

Chapter 8

Can Sages and Women Dance Side by Side? contested text and gender in the *Kavitāvalī* of Tulsīdās

Imre Bangha

The importance of the works of Tulsīdās (d. 1623 – traditional date) in shaping modern Hinduism cannot be overestimated.¹ His Hindi retelling of Rāma’s story, the *Rāmcaritmānas* has become one of the most influential books of modern Indian religiosity. One of its early English translators labelled this work as *The Bible of North India* and considered it “the best and most trustworthy guide to the popular living faith of its people” (RCM 1930: xxxviii). Mahatma Gandhi called it “the greatest book of all devotional literature” and a more recent translator acclaimed it as “the living sum of Indian culture” (Lutgendorf 1991: 1). Perhaps as telling as these claims is the fact that the sales of the *Rāmcaritmānas* by the ubiquitous Gita Press far exceeds that of Vālmīki’s Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* and is only comparable to that of the *Bhagavadgītā* amongst the religious books of India.²

Female characters figure prominently in the *Rāmcaritmānas* and Tulsīdās often explicitly includes both women and men in scenes where he could easily have talked only of men.³ However an underlying misogynist discourse in the epic has long been the subject of discussion.⁴ On the narrative level one can refer to Satī’s folly in *Bālakāṇḍa* 48-64, where out of doubts and curiosity Satī tests Rāma, which results in Śiva’s alienation and Satī’s eventual self-immolation. Such discourse also appears on the textual level. One of the most influential Tulsī-scholars, Mata Prasad Gupta, for example, called Tulsī’s attitude towards women in general *anudār* ‘mean’ as he found the poet prompt to generalise about women after bad female actions.⁵ Tulsī’s most notorious misogynist sentence is in the *Sundarakāṇḍa*:

ḍhola gavāṃra sūdra pasu nārī sakala tāṛanā ke adhikārī

(Gita Press edn: RCM 2008: 5.59.6)

ḍhola gavāra sudra pasu nārī sakala tāṛanā ke adhikārī

(Kāśīrāj edn: RCM 1962)⁶

A drum, a clown, a churl, a beast and a woman are all fit subjects for beating.
(RCM 1914: 499)

In modern times much has been written to excuse Tulsī for this line.⁷ The fact that it is not a straightforward statement from the poet or from Rāma but contains the Ocean’s words does not excuse the author. The Ocean expresses his submission to the divine prince by comparing himself to these five objects worthy of beating. However, in a monologic epic like the *Rāmcaritmānas* the voices of the characters are not meant to represent views conflicting with the prevailing ethos of the work. Eventually, even his enemies cannot help praising Rāma.

Contested gender in Tulsīdās’s texts

The fact that the line quoted above has no variants in the manuscripts inspected for the Kāśīrāj edition is telling evidence for its unproblematic early modern reception. Nevertheless, there are instances when textual variation may modify the intensity of the

denigration of women. Just to quote an example (with relevant contested words highlighted):

kavanem avasara kā bhayaü gayaiṁ nāri bisvāsa 2.29 dohā

(Gita Press, RCM 2008)

kavanem avasara kā bhayēu gayēuṁ nāribisvāsa

(Kāśīrāj, RCM 1962)

What a thing to happen at such time! I am undone by putting trust in a woman.

(RCM 1914: 231)

While this may pass as a complaint against one woman, the modern scholar Dr Kishorilal emends the vulgate text into a more general lament with grim consequences, more in line with the generalising tendency observed by Gupta:

kavanem avasara kā bhayehu gaeu nāri bisvāsa

(Kishorilal 1997: 95)

What a time it was and what happened? Trust in women is destroyed.⁸

Dr Kishorilal argued that this is a more beautiful reading and is the text of most manuscripts.

Small textual changes can also remove the visibility of female characters as was the case with a variation in the *Jānakīmaṅgal*:

siyarahuvīrabibāhu jathāmati gāvaum̃ (2: Tulsīdās 1923: 45)

I sing the marriage of Sītā and Rāma to the best of my knowledge.

Where the vulgate has *siya raghubīra*, the Hindi Sāhitya Sammelan manuscript no. 5264 reads *srī raghubīra*. Sītā does not seem relevant to the ‘*maṅgal*’ being embarked upon. Sītā’s prominence has also been contested in the transmission of the next line,

subha dina racyau svayamvara maṅgaladāyaka (3)

Two manuscripts replace the word *svayamvara* with *sumaṅgala*.⁹ Sītā’s agency, which is dependent upon the fact that the wedding was a self-choice ritual, is thus erased in the alternative reading of these manuscripts.

The above examples show two aspects of contested text with reference to gender, mistrust in women and erasing women from the narrative space. It should also be mentioned that gender was not only contested in its social context but grammatical gender could also cause a headache for scribes and editors. In a famous passage, Sītā is accompanied by an apparently masculine word ending:

marama bacana jaba sītā bolā; hari prerita lachimana mana ḍolā

(2.28.9: Gita Press and Kāśīrāj)

Scribes from at least the early eighteenth century onwards and some modern editors found this line problematic and changed it to eliminate the perceived grammatical discrepancy,

marama bacana jaba sītā bolī; hari prerita lachimana mati ḍolī.¹⁰

Modern scholarship, however, agrees that the form *bolā* is not masculine here but is a metrically lengthened form of a gender-neutral *bola*. This interpretation is confirmed by the evidence from the overwhelming majority of the manuscripts that did not contest the passage.

In all the above examples evidence from the majority of the manuscripts confirms the reading of the vulgate and in all probability the vulgate readings go back to the author himself. The important thing here is that there was a minority of manuscripts in which the scribes were not satisfied with the relatively moderate approach of Tulsīdās but attempted to bring in a more misogynist bias. An examination of the variants created during

transmission reveals a hidden second dimension of the text in which gender has been contested and which is invisible in the linear vulgate text. In this chapter, I am examining the transmission of one of the most popular minor works of the poet, the *Kavitāvalī* ‘String of quatrains’, of which I am preparing a critical edition.¹¹ In order to fully appreciate a more detailed study of gender issues in the *Kavitāvalī*, this text needs to be contextualised.

The Kavitāvalī

For centuries, Tulsīdās has been considered to be a devotee poet. However, his being a devotee has long overshadowed the fact that he was also a poet — in fact one of the most accomplished poets of Hindi. He used all available major forms of the emerging Hindi literature to create bhakti literature in the service of his chosen deity Rāma. Jain narratives, Sufi romances and Hindi heroic poems in the *dohā-caupāī* metre must have served as examples for the *Rāmcāritmānas*.¹² His *Rāmlalānahchū*, the *Pārvatīmaṅgal* and the *Jānakīmaṅgal* were prepared primarily as longer oral festive songs. The short devotional *pad*s of Nirgun and Kṛṣṇa themes served as inspiration for his *Vinaypatrikā*, *Gītāvalī* and *Kṛṣṇagītāvalī*, while his *Kavitāvalī* shares a lot with the budding classicist courtly genre, the *rīti*-poetry. His *Barvai Rāmāyan* also parallels experiments in the Mughal court (Snell: 1994). Moreover, unlike his great Kṛṣṇa-bhakti precursors and contemporaries, such as Sūrdās and Mīrā Bāī, who sang their praises to Kṛṣṇa, he was a person who also wrote down most of his bhakti works.¹³

In the various genres he used, Tulsī encompassed different attitudes. His most courtly work is the *Kavitāvalī* not just because of its use of the quatrain *kavitt-savaiyā* (and occasionally *chappay*) forms but also because it presents attitudes borrowed from Sanskrit or classicist *muktak* poetry, namely a highly Sanskritised register, a marked use of poetic figures (*alaṅkāras*), the intradiegetic narrator position (sometimes within the frame of extradiegetic narration), in which the narrator is often a woman witnessing the events (see below). Furthermore, the scenes described in the collection are the ones in which we encounter themes of domestic interest or a female point of view.

Unlike the *Mānas*, most of Tulsī’s other works, including the *Kavitāvalī*, are not narratives but rather series of *jhāmki*s, snapshots from the narrative.¹⁴ Although in the majority of manuscripts and early publications the *Kavitāvalī* is called *Kavitt Rāmāyan*, its quatrains were not originally composed to follow the story-line but were free-standing short poems, *muktaks*. They were probably written over a long period of time and gathered into a narrative framework later either by the poet or by an influential redactor.¹⁵ This explains the fact that in the *Kavitāvalī* we only have select scenes from the Rāma narrative and much of the story line is missing. The *Aranya* and the *Kiṣkindhā* ‘chapters’, for example, only comprise one poem each. The *kāṇḍa* structure seems to be a later addition as the three oldest manuscripts of the work do not present *kāṇḍas* although their order of poems is more or less the same as that of the later versions.¹⁶ There is no indication either that the work is a Rāmāyaṇa, more precisely a *Kavitt Rāmāyan*, as it came to be known in the majority of nineteenth-century manuscripts and lithograph editions.¹⁷ The uneven distribution of the *kāṇḍas* also indicates that the collection was not originally designed to be a Rāmāyaṇa written in quatrains. It is only the first six *kāṇḍas* that present the Rāma story, which constitute less than half of the work (142 out of 325 quatrains in the vulgate). The thematic distribution of these six *kāṇḍas* is indicative of what captured the poet’s imagination in this poetic form.

Bāla (22 quatrains)

1-2 Rāma and his brothers as toddlers
3-7 Rāma and his brothers as children playing
8-11 The breaking of the bow
12-17 Rāma and Sītā's wedding
18-22 Exchange between Paraśurāma and Lakṣmaṇa

Ayodhyā (28 quatrains)

1-2 Leaving for the exile (*vanagamana*)
3-4 Sumitrā talks to Kauśalyā about Kaikeyī
5-10 The boatman washing Rāma's feet
11-13 Sītā's languor on the road (*Sītāmurchā*)
14-20 The village-women watch and talk about the princes and Sītā
21 The village-women ask Sītā
22 Sītā's reply
23-25 The women's memory of the princes' passing
26-27 Rāma hunting
28 The delight of the ascetics of Vindhyā that stones now will turn into women

Aranya (1 quatrain)

Pursuit of Mārīca

Kiṣkindhā (1 quatrain)

Hanumān's leap over the sea

Sundara (32 quatrains)

1-2 Sītā in Aśokavana
3-25 Hanumān burns Laṅkā (*Laṅkādahana*) — including
6 the lament of the female demon(s) (*jātudhānī*)
9 the *rākṣasas*' fear
10-14, 24 the lament and warning of Mandodarī and of other demonesses
26-28 Hanumān bids farewell to Sītā
29-31 Hanumān's leap back
32 Rāvaṇa's wealth

Laṅkā (58 quatrains)

1 The worry of the *rākṣasas*
2-3 Trijaṭā consoles Sītā
4-5 The worry of the residents of Laṅkā
6-8 Bridging the sea
9-16 Aṅgada's mission as messenger
17-29 Mandodarī's advice to Rāvaṇa
30-51 The battle
52-55 Lakṣmaṇa wounded and healed (*Lakṣmaṇamurchā*)
56-58 The end of the battle

One can observe from this list that the *Kavitāvalī* is a subjective selection. For example, hardly any poem is concerned with the events in Ayodhyā in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*. The poet is more interested in visualising the divine triad on their way to the forest (*vanagamana*). (One cannot miss the legendary parallel here, according to which Tulsī had a vision of Rāma in this form). Even more striking is the prominence given to the burning of Laṅkā (*Laṅkādahana*): out of the 32 *kabitts* of the *Sundarakāṇḍa*, 22 are devoted to this event in

contrast with the 4 verses in the protracted *Mānas*. Popular belief has it that this shift is due to Tulsī's witnessing a major fire in Benares.¹⁸ Another prominent shift in this work as compared to Tulsī's earlier poems is that Hanumān's role is highlighted more than in the *Mānas*.¹⁹ Furthermore, the prominence given to women and to domesticity is of special interest for this chapter. The first line of the entire collection spoken in a feminine first person (lost in translation) has a paradigmatic value, *Avadhesa ke dvāra sakāra gāī* 'In the morning, I went to the gate of Ayodhyā's king' (1.1.1). Even in the most martial scenes, such as Hanumān's burning of Lañkā or in the fierce *Lañkākaṇḍa*, females often appear warning Rāvaṇa or consoling Sītā.

Emphasis on women is also reinforced through their role of intradiegetic narrators. Although in a few cases male narrators' words are presented (*bhale bhūpa kahai...* 1.15.1), a very high number of poems use the feminine exclamation *rī*, feminine addresses, such as *sakhī*, *sajanī*, and feminine verbal forms (*avadhesa ke dvāra sakāra gāī* 1.1.1) while others state that we hear the words of women (e.g. *sakhī kahai sakhī soṃ* 1.12.1; *kahai kausilā sumitrā jū soṃ* 2.3.1; *jātudhānī akulānī kahaiṃ* 5.5.4; *trijatā kahata bāra bāra* 6.2.1; *kahati siya trijatā soṃ* 6.3.1; *badata mandodarī parama bītā* 6.17.1, etc.). Apart from their speech, the poems may present the reactions (*biloki kai... rahe naranāri jyom citere citrasāra haiṃ*, 2.14.4; *lokalocanani suphala karana haiṃ* 2.17.4; *suni grāmabadhū bithakī pulakī* 2.18.3, etc.) of onlookers who are often singled out as being women.

Furthermore, sometimes extradiegetic descriptions can be perceived as the words of onlookers, especially when they are among poems in which the onlookers' speech context is explicit. This may be a strategy taken over from *rīti* poetry in which most poems can be considered as the words of the *sakhīs* or of the lovers. A chief concern of *rīti*-literature is to show the emotions of love primarily within a heroine and often through the eyes of a female companion. Tulsī's use of the onlooker's voice is also a strategy not only to evoke the narrator as a witness, but also to make the listener or the reader become part of the same mythical universe. Indeed, mental witnessing of the divine *līlā* is one of the principal attitudes of bhakti.

The increased importance lent to the female in the *Kavitāvalī* also leads to a more generous treatment of women than in the *Mānas*. There are hardly any denigratory remarks against female characters in this work and if there were even slighter ones than in the *Mānas*, they were often disputed on the textual level, as we shall see.

The literary aspect of the collection was also appreciated through its use as teaching material. From at least the late eighteenth century, the *Kavitāvalī* has been used in teaching Brajbhāṣā. The J₈ manuscript (1780), with its unusual marking of *padachedas* to facilitate reading, is an early example. The Bengal Asiatic Society manuscript, copied in Benares in 1757-8, has Modern Hindi comments on its margin. In the mid-nineteenth century, the *Kavitāvalī* was also present in the Bhuj Pāṭhśālā, a famous institute in Kacch to train Brajbhāṣā poets, and in the mid-twentieth century it was a coursebook for the *Madhyamā* examination of Hindī Sāhitya sammelan (*Kavitāvalī* 1951: 5). In the late 1990s, I have also attended *Kavitāvalī* classes at the Hindi Bhavan of Visva-Bharati university in Santiniketan.

The text

With more than seventy documented manuscripts between the late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and more than one hundred and twenty editions over the past two centuries, the *Kavitāvalī* is one of Tulsīdās' most popular texts.

In his study of the text, based on close parallels from various other works of the poet, Mata Prasad Gupta speculated that the quatrains were composed over a period of several decades (*Kavitāvalī* 1951: 12-22).

The last twenty-two poems of the vulgate text refer to astrological events and an epidemic (*mahāmāri*) in Benares, indicating a mid-1610s date for this section.²⁰ Many of these twenty-two quatrains as well as the *Hanumānbāhuk* note that their poet is highly respected, and other stanzas refer to old age and suffering from diseases. A celebration of recovery would have been a good opportunity to show the working of God's grace, as the poet did in the case of his childhood deprivations. The lack of any reference to recovery in any work suggests that the *Kavitāvalī*, together with the *Hanumānbāhuk*, is among the poet's last works.²¹ Indeed, tradition holds that the *Kavitāvalī* contains Tulsī's last poem, a quatrain (v. 7.180) about glimpsing a kite (*kṣemkarī*), an auspicious bird at the time of setting out for a journey (Allchin, introduction to *Kavitāvalī* 1964: 66).

A study of the transmission of the text reveals that *Kavitāvalī* manuscripts appear from 1692 A.D. onwards and can be divided into two recensions, a longer and a shorter one. Although Tulsī's apparently latest quatrains are missing from the Shorter Recension, and therefore at least its last section presents a more archaic structure than that of the Longer Recension, due to contamination it is difficult to decide which recension's readings are more archaic, and each contested passage needs individual treatment.

As far as the modern vulgate text is concerned, it is a hybrid version of the two recensions. In its present form, it goes back to the Benares and Lucknow editions of the Shorter Recension dating from the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s, the main source of which seems to be the *Kavitta Rāmāyaṇa* edited in 1858 by Durgā Miśra on the basis of the manuscript of Pt. Raghunāthdās Gosvāmī.²² This text was then combined with that of Lālā Chakkanlāl (*Kavitāvalī* 1886) in the *Tulsīgranthāvalī* (Tulsīdās 1923), the source of later 'vulgate' editions.²³

Variations on approaches to gender in the transmission of the Kavitāvalī

In the second part of this chapter, I will scrutinise some variations in the text where gender is contested. Variations may be the results of conscious scribal intervention aiming at an imagined 'authenticity' of the text or of reconstructing physically damaged or obviously corrupt passages. Although I may make comments on the possible direction of textual changes, my primary interest is not to reconstruct the text that Tulsīdās may have written but rather to examine in which places the text was questioned and what might have been the arguments for or the consequences of introducing variants.

Since my examples will primarily be taken from poems in the first two *kāṇḍas* I do not present an exhaustive survey of the *Kavitāvalī*. However, it may come as a surprise that amongst the meaningful textual variants, many present cases involving gender.

Questioning female prominence or presence

One of the textually most contested issues is the prominence given to female characters and especially to the chief female character of the story, Sītā. As has been mentioned,

women figure significantly in the *Kavitāvalī*. However, transmission has sometimes been reluctant to acknowledge this fact.

This questioning may already happen in the morphologic (or orthographic) level when, for example, the Braj feminine present imperfect verbal ending *-ati* alternates with the gender-neutral *-ata* (e.g. *pūchati* ‘she asks’, *pūchata* ‘he/she asks’). Such cases, however, may not present straightforward interrogation of gender as manuscripts may or may not use gender-specific conjugation.

The number of female agents is often unindicated or indicated only by a plural verbal form, but some vulgate editions (Gita Press) specify the plural by plural nouns in nasalised long *-īm* ending and by plural verbal forms (*chakorīm... baiṭhīm*, 1.13.2; *rāṇīm pāvātīm*, 1.13.3, *jhātudhānīm* 5.6.4, 5.14.4; *rāṇīm... jāhīm* 5.12.10; etc.) even when none of the old manuscripts gives this kind of plural. The plural, however, is clear from the context in most of these cases:

rānī akulānī saba ḍādhata parānī jāhīm
(V 5.12.1)²⁴

The queens all frightened by the fires
ran hither and thither

The plural form *jāhīm* is given only in the *Granthāvalī*. The plural is obvious from the adjective *saba* ‘all’ and old manuscripts only give *jāhi* (M_L R_L V_s) or *jāī* (I_s). However, the Gita Press edition pluralises even *rānī* as *rānīm*.

Small textual changes, however, can fine-tune the prominence given to women. In the following line, Rāma and Sītā exchange a playful glance after hearing the clever words of the boatman who argued fervently for Rāma to allow him to wash his feet.

tulasī suni kevaṭa ke bara bainā hāse prabhu jānakī ora hahā hai
(2.7.4)

Says Tulsī, hearing the fine words of the boatman,
the Lord turned to Jānakī, and burst out laughing.

The *jānakī ora* ‘towards Sītā’ reading is present primarily in the Shorter Recension. Three Longer Recension manuscripts (K_L, M_L and B_L), including two old ones, give the variants *jānakī ona/yauna*. This early corruption arose, apparently, through misreading the Kaithi script *ra* (-) character. Later Longer Recension manuscripts either reverted to *jānakī ora* or had to invent other meaningful readings. However, the marital tenderness of the divine couple was lost in their variants of *sānuja sīya* ‘his brother and Sītā’ and *jānakīmātha* ‘Sītā’s Lord’ since in the first case Lakṣmaṇa is included and in the second Sītā is excluded from the gleefulness.

Sītā’s role may also oscillate in the transmission between that of an individual and a wife.

tiya kī lakhi āturatā piya kī ākhiyāati cāru calī jala cvai
(V 2.11.4 – Shorter Rec. and Gr)

Seeing his wife thus sadly discomfited,
from her husband’s most beautiful eyes tears flowed forth.

The above vulgate reading is only attested in the Shorter Recension. Manuscripts in the Longer recension give two different prominent readings:

siya kī lakhi āturatā piya kī ākhiyā ati cāru calī jala hvai
(K_L)

tulasī tiya kī lakhi āturatā juga naina cale jala cvai
(Longer Rec.)

Here, again, the Shorter Recension manuscripts appear to give the most graceful and probably original reading. It is another line about marital tenderness, in which the words referring to the wife (*tiya*) and husband (*piya*) elegantly rhyme. The earliest K_L manuscript names *Sītā* (*siya*) and by this may distantly evoke *Sītā*'s divinity and the touch of human tenderness becomes less apparent. The hesitation in the transmission also gave an opportunity to insert the signature *tulasī* into a *savaiyā* of an otherwise unquestioned pedigree. Some scribes might also have objected to the *piya kī ākhiyā ati cāru* 'her husband's most beautiful eyes' reading as perhaps eyes in suffering are not supposed to be beautiful.

Rāma's wedding and the general festivities accompanying it are described in six stanzas in the *Bālakāṇḍa*, making it the most detailed event in this *kāṇḍa*. Heaven and earth are joined in these celebrations. However, it is debated in the transmission whether men and women participate in the same way. In *kavitt* 14, the vulgate gives the following reading:

nagara nisāna bara bājairi, byoma dundubhī,
bimāna caṛhi gāna kai kai suranāri nācahim
 (V 1.14.1)

In the city sounded fine drums,
 In the heavens kettledrums,
 And heavenly damsels mounted
 in aerial chariots sang and danced.

With not always fortunate variants for *bara* (namely, *nabha*, *na[bbāgha]*, *subha*), three manuscripts, including the earliest one, give more or less the same line. However, the most frequent text in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manuscript transmission, present with minor variations in 11 out of 14 manuscripts examined, was:

nagara nisāna, nabha dundubhī, bimāna caṛhi
gāna kai kai sura muni nāri nara nācahim
 In the city sounded drums, in the sky kettledrums;
 divine sages, men and women mounted in chariots sang and danced.

The simplest way of interpreting the line is to take *sura-muni-nārī-nara* as a Sanskrit *tamālavṛkṣadvandva* compound meaning "divine sages, women and men". Yet, there are problems here. Why would divine sages mount on chariots along with (divine) women and men and dance along with them? Are they a category apart from men and women? This reading might have arisen by the late eighteenth century as a reaction to the corruption that occurred in the place of the vulgate *bara* already in the K_L manuscript of 1716. It may well be the case that the vulgate reading even predates that manuscript. In the vulgate text the celebration is focused on the divine music and dance. Nevertheless, manuscript transmission was inclined to extend the boisterous celebration to all divine beings where dance is not performed only by the *apsarās*, the heavenly damsels. Although this goes against *maryādā* 'respect for social boundaries', a central concept for Tulsīdās, this was the most common reading for about two hundred years.

At the wedding celebration, the vulgate only allows for girls to sing, while manuscripts uniformly present all the married couples as singing together.

gāvati gīta sabai mili surādari beda juvā juri bipra paḍhāhī
 (V 1.17.2)

All the damsels there assembled together sang their songs,
 while Brahmin youths joined chorus in recitals of the *Vedas*.

All manuscripts, however present a different reading:

gāvata gīta sabai mili dāmpati beda juvā juri bipra paḍhāhī
 All married couples assemble and sing songs, while Brahmin youths join along and recite the *Vedas*.

The only significant variation within the manuscripts is that some of them read the feminine *gāvati* ‘they sing’ even with the masculine noun *dampati* ‘married couple’. Here, we can see that the transmission and probably Tulsīdās himself was more inclusive than the modern vulgate text suggests. The non-vulgate text’s inclusiveness in the previous example coincides with the approach of the manuscripts seen here.

While at the celebrations gods are overjoyed by Rāma’s (or the divine couple’s) beauty, in the *lectio faciliior* of the Shorter Recension it is the celestial women who are impressed by his exquisiteness:

*jaya jaya tihum pura, jayamāla rām aura,
baraṣaim sumana sura, rūre rūpa rācahī*
(V 1.14.2)

In the three words cries arose of ‘Triumph!
Triumph!’ on Rām’s breast the victory garland,
While the gods rained flowers,
overjoyed at his great beauty.

The variant reading of the Shorter Recension:²⁵

*jaya jaya tihum pura, jayamāla rām aura,
baraṣaim sumana suravadhū rūpa rācahī*

... While divine women overjoyed at his beauty rained flowers.²⁶

Here the *suravadhū* reading may be more than the result of the lack of understanding of the obscure word *rūre* ‘increased, great’. The first version suggests that the gods in general are overjoyed at Rāma’s beauty, which is beyond any gender. However, in the version of the Shorter Recension, Rāma’s beauty and the divine world are heterosexually gendered.²⁷ This variation hints towards a gendered anxiety in transmission removed from a possibly original spiritual abstraction.

Presence of women in the text is sometimes added. In the following line, Tulsī talks about how the Ganges appeared by Viṣṇu’s feet:

tulasi jehi ke padapaṁkaja teṁ pragaṭī taṭinī jo harai agha gāḍhe
(V 2.5.3)

Tulsī, from whose feet appeared the river Ganges,
which banishes gross sins

The word for the river Ganges in this line is the uncommon Sanskrit *taṭinī*, which is present in all but one source. The A₅ manuscript gives *tarunī* ‘young women’ instead. The misreading of a *lectio difficilior* resulted here in a reference to Ahalyā, the petrified woman saved by the touch of Rāma’s feet. However, with this reading the end of the line ‘which banishes gross sins’ becomes confused although it can pass as a reference to Rāma again.

Women as subjects: female action and speech

Sometimes, the female presence goes unquestioned and it is rather the propriety of their action that is contested. Such cases include the line where Sītā’s movements are presented as less graceful in variants. Stanza 17 of *Bālakāṇḍa* is about the wedding of Sītā and Rāma and presents what happened to Sītā when she glimpsed her bridegroom:

tātaim sabai sudhi bhūli gāi kara ṭeki rahī pala ṭārati nāhī
(V 1.17.4)

She forgot what she was doing, her hands froze and her eyelids did not blink.

In this case, the vulgate reading is taken from the Longer Recension and the *kara* “hand” variant for *pala* “eyelid” is abundantly attested.

tātaim sabai sudhi bhūli gāi kara ṭeki rahī kara ṭārati nāhī

(1.17.4)

She forgot what she was doing, her hands froze and she did not move her arm. In spite of its presence in the oldest manuscript of this stanza (*karu* in K_L), it appears to be secondary as it creates an unnecessary repetition. While the secondary reading is definitely less graceful and inferior in style and meaning, its persistence is remarkable as apart from our oldest manuscript it is present in almost all of the Shorter Recension manuscripts with one exception.²⁸

There is an even more problematic quatrain with a far less graceful *Sītā*. *En route* to the forest, village women ask *Sītā* about the men that are accompanying her. In one *savaiyā* (*Ayodhyā* 21), *Sītā* cleverly indicates with a gesture of her eye that *Rāma* is her husband. This is in line with the Indian convention that married women are not supposed to pronounce the name of their husbands and at the same time it indicates that *Sītā* is able to connect with the villagers, just as God with the devotees. However, the following awkwardly outspoken ‘apocryphal’ quatrain had a conspicuous presence in the transmission of the *Kavitāvalī*. Below is a scholarly reconstruction on the basis of twenty sources:²⁹

dīna ke dāni divākara bāridha sīla sudhā basudhā ujjāre;
santa ki sampati bhūpana kī mani mātu pitā gṛha prāna adhāre;
kauna miṭai bidhi kī likhanī pitu āyasu te bana ko pagu dhāre;
gore so gāta lalā mama devara, sāvare so pati prāna hamāre.

He is manifest on earth as a generous sun for the needy and an ocean filled with the nectar of virtues,

wealth of the truthful, lord of sovereigns, mother, father, home, support of life.

— Who can erase fate written by the Creator? — On the orders of his father he set out for the forest.

The dear boy with fair body is my brother-in-law, the dark one, my friend, is my dearest beloved.

Sītā’s verbose presentation of her male relatives is found after quatrain 21 of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* of the vulgate text with minor variations in about two thirds of the sources I examined. It is included in almost all of the Longer Recension manuscripts from at least the late eighteenth century onwards and also in several lithographed editions. The Shorter Recension is far more ambivalent towards this quatrain. One manuscript (Vr_1) gets round the problem by omitting the last line and another one (Pa_2) by omitting the last two lines. In one manuscript (Ti) that originally omitted it, it pops up as marginalia added later. The few Shorter Recension manuscripts that originally contain it, present the variant *tulasī* for *likhanī* “writing” in the third line making it into the poetic signature of *Tulsīdās*. In all probability this poem was not originally composed by *Tulsī* but, after its inclusion in the *Kavitāvalī* because of its overlapping theme and form, the attribution to *Tulsī* was sealed into the *savaiyā* itself. Even if the quatrain presents a far less graceful *Sītā* than expected from the elegant poetry of *Tulsī*, the conspicuous presence of this quatrain in the transmission of the *Kavitāvalī* is, again, remarkable.

An interesting case is when the text varies between presenting *Sītā*’s technical inquiry and the suggestion of intimacy. Below, *Sītā* is languishing on the route to the forest (*sītāmurchā*) and asks the following question:

phiri pūchati hai, calano ba kiteku hai, parnakūṭī karihau kita hvai
(V 2.11.3)

Then she enquires, “How much further must we go now?
where will you put up a little shelter made of leaves?”

Interestingly, the *parnakutī* ‘shelter made of leaves’ reading of almost all of the sources becomes *nātha, kuṭī* ‘a shelter, O Lord’ in K_L . This direct address is more intimate but it does not reflect Sītā’s technical knowledge.

Sītā is not the only royal female who receives unfavourable treatment in variations of the text. An important aspect of transmission is the questioning of anything that goes against the propriety of speech expressed in the popular Sanskrit saying *satyaṃ brūyāt, priyaṃ brūyāt, na brūyāt satyaṃ apriyaṃ* ‘One should say the truth, one should say the pleasant, but one should not say the unpleasant truth.’ While this attitude provides gracefulness to Tulsī’s compositions, transmission may or may not reinforce it.

In two *kavitts* (*Ayodhyā* 3 and 4), in the wake of Rāma’s exile the queens Kauśalyā and Sumitrā talk about their co-wife Kaikeyī who caused the disaster. Their talk is respectful even in the middle of the disastrous events, yet these two quatrains have been omitted from the fastidious Shorter Recension. In this case, it is not the variation on the vulgate text that gives a clue. The third line in the vulgate *Ayodhyā* 3 runs as follows:

*tulasī sarala bhāya raghurāya māya mānī
kāya mana bānī hūna jānī kai mateī hai*
(V 2.3.3)

Says Tulsī, “Raghuraj also treated her
with affection as though she were his mother,
And in body, mind and speech he
never thought of her as step mother.”

However, this is only the reading of two consulted manuscripts. Six others give the following:

*tulasī sarala bhāya raghurāya māya mānī
kāya mana bānī hūm na jānī kumateī hai*
... “never thought of her as bad stepmother (*kumateī*).”

It must have been this reading to which the compiler of the Shorter Recension objected. However, the oldest form preserved in K_L , and eventually in the vulgate, is more respectful. When the text became derogatory, some scribe may have omitted the entire quatrain from the collection.

The two quatrains show further contested readings. In the first line of 2.3, scribes debated the deference shown by the narrator towards the characters of the story.

*sithila saneha kahai kausilā sumitrā som, maim
lakhī na savati, sakhī, bhaginī jyaum seī hai*
(K_L 2.3.1)

Kaushalyā overcome by love said to Sumitrā, “My dear,
I never treated her as co-wife, but ever cared for her as sister.”

The vulgate *kausilā* already present in K_L became the more Sanskritic Kausalyā or even Kauśalyā in later manuscripts. This probably implied more politeness, while in the second line (not quoted here) the Sanskritic *kaikē* of K_L and the vulgate became the tadbhava *kekai* as if taking a shade away from Kaikeyī’s high status. In the above line, the intimate-deferential particle *jū* is added to the name *sumitrā* in the vulgate text, which also helps to avoid the original enjambment and the slightly awkward but permissible stress on the second syllable of *savati*. Here, some scribes also felt that *sakhī* was not an appropriate term of address between royal co-wives. Although *sakhī* is the reading of four old and two younger manuscripts, K_L has *kachu* while one late manuscript proposes *gati* and another one *sukhī*. These variations, however, destroy the *lakhī-sakhī* wordplay. The apparently original *seī* “I served” reading of K_L and the vulgate text stands out against the non-rhyming *ra(h)ī*

“stayed with” in all other old manuscripts. At an early point, scribes may have felt it inappropriate for one queen to serve another, in fact, an undeserving one.

An interesting single variant appears in Sumitrā’s reply in the next *kavitt*:

tulasī sahāvai bidhi, soī sahiyatu hai
(V 2.4.1)

What destiny orders for us to suffer must be suffered.

One manuscript however replaces *tulasī* with *kula kī*, producing a meaning ‘What the ways of the family order for us to suffer must be suffered.’ This becomes a resigned acceptance of family rules on the part of the females.

Propriety of speech is of special importance for other characters in the story. While the villagers talk about the divine trio passing by, some women talk ill not only of Kaikeyī in the first line but after that also of Daśaratha:

rājahu kāja-akāja na jānyo, kahyo tiya ko jina kāna kiyo hai
(V 2.20.2)

This vulgate reading is present in the earliest K_L manuscript and in some other early and later sources ($M_L V_s^{mg} B_L H_L$). However, the onlooker women’s derogatory remark became contested and it is missing from manuscripts $R_L I_s V_s^{ac} C_L U_L A_s H_s C_s P_s I_s S_s$. The order of lines in these manuscripts is 1-3-4-5, where 5 is a new line:

tulasī mana jāni sayāna soi jina ke ura antara bāsa liyo hai

Tulsī says, consider that person clever, in whose heart He has taken abode.

Although this line manages to smuggle in Tulsī’s poetic signature, it may be secondary. In the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, Lakṣmaṇa says similar things about Daśaratha even more bluntly:

viparītaś ca vṛddhaś ca viṣayaiś ca pradharṣitaḥ |
nṛpa kim iva na brūyāc codyamānaḥ samanmathaḥ ||
(VR 2,18.3)

The king is perverse, old and debauched by pleasures. What would he not say under pressure, mad with passion as he is?

(trans. Pollock, VR 1984- : II, 121)

However, such bluntness even from uncouth villagers towards Daśaratha was felt to be over the top by the transmitters of Tulsīdās used to the poet’s sense of propriety.

So far, verses concerning Sītā and other royal women have been examined. However, female presence, prominence and propriety of action is questioned on a larger scale in the *Kavitāvalī*. An important locus of contest is gendered participation in the festivities.

In an entirely different context of the burning of Laṅkā, the action of the fleeing queens is modified and their consciousness of and care for the body is questioned,

basana bisāraim, mani bhūṣana sābhārata na,
ānana sukhāne kahaim, kyomhū koū pālihai
(V 5.10.2)

Clothing they forget,
nor take they jewelled ornaments,
With blanching faces they cry,

“Now who is there to protect us?”

This reading of the vulgate is present only in one old manuscript. The other old manuscripts give a slightly different picture:

basana bisāre mani bhūṣana, sābhāre tana,
ānana sukhāne kahaim, kyomhū koū pālihai

They forget clothing and jewelled ornaments, they only care for their bodies, ...

This reading has a more realistic touch through underlining that the queens only care for their lives.

Females as object: Actions towards women

The next example presents a case when propriety of action towards a female is queried by the transmission. One of the most interesting contested passages appears in a well attested poem that, eventually, did not make it into the vulgate. In this *savaiyā* on Sītā's languor on the road to the forest, Rāma's words can be understood as a rebuke to Sītā. The poem is missing from the selective K_L manuscript and from five other surveyed manuscripts but is present in thirty-three other manuscripts where it follows the vulgate 2.11. The *savaiyā* becomes more hotly contested in the lithograph editions. Out of the fourteen books I consulted, seven give it and seven omit it. The quatrain then tends to disappear from the twentieth-century editions. Only the *Granthāvalī* presents it in a footnote adding that it is of dubious pedigree as Tulsī's poetic signature is missing from it. That, however, is a weak argument as the signature is missing from many other quatrains of unquestioned pedigree including the one immediately preceding it. A more valid reason for omission could have been that the first line is hypometrical at the beginning and the rhyme-words tend to be distorted and contested, or that Rāma's reproach to his divine wife was seen to be beyond the *maryādā* 'respect for social limits' generally propagated by Tulsīdās.

sūkhi gaye ratanādhara mañjula kañja se locana cāru cucvai |
karuṇānidhi kaṁta turamta kahyau kita dūri mahābana bhūri jo svai |
sarasīruha locana nīra hi dekhi citai raghunāyaka sīya pai hvai |
abahñ bana bhāmini bñjhati hau taji kosalarāja purī dina dvai ||

The jewels of her lips went dry and her lovely eyes, which are like charming lotuses, are dropping tears.

At that point, she said to her beloved, the Treasury of Compassion, "How far is that great forest which is so abundant?"

Seeing the tears in her lotus-eyes, the Lord of the Raghus looked at Sītā.

"Having left the town of Kośala's king two days ago, o passionate lady, you are already asking for the forest?"

This poem is present in a greater number of manuscripts than several vulgate ones, such as 2.3-4 or 7.91-96. Nevertheless, just as in the case of many other poems, it cannot be said with certainty whether it goes back to Tulsīdās or not. However, the high frequency of the *savaiyā* in the manuscripts shows that it was appreciated and thought during the documented period of manuscript transmission to be by the poet-saint and that Rāma's resigned reproach to the languishing Sītā was accepted as originating from the greatest Rāma-devotee of Hindi poetry.

General female presence and propriety

In the following case, the presence of the onlooker's gaze becomes contested. The following half-line is about demonesses fleeing during the burning of Lañkā:

jāti hairṁ parānī jaga jānī gajacāli hai
(5.10.1)

They fled with movements that people think to be the gait of elephants.

In this half-line, *jaga* 'the world, people' is the reading of the old manuscripts ($M_L R_L I_S V_S^{ac}$) against the vulgate *gati* 'movement' (or *gata* V_S^{pc}).

One little-explored aspect of Tulsī's poetry is his use of humour, *hāsyarasa* (Tivari 2013). The following humorous quatrain exploiting the tension between male asceticism and longing for women is present in all manuscripts.

bindhya ke bāsī udāsī tapobratadhārī mahā binu nāri dukhāre |
gautama tīya tarī, tulasī, so kathā suni bhe munibr̥nda sukhāre |
hvaihai silā saba candramukhī parase padamañjulakañja tihāre |
kīnhī bhalī, raghunāyaka jū, karunā kari kānana kaū pagu dhāre ||
(2.30)

Those who perform great vows, disinterested ascetics, dwelling
in the Vindhya mountains were sorrowing without women,
But when they heard that Gautam's wife was saved,
learning the story, those sages were made glad.
Now touched by your most lovely lotus-feet,
all these stones will turn into moon-faced maidens,
you have indeed done well then Raghunāyak
that you have set foot in the forest.

While the text of these lines presents only minor variation, the ridiculing of the hermits' asceticism was questioned in one manuscript by changing the initial word *bindhya* 'the Vindhya hills' into *audha* 'Ayodhyā' in an attempt to turn the ascetics into ordinary citizens at the price of producing a confused quatrain with references to asceticism.

Conclusion

While the classicist poetry making use of the arsenal of late Sanskrit aesthetics, and the *Kavitāvalī* produced in the same style, needed erudition available primarily to men and not women, one of their major concerns is still with the feminine. Similarly, manuscript culture was primarily a male domain. We learn from colophons of manuscripts about scribes and sometimes also about commissioners. While scribes are invariably males, commissioners are sometimes high-rank women, indicating at least a capacity to read Hindi manuscripts.

Although Tulsī's treatment of the female characters, according to the exigencies of the *rīti* arsenal, is milder than in the more austere *Rāmcaritmānas*, this treatment is often contested on the textual level. The most frequent concern is the space given to women within the body of the text. Transmission might erase or add female presence to a scene. It can also underplay or emphasise it and it can also debate their actions. Female actions can be made more graceful or less and their propriety may be questioned. Sometimes marital tenderness is emphasised, at other times devotion. Similarly, actions towards women can also be questioned, as they influence the reader's perception of the male characters. Apart from some contested passages, Rāma's gentleness towards females is maintained and in a singular case the humour directed at ascetics longing for women is rejected.

The study of the transmission of a text in a South Asian context can provide often invisible nuances of gender attitudes in the subcontinent.

Notes

Chapter 8: Can Sages and Women Dance Side by Side? contested text and gender in the *Kavitāvalī* of Tulsīdās

This chapter arises from research funded by the British Association for South Asian Studies and the John Fell Oxford University Press (OUP) Research Fund.

² <http://www.gitapress.org/pub.htm> (6 Febr 2015).

³ For example, one of Tulsī's favourite terms for people is *nara-nāri* 'men and women'.

⁴ An early example is mentioned in Lutgendorf 1991: 402-3. A Google search with linked keywords 'Tulsidas&misogyny' resulted in 7690 hits on the internet on 6 Febr 2015.

⁵ Instances of misogynist discourse from the *Mānas* are collected by Gupta (2005: 294-6). On the preceding pages (288-94) Gupta has discussed Tulsī's depiction of specific female characters.

⁶ The text of the *Mānas* will be quoted both from its vulgate Gita Press edition (RCM 2008) and from the most accomplished critical edition published by Kashiraj Trust (RCM 1962).

⁷ An early example is mentioned by Lutgendorf (1991: 402-3).

⁸ If not indicated otherwise, translations are by the author.

⁹ f.1 in the manuscript from Faizabad presented in Agraval 1977: 1947/142ka and f.1 in the Oxford Chandra Sham Shere ms. c.452, which was prepared in Benares.

¹⁰ See the variants listed in RCM 1962: 478. The earliest manuscript with these variants is dated 1711-14. Initially, even Ramchand Shukla inclined to accept this version (cf. *Gosvāmī Tulsīdās*, 1st edn, p. 238, quoted in Singh and Tivari 2000: 174).

¹¹ On the project see <http://tulsidas.orient.ox.ac.uk/>

¹² On the possible connections between Jāyasī's Sufi romance *Padmāvat* and the *Mānas*, see de Bruijn 2010: 133-40.

¹³ The lack of *geyavikāras*, variations typical of oral transmission, from the *Kavitāvalī* and other works and the relatively uniform nature of their texts shows that our manuscripts go back to written archetypes in all probability composed and edited by Tulsīdās or his scribes. On the *geyavikāras* see Callewaert and Lath 1989: 63-82.

¹⁴ The term *jhām̐kī* was used by Chaturvedi (1953: 154).

¹⁵ On the length of time see Gupta (*Kavitāvalī* 1951: 12-22). According to Sahay (2000: 314), the *Kavitāvalī* was assembled by Tulsī's disciple, Śṛṅg, whose floruit, according to him, is given in the *Saroj* as VS 1708 although I was not able to find it in Gupta 1967.

¹⁶ The incomplete I₁ manuscript (Hindi Sahitya Sammelan 3-9/5246 dated 1692, VS 1749) at present contains only the poems from 7.55 onwards and has no colophon at the end. K₁ (Jaipur Pothikhana 2987, dated 1716, VS 1773) gives 35 quatrains from between 1.12 and 2.25 numbered continuously and introduced as *atha kabitt gusāmī jī śrī tulasīdāskrit liṣate rāmcārit* and has no final colophon either. The brief description of the now unavailable Pratāpgarh manuscript (dated 1740, VS 1797) as given in Agraval 1977: 731 (26-484D), does not show whether it is structured by *kāṇḍas*. It presents 343 numbered quatrains from between 1.12 and *Hanumānbāhuk* 44 and starts without naming the book. At the end, it gives the title as *iti śrī gusāi tulasīdās kṛt śrī rām carit kabitt*

samāptam. The J_s manuscript (1780, VS 1837) already presents *kāṇḍas*.

¹⁷ For a list of selected manuscripts see <http://tulsidas.orient.ox.ac.uk/Collated%20manuscripts.htm> or Bangha 2011: 162-3. A list of all the published versions of the *Kavitāvalī* can be found at <http://tulsidas.orient.ox.ac.uk/All%20Editions.htm>. A comprehensive list of *Kavitāvalī* manuscripts will be published in Bangha and others, *Kavitāvalī* (in progress).

¹⁸ Prof. Siyaram Tiwari, personal communication, March 1998.

¹⁹ Chaturvedi 1953: 154-5. See also Lutgendorf 2007: 94-8, especially 96-7.

²⁰ The *Rudrabīsī*, or “Twenty years of Rudra” (7.170 and poem 240 in another work, the *Dohāvalī*) refers either to 1566–85 (according to Swamikannu Pillai 1922) or to 1598–1618 (according to Sudhākar Dvivedī). See Gupta 2005: 183. The *Mīn kī sanīcarī*, or “Saturn in Pisces” (7.177) took place from March 1583 (Caitra Śukla 5 VS 1640) till May–June 1585 (Jyeṣṭha VS 1642) and again from March 1612 (Caitra Śukla 2 VS 1669) till May–June 1614 (Jyeṣṭha VS 1671), according to Sudhākar Dvivedī (Gupta 2005: 186, 504–8). There were three major epidemics during Tulsī’s lifetime. The famines of 1555–6 and of 1595–8 are supposed to have been followed by pestilence, and a new disease, bubonic plague, appeared in 1616 (Smith 1917: 397–8; Rogers and Beveridge 1909: 330, 442).

²¹ Mata Prasad Gupta, considered the *Kavitāvalī*, together with the *Hanumānbāhuk*, as dating from the period 1610–23 (Gupta 2005: 251–4). Several scholars, including the English translator F.R. Allchin, followed his ideas (introduction to *Kavitāvalī* 1964: 63–6). Shyamsundar Das and Pitambardatt Barthwal, however, relying on the early “biography” *Mūl gosāimcarit* (claimed to have been preserved in a manuscript from 1791), argue that the *Barvai Rāmāyaṇ*, the *Hanumānbāhuk*, the *Vairāgyasandīpanī*, and the *Rāmāyaṇpraun* are Tulsī’s last works (*Kavitāvalī* 1964: 69). For a study and critique of the different Tulsī biographies see Lutgendorf, Short Title’ Cited Pages. Furthermore, Madanlal Sharma and Gitarani Sharma consider the *Vinay Patrikā* to be his swan song although they do not provide any argument for this supposition (Sharma and Sharma 1990: 56).

²² The only recorded copy of *Kavitāvalī* 1858 was in the Royal Library, Ramnagar (acc. no. v13/88). However, it is inaccessible now (Dr Udaya Shanker Dubey, email communication 17 February 2015). I was able to consult the edition made two years later by the same publisher.

²³ The *Granthāvalī* acknowledged only Chakkanlāl’s book as its source (Tulsīdās 1923: “Vaktavya”, 1).

²⁴ The numbering of the stanzas follows that of the vulgate text. Vulgate readings, marked with V, are from Tulsīdās 1923: 153-245. For translations of the vulgate see Allchin, *Kavitāvalī* 1964.

²⁵ All manuscripts of the Shorter Recension give this reading. However, a second hand in V_s corrected it into *rūre*.

²⁶ Other possible interpretations include, “While the gods rained flowers, overjoyed at the bride’s beauty.”

²⁷ Syntactically, another gendered reading “the gods are overjoyed at the bride’s beauty” is also possible but this interpretation is the least graceful as Rāma is garlanded but it is his wife who enchants the male gods.

²⁸ pala C_L M_L R_L U_L C_S H_S E; karu K_L; kara B_L I_S V_S A_S P_S S_S (subscript L in a siglum indicates that the particular manuscript belongs to the Longer Recension while subscript S indicates the Shorter Recension).

²⁹ For a critical edition of this poem on the basis of three sources see Bangha and Négyesi 2007: 297 and for a more complete collation see Bangha and others, *Kavitāvalī* (in progress).