simplicity and goodness of Seetha Devi is different from Valmiki's picture. There are some very touching episodes in the 'Ramacharitamanasa', which are not found in other Ramayanas.

These delicate flowers of the poet's imagination give forth a sweet fragrance of Bhakti.

One such episode reveals Guha's Bhakti. He is the chieftain of the boatmen and a staunch devotee of Sri Rama.

When Sri Rama, Seetha and Lakshmana come to the forest Guha serves them in many ways.

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The next day Guha is to ferry them across the river. Sri Rama is about to step into the boat. Then Guha behaves in a way which at first seems strange. He says to Rama, 'My Lord, pardon me; I cannot allow you to get into the boat until I wash your feet. The mere touch of the dust of your feet turned a stone into a woman, the wife of a sage. What am I to do if my boat turns into a woman at the touch of the dust of your feet?' (Ahalya had become a stone by a curse; the divine touch of Sri Rama made her again a woman).

Tulasidas has depicted this situation very touchingly. In the words of Guha, a fine sense of humor, innocent devotion and Rama's divinity are all reflected at the same time.

Tulasidas has also brought out Bharatha's intense love for his brother, the affection of Dasharatha for his son, the simplicity of Sumitra. Rama's magnanimity and grace in his treatment of Shabari and Jatayu and many other such virtues.

The scholars of Tulasidas's times thought that epics ought to be composed only in Sanskrit. Tulasidas knew that scholars would object that his epic was in Hindi, the language of the common man. But he believed that good poetry, like the sacred river Ganga, should be accessible to one and all and should reach everyone.

On the whole, Tulasidas's 'Ramacharitamanasa' preaches the traditional values of truth and righteousness, but presents them in greater splendour in a new context. When people had lost courage and were groping in darkness, Tulasidas's 'Ramacharita manasa' appeared as a guiding light of culture; it showed them the divine figure of Sri Rama in the bright light of Bhakti.

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Tulasidas thought that Kashi was the best place for the publication of his work. So he went again to Kashi. In the same cottage, the old activities of the day and the evening discourses were resumed. But now he recited passages from his own 'Ramacharitamanasa' and explained them.

The scholarship and genius of Goswami Tulasidas won the admiration of the people of Kashi.

They regarded him as the incarnation of Valmiki. Several scholars became his disciples. Thousands of people realized the greatness of Bhakti and became devotees of Sri Rama.

Has there been an age without the wicked and the jealous? There is a story about how the attempts of such people to discredit the 'Ramacharitamanasa' ended only in confirming its greatness.

The detractors joined hands. They planned to insult the 'Ramacharitamanasa' and destroy its popularity. One day a conference of scholars was held in the temple of Lord Vishwanatha. All reputed works of literature, religion and philosophy were read out. The 'Ramacharitamanasa' also was recited. Then all the works were arranged in a pile. The crooked fellows put the copy of the 'Ramacharitamanasa' at the bottom, as a deliberate insult. But the next morning when the doors of the temple were opened the 'Ramacharita manasa' was found on top of all the books. Then everybody realized the merit of the 'Ramacharitamanasa' and the greatness of Tulasidas.

Another such incident happened.

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The opponents of Tulasidas joined together. They took a copy of the 'Ramacharitamanasa' to Madhusudan Saraswathi, a great master and exponent of Advaita philosophy and said, "Please tell us what you think of this book, sir."

Madhusudan Saraswathi was an Advaiti, Tulasidas did not belong to this school of philosophy. So the crooked fellows thought that Madhusudan Saraswathi would surely condemn that book. Then they could easily carry on their propaganda against the work. But what happened was entirely different.

Pandit Madhusudan Saraswathi read the entire work, then he said: "There is a plant called Tulasi in the garden of poetry. Sri Rama is the bee buzzing about the flowers of poetic beauty that have blossomed on its branches."

The reputation of Goswami Tulasidas was not limited to Kashi only. It spread all over North India. Many Muslims also became Tulasidas's followers and worshipped Rama. There is a story associated with Emperor Jahangir. The fame of Tulasidas reached the ears of Jahangir. He wanted to see Tulasidas.

When Tulasidas visited Agra, the emperor invited him and treated him with great respect.

The emperor said, "I hear that you perform miracles. Let me see a miracle."

Tulasidas modestly replied, "I don't perform miracles. All powers belong to Sri Rama."

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The emperor was stubborn. He said, "I won't let you go until you show me a miracle." He imprisoned him in the fort of Salimgad (Gwalior). 'Everything is Anjaneya's will,' said Tulasidas and sat down with folded hands.

All of a sudden a band of monkeys burst into the palace. They rushed into the queens' apartment and caused great havoc. They were not afraid of even the soldiers. It was only after Tulasidas was released that the emperor was free from their menace.

From that time Tulasidas and his followers were never troubled by the emperor.

So goes a story.

Historians say that, during this period, Tulasidas wrote 'Satsai' - a book of 700 verses.

Gradually the number of followers of Tulasidas grew enormously. Poets like Nabhadass, Pranchand Chowhan, Hridayaram and Agradas became his disciples, too. Inspired by his preaching's and ideal life they devoted themselves to the task of spreading the cult of Rama Bhakti.

Once Tulasidas came to Mathura, the centre of Krishna's devotees. Goswami went to the temple of Krishna. He was greeted and welcomed warmly by the holy men there. They said to him, "Sir, we believe that you are a matchless devotee of Sri Rama. Is it true you never sing of any Gods other than Sri Rama?"

Tulasidas said, "No. It is not so. In fact Sri Rama is Sri Krishna." And then he composed on the spot a song on Sri Krishna and sang it.

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Though it was on Sri Krishna, the attributes were those of Sri Rama. The saints and sages gathered there were highly pleased. It is said that a miracle took place. Even as Tulasidas's song ended the idol of Sri Krishna (with a flute in his hand) in the inner shrine appeared as the idol of Sri Rama holding a bow in his hand.

People who witnessed this sight stood amazed. They were full of praise for Tulasidas who showed that Sri Rama and Sri Krishna were one.

After this Tulasidas composed his 'Krishna Geetavali'.

Goswami Tulasidas had visited all the holy places. He spent his last days in Kashi. It is said that in his last days he suffered from pain in the arms. Having lived a fruitful and saintly life of 136 years

Tulasidas passed away in 1680 of the Vikrama Era (i.e. 1623 A. D.) in Asighat of Kashi.

Scholars say that Goswami Tulasidas has written 37 books. But only 12 of them have survived.

Tulasidas was a great man. He suffered much hardship from his early years. He did not know the care and affection of father and mother. He was brought up by the charity of the people. Even after he became a sanyasi, difficulties did not cease. When he settled down in Kashi, many blamed him, and many made fun of him. But he was always patient and calm. Once he said, "Some say that Tulasi does bad deeds. Some call him a big cheat. Some others say that he truly is a devotee of Rama. I can bear all comments. My mind is

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untroubled. Whatever is to happen to Tulasi, good or bad, is in the hands of Rama."

Kindness and courage were blended in him A Brahmin, it seems, had done something bad. So he came to Kashi to purify himself. The orthodox people kept him at a distance as an outcaste. But Tulasidas treated him as one of his own people. He knew full well that the orthodox people would be furious; he knew he would have to face severe criticism. Yet he ate the food prepared by that Brahmin.

Tulasidas was a very great scholar. He had made a profound study of Indian philosophy and literature. But his scholarship did not make him arrogant. For him meditation on Rama was more important than all other things. Whatever the difficulties one should not lose zest in life. One should always do good to others treating all as the children of God, making no distinction of caste, status or rank. This was the way he showed to others and this was how he himself lived.

Tulasidas showed the way of Bhakti. It is a good way of life even today. The characters he has sketched such as Sri Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Seetha, Anjaneya, Vibheeshana, Jatayu, Guha and Sugreeva are ideal figures of Hindu culture. We should rejoice that such a great poet and a saint of such high order as Goswami Tulasidas was born in India, and lived and carried on his mission here.

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