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**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.

Havelock¹

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 Wittgenstein²

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 Goody⁹ and Walter J. Ong (with his most widely known work *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

¹ Eric Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1986, p. 74.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford 2009, p. 116 (§ 340).

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.

⁴ Also called Communication Theory, Literacy Thesis and Orality/Literacy Theory.

⁵ Grzegorz Godlewski, *Słowo – pismo – sztuka słowa. Perspektywy antropologiczne*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa: 2008, pp. 151–153 (*Word – Writing – the Art of Word. Anthropological Perspectives*, in Polish).

⁶ Esp. Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, Toronto University Press, Toronto–Buffalo–London 1951.

⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Toronto University Press, Toronto–Buffalo–London 1962.

⁸ E.g. Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1963 and Havelock, *The Muse*.

⁹ E.g. Jack Goody and Ian Watt, *The Consequences of Literacy*, in: *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1968, pp. 27–84; Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977; Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organisation of Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, and Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987.

¹⁰ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Routledge, London and New York 2002; 1st published 1982.

¹¹ For more see Khosrow Jahandarie, *Spoken and Written Discourse. A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective*, Ablex, Stamford 1999 and Godlewski, *Słowo*, p. 156.

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 *Rāmkaṭhā*, 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

¹² Cf. Godlewski, *Ślowo*, p. 155.

¹³ For the titles of some earlier works concerned with African, Chinese and Arabic oral traditions, see Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 28–29.

¹⁴ C.J. Fuller, *Orality, Literacy and Memorization: Priestly Education in Contemporary South India*, “Modern Asian Studies” 2001, 35, 1, p. 1.

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*, pp. 110–122 and William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, pp. 67–78.

¹⁶ Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text. Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1992. Also see Philip Lutgendorf, *The View from the Ghats: Traditional Exegesis of a Hindu Epic*, “Journal of Asian Studies” 1989, 48, pp. 272–288 and Linda Hess *Staring at Frames Till They Turn into Loops: An Excursion through Some Worlds of Tulsidas*, in: *Living Banaras: Hindu Religion in Cultural Context*, ed. Bradely R. Hertel and Cynthia Ann Humes, Manohar, Delhi 1998, pp. 73–102.

¹⁷ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, Waveland Press, Prospect Heights Ill. 1977.

¹⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 31–56.

¹⁹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 2ff.

of overwhelming illiteracy.”²⁰ 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.²¹

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.²²

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*²³), 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).²⁴

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:

²⁰ Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, p. 9.

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*.

²² See, e.g. F.S. Growse, *The Rāmāyana of Tulsi Dās*, Ram Narain Lal, Allahabad 1914, p. xii; George A. Grierson, *The Modern Vernacular Literature of Hindustan*, the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta 1889, p. 45; Mātā Prasād Gupta, *Tulsīdās: Ek samālocnātmak adhyayan*, Hindi Parishad Prakāśan, Prayāg 1972, pp. 198–205, 217–221, and Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, p. 9. N.B. an early manuscript kept in the Sankat Mochan temple in Varanasi had been stolen in December 2011 and happily recovered in July 2012.

²³ All references to the text of the *Rāmcaritmānas* are in accordance with the popular Gita Press edition: Tulsīdās, *Rāmcaritmānas*, comment. by Hanumān Poḍḍar, Gītā Pres, Gorakhpur 1971. Winand M. Callewaert and Philip Lutgendorf, *Rāmcaritmānas Word Index*, Manohar, Delhi 1997, p. 280 and Baccūlāl Avasthī, *Tulsī śabdakoś*, vol. 1, Buks en Buks, Dillī, p. 957.

²⁴ *dhūma kusaṅgati kārikha hoī / likhia purāna mañju masi soī*. Cf Añjanānandan Śaraṅ, *Mānas-pīyūṣ*, vol. 1, Gītā Pres, Gorakhpur 1998, pp. 167–168. All translations of the *Rāmcaritmānas* quoted in this paper are mine.

“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 Kumārīlabhaṭṭa (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);

²⁵ *kabita bibeka eka nahī morē / satya kahaū likhi kāgada korē*. It may be noted here that the noun *kāgada* is a phonetic adaptation of the Persian *kāgaz*. 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.

²⁷ Ludo Rocher, *Orality and Textuality in the Indian Context*, “Sino-Platonic Papers” 1994, 49, pp. 8–9. Cf. Graham, *Beyond the Written Text*, p. 4.

²⁸ Cf. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, esp. pp. 1–8.

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”: *kahaū* (e.g. 1.9.6), *kahihaū* (e.g. 13.5), *kahi* (e.g. 1.10 kha),
kahaba (e.g. 1.33.1);
gāva- “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”: *baranaū* (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),
sunī (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 *karaū 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” (*śravaṇa 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 *phalaśrutis*, 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 Kākḥbhuṣuṇḍī,
 Recognizing in him Rām’s devotee, a person deserving it.
 Yājñavalkya received it from him³³
 And then sang it to Bharadvāj.
 (...)

³¹ Also see Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, p. 38.

³² Cf. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 40–42.

³³ Some commentators are of the opinion that the pronoun *tehi* refers to Śiv, but the majority understands it as relating to Bhuṣuṇḍī. See Śaraṇ, *Mānas-pīyūṣ*, pp. 452–453.

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 Tulsīdās’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 (*anukathan* 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 Devakīnandan Śrīvāstav, *Tulsīdās kī bhāṣā*, Lakṣnāu Viśvavidyālay, Lakṣnāu 1957, pp. 1–2 and Stasik, *Perso-Arabic Lexis*, pp. 67–68. Cf. Śaran, *Mānas-pīyūṣ*, pp. 459–460.

³⁵ *sambhu kīnha yaha carita suāvā / bahuri kṛpā kari umahi sunāvā // soi siva kāgabhusuṇḍīhi dīnhā / rāma bhagata adhikārī cīnhā // tehi sana jāgabalika puni pāvā / tinha puni bharadvāja prati gāvā // (...) māi puni nija gura sana sunī kathā so sūkarakhetā / samujhi nahī tasi bālapana taba ati raheū aceta // (...) tadapi kahī gura bārahī bārā / samujhi parī kachu matī anusārā // bhāṣābadha karabi māi sōi (...).*

³⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, esp. pp. 36–75.

³⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 72.

³⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 45.

³⁹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 45, cf. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, pp. 145–146.

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),”⁴³ 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.’”⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ This very characteristic of the *Rāmcāritmānas* 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,⁴⁶ it should be of major importance; nevertheless, it is not treated as such – it is relatively rarely discussed among specialists.⁴⁷

The poem’s narrative is realized through a series of four dialogues (*samvād*) 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.⁴⁸

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.

⁴⁷ With the exception of the above mentioned texts by Lutgendorf: *The View from the Ghats* and *The Life of a Text*, and by Hess *Staring at Frames*. Cf. Kāmil Bulke, *Rāmkathā aur Tulsīdās*, Hindustānī Akadēmī, Ilāhābād 1977 and Kāmil Bulke, *Rāmcāritmānasa and Its Relevance to Modern Age*, in: *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, ed. V. Raghavan, Sahitya Akademi, Delhi 1980, pp. 58–75; Mātā Prasād Gupta, *Tulsīdās: Ek samālocnātmak adhyayan*, Prayāg: Hindi Pariṣad Prakāśan, 1972 and Charlotte Vaudeville, *Étude sur les sources et la composition du Rāmāyaṇa de Tulsī-dās*, Adrien-Maisonnette, Paris 1955.

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 ṣarati akṣaram. 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 here⁵⁰ that these four dialogues forming the narrative frames of the poem are between: 1) Śiv and Pārvaṭī, 2) Bhuṣuṇḍī and Garuḍ, 3) Yājñavalkya and Bharadvāj, and 4) Tulsīdās 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 *Rāmcaritmānas* 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 Tulsīdās 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 Rāmkaṭhā. 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), Tulsīdās 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:

⁴⁹ *suṭhi sundara sambada bara birāce buddhi bicāri / tei ehi pāvana subhaga sara ghāṭa manohara cāri // sapta prabandha subhaga sopānā / jñāna nayana nirakhata mana mānā.*

⁵⁰ See passage 1.30.2ff quoted above.

⁵¹ For more on the discussion of the narrative frames of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, 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 diagrammed 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 sunāhī bahu bidhi saba santā // rāmacandra ke carita suhāe / kalapa koṭi lagi jāhī na gāe.*

⁵⁸ Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, pp. 22–23, cf. Lutgendorf, “The View from the Ghats.”

⁵⁹ Cf. Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, pp. 35–41 and Stasik, *The Infinite Story*, pp. 79–80.

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.

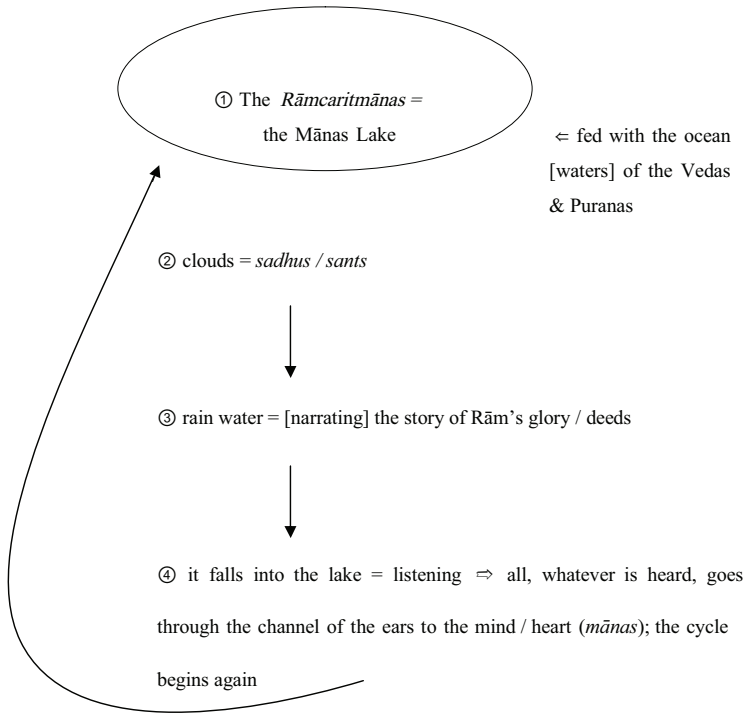


Figure 1