

Children of the Ramcharitramanas Country

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I come from Ramcharitramanas country. That would have, indeed, been a handy opening to this essay; a beginning that would have connected well with what I wanted to write. At the same time, it would be telling just half the story because we come from many different worlds. For me, though, the Ramchandramanas country has been a most productive and creative territory as a writer, especially now when I have turned to writing in Fiji Hindi. I was somewhat intrigued to read an article on Indian diaspora that said my novel, *Dauka Puraan*, was the first novel in Bhojpuri and that it had emerged from 'the Ramcharitramanas country'. The author of the article was, of course, referring to my place of birth, Labasa. The Ramcharitramanas country wasn't just a place for me; it was a whole cosmos - history plus mythology.

It is interesting to speculate how Tulsidas would have reacted if he knew, when he was composing his great epic in 1631 in Avadhuri, that his creation would be carried across the seas to a remote island in the South Pacific, and that a place would be named after it in discourses on Indian diaspora. As a writer, he would have definitely been overjoyed and felt fulfilled that his work would make such a profound impact, beyond anything he could have ever imagined at that time. There is much to speculate about the great bard's life as most of the biographical details that have been gathered are mainly from his epic and the minor works. There isn't a great deal of concrete information available about him.

Tulsidas's *Ramcharitramanas* is a large tome; it allowed indentured workers to sit around it and recite the inspiring verses. While the girmitiyas identified themselves with the tale of Rama's exile, seeing in it their own exile, as a child growing up in that impoverished post-indenture

world, I found my first great hero in Sri Ram. Later when I came to writing in Fiji Hindi, I re-discovered the language of *Ramcharitramanas*. The critic who had said *Dauka Puraan* was in Bhojpuri was, of course, mistaken about the actual language of the novel. Like Tulsidas, who employed a hybrid language made up of Avadhi, Brijbhasa and Bundeli, my novel was also written in a mixed language that evolved in Fiji's plantation life; Fiji Hindi has Avadhi and Bhojpuri in it as well as Fijian and English. Regarded by Fiji's Hindi elite community as a broken language, unsuitable for literary or philosophical discourses, my experience of writing in it proved the opposite: critics have noted ample philosophical musings and the various *rasas* in *Dauka Puraan*. They have correctly pointed out that the influence of Tulsidas is not confined to the language; it permeates the structure of the novel.

I now see it as a defining moment, one that stands out in my memory, when a *mandali* elder, whatever his motive picked me from other kids, as a relatively bright boy with a reasonably melodious voice, and pushed me to the front of the older reciters to try out my talents. At first I felt like an interloper, soon to be the main draw-card for the *mandali*. We were invited to distant villages to recite. They wanted mostly to hear the boy with a melodious voice. Maybe the *mandali* elder saw in me a kid with a future, one who would go the furthest. I made rapid progress from a boy reciter to becoming the main interpreter; I was not even a teenager. I do not know how much of Tulsidas I really understood, but I had the knack of spinning a yarn around his *dohas* and *sorthas*.

I especially relished the heated debates in the *mandali*: they were often about trivial details in the narrative, lacking in depth or relevance, but for a child they were profoundly earth-shaking issues and I longed to join in the debates. As an interpreter it was wise for me to remain slightly aloof. Hindi was kept alive through these debates.

I have viewed this early experience as an existential moment; even though the choice was made by someone else for me to be such an important part of the *mandali*, nonetheless, it struck a chord deep inside me, connecting to what I now see as flair in my being for crooning and manipulating language. I thrived in the limelight.

When I was growing up in Ramcharitramanas country in the 40's and 50's, cinema had just started to make its impact. First it was the HMV gramophone, then matinees at the Majestic Theatre in town. On Friday, a man would come from the Majestic Theatre ringing a bell, a billboard slung over his neck, announcing the latest mythological, coincidentally all based on Tulsidas' great epic: '*Ram Baan, Ram Rajya, Lanka Dhahan*'. The *mandali* now started to sit in the Majestic Theatre! The god that ex-

isted in my imagination now appeared on the silver screen. My god was a debonair gentleman, suave and well-bred, with a dazzling smile. When I first saw Mahipal in the role of Lord Rama, I knew instantly that is what God ought to look like. In misery or in danger, as a child when I prayed, the image that came to me was the lordly face of Mahipal looking benignly at me from the screen wearing his gently playful and inscrutable smile. I was most disappointed when I saw him in the role of Tulsidas in Harsukh Jangeshwar Bhatt's 1954 version of the poet's life. The moustache didn't sit well on his face; it had the effect of distorting his godly smile. I expected Tulsidas to look like Rabindranath Tagore. But then Mahipal had other incarnations, for instance, as Aladdin in *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*. He was still a god who could transform himself into Aladdin. Apart from the misfit Mahipal as Tulsidas, I found the storyline of Bhatt's film rather thin. It was a story that I was to hear many times: the poet's infatuation with his wife, Ratnavali; his wife taking a break at her father's house, and Tulsidas, unable to bear the separation, travelling through a treacherous night to meet her, and then her cold words greeting him: if he felt half as inflamed towards Lord Rama, he would find salvation. That was the epiphanic moment in the sensitive man's life; it transformed him into a wandering mendicant, out in search of his Rama.

The story didn't move me very much; I had a vague notion of a much grander narrative. After all, he was the creator of the greatest epic ever—*Ramcharitramanas*. Although the film disappointed me, the songs and the lyrics didn't; they still linger in my ears, connecting me to the life of the bard as depicted in that film.

At the Majestic Theatre I discovered another cinema that wasn't about gods. This was an important discovery—films as a medium of representation of real life; later in life, it opened the world of great cinemas. I became a movie addict. I caddied at the nearby golf course, worked in the paddy fields, and sold empty beer bottles, for ticket money. My parents, too poor to care about movies, knew though that there were *nautanki* dances in them and were told that the movies had nautch girls who performed lurid acts. They cautioned me but didn't stop me from going to the Majestic Theatre if I could find ticket money. One Saturday, I sneaked away to a mid-day matinee. Somebody tipped off my father; he found me sitting majestically, like Prince Salim, gazing at the gorgeous Anarklali doing a sensuous item for King Akhbar. You can imagine my humiliating exit from the Majestic Theatre!

Apart from *Ramcharitramanas*, there weren't many books around in our community when I was growing up. But if you were genuinely interested in books, you were bound to find them somewhere, and also readers

of books. There were two readers of books that I discovered. A woman, whose hair looked like a hornet's nest, read her books—*Prem Sagar* and *Sukh Sagar*-- sitting on the verandah of her barrack; the books looked like ancient parchments. She read them not with her eyes but her fingers. We teased the woman, calling her Sukh Sagar! Prem sagar!

The other reader was a trade unionist; he read mainly the Hindi newspaper - *Fiji Samachar*. He was deeply unhappy about something, I could never fathom what, and quite ill-tempered as well. I deliberately passed by the barracks of these two readers just to watch the old woman and the trade unionist read. I found there were more books and readers around. Some young men from the mandali also read books. They looked like they belonged to some underground secret society; they circulated books stealthily among themselves, their furtive glances suggested something awfully clandestine. What were they reading? I was allowed to peek; I was considered grown up enough because of my status as the mandali interpreter. Even from my child's eyes, I could see the books were poorly produced: the front covers were garish and unattractively designed but their titles were enchanting: *Nirmohi*, *Basera*, *Lawang*, *Manzil*, *Chudiyani*, *Ahuti*. Once I started reading the books, I was entranced. It wasn't just the story that captivated me; more the language and style of the author. He used Hindi mixed with Urdu that produced a hypnotic effect. I remember he was most liberal with exclamation marks to attract attention. That spoiled the effect for me. But then there were plenty of other strong qualities in the books, for instance, pathos, poignancy, and a lot of sadness, that I now see as mere sentimentalism. I read every novel that was available, some of them over again. I searched for information about the author; there was very little offered. On the back cover was a passport-size picture of him: chubby-faced, black curly hair, and dark glasses. Most intriguing for me was the dedication, 'Turan Ko Bhent', that added to the mystery. The writer, Mr. Kushwaha Kant, was undoubtedly a cult figure. Even today that cult stature remains; still very little is known about him.

Books fortified me against desolation. How did these books reach our community? There were no book shops in town. There was a photo studio that sold detective fiction and juvenile romance in English, and Indian film magazines: 'Mother India' and 'Chitrakaar', but no Kushwaha Kant novels. So where did these books come from? They came from the faraway leper colony in Makogai. Many years ago, a man from the barracks was taken to Makogai island; he was carrying leprosy. From the leper colony, he sent parcels of books for his wife and children. Some of the

books (not all of them were Kushwaha Kant novels) probably originated from Mr. Kushwaha Kant's own press in Varanasi, India. I do not know if the wife of the man from Makogai read the books; it is likely she gave them away to the young men from the barracks. The children didn't seem to value the books; they traded them at school for rulers and coloured pencils. I was the proud owner of some of the books but they weren't Kushwaha Kant novels. Most of them were poorly written Hindi detective fiction and stories about the supernatural. The gaudy covers suited these novels.

The question is sometimes asked of me: 'What inspired you to write?' It's an apt question: what inspired me to be a writer in that nowhere place? Inevitably, I have to give a complicated answer that includes *Ramcharitramanas*, the novels of Kushwaha Kant, and the movies: the sacred and the profane. The great epic helped me to forge a language for myself, the novels instilled in me the romance of being a writer, and the movies expanded the imagination.

Recently in the course of writing this essay, I visited a couple of old bookshops in the township of Ba where I was told I might find novels of Kushwaha Kant. All the works of the author that I had collected in the Ramcharitramanas country had been swiped away by itinerant readers during my sojourn abroad. This is what happens to books when one becomes diasporic. There is no way of tracing their peregrination. They disappear like certain acquaintances from childhood. Are those books still alive somewhere? I shall never be able to know. I remember each of them so distinctly like people from my childhood. There was a hardback copy of *Akela* that I purchased from a grocery store where they sold back issues of the Hindi newspaper *Shanti Dut*. I think the novel cost me four shillings, money I had collected working in a relative's paddy field during the school holidays. I read the novel during a night of immense suffering when I had stomach cramps and a severe fever. I was alone in the house; my parents and sisters had gone to a distant village for a wedding. I stayed up all night to finish the book. I would dearly like to repossess that copy simply because of the memories attached to it.

I desperately needed to revisit Kushwaha Kant in order to find out why the novel had made such a deep impression on my childhood imagination. The Premier Bookshop of Ba was exactly as I had expected a Hindi bookshop to be: the medicinal smell of Indian paper and the range of publications laid out for browsing - from philosophy, the sciences, self-improvement books, adult fiction, and children's literature to texts on astrology and tantric subjects, with occasional Graham Greene and P.G. Wodehouse. It was almost exactly as another bookshop in a different city,

the Premier Bookshop of Bangalore that I frequented in search of something unexpected. Of course the piles in Bangalore Premier Bookshop were more mountainous. And just like the legendary Mr. Shanbagh of Bangalore's Premier Bookshop, off Church Street, the owner of Ba Premier Bookshop came out to help me find what I was looking for. He said he had recently seen a copy of *Akela* and would easily find it for me. My heart must have missed a beat. I didn't really expect to find a copy of *Akela* at Ba's Premier Bookshop. I was prepared to be disappointed. I was disappointed. Someone had come before me, the novel was gone. Instead the bookshop owner pulled out from the bottom of a pile the only remaining novel of Kushwaha Kant in the bookshop—*Khoon ka Pyasa*. That was not what I was looking for. It didn't even have the dedication I wanted to see again. The first few pages showed that Mr. Kushwaha Kant was writing out of his range. It read like a frail imitation of a vampire novel. It was not the Kushwaha Kant of *Basera*, *Nirmohi*, and *Akela*.

What made the visit to Premier Bookshop in Ba worthwhile was meeting the owner of the bookshop who seemed to have read the books he had for sale; the same impression that Mr. Shanbhag of Premier Bookshop of Bangalore created. He started talking about Kushwaha Kant. Many of his older customers still came to buy the author's books; at one time he himself had read most of the author's novels. And then, almost without thinking, he said, 'He was so anti-Muslim in his novels, and look what happened, he fell in love with a married Muslim woman; that was his great tragedy. 'So Turan in the dedication was that Muslim woman who was responsible for the author's tragic end?' I wanted to pursue the subject, but this owner of the Premier Bookshop, like his counterpart in Bangalore, was a man of few words. He left me with a copy of *Khoon ka Pyasa* and disappeared inside his office. Mr. Shanbhag, too, would start a conversation—one would learn that Girish Karnard frequented the book shop, and so did U.R. Ananthamurthy-- and before you could pursue the subject further, there was something else Mr. Shanbhag had to attend to. I was relieved that this Premier Book Shop in Ba was still dispensing books whereas Mr. Shanbhag's Premier Book Shop had closed in 2009. For many reader and writers, it was like the city losing its soul.

Writing came to be my right to exist. Thus all the grand ambitions in the son of an ex-indentured labourer, in that out-of-the-way place, were planted by *Ramcharitramanas*, the novels of Kushwaha Kant and the movies - they were some of the main influences in my wanting to be a writer. My father's language was Malayalam; I spoke Hindi with a certain flair because of these influences. The first extended prose that I ever

wrote was in Hindi at high school. It probably had something of Kushwaha Kant in it, I do not know. The manuscript is lost for ever. Hindi was my original choice made in childhood, and going back to write in it, decades later, was like returning to childhood for important inspiration. It was there, in childhood, I realised the power of books in transporting you to another world, and also the belief that writing was a noble vocation that in some way served humanity. After decades of writing in the English language, when I returned to Hindi again the memory of that initial writing experience came back to me: of seeing the number of pages grow, the narrative taking new turns, and finally discovering the right closure.

During my early visits to India in the 1980's and 90's, I didn't forget my childhood heroes and hoped to fill in the gaps in my knowledge about them. I was disappointed that I could find so little about them. When I mentioned Tulsidas to Mr. Amar Varma of Star Publishers, the largest distributor of Hindi books in India, he found me a copy of Amrit Lal Nagar's novel, *Manas ka Hans*. Ironically, the book opens with a reference to scarcity of material on the life of the greatest poet saint of India. When Nagar asks the filmmaker Mahesh Kaul, a great devotee of Tulsidas, to make a film on the life of the poet, he replies, 'But where is the authentic life history of the holy man?' For this reason very few films have been made on Tulsidas' life in Hindi or any other language, the most well-known being Jayanti Desai's *Sant Tulsidas* that featured one of the favourite starlets of the black and white era, Leela Chitnis.

There were, however, a few interesting facts I found about Tulsidas' career I learnt from Nagar's novel that *Ramcharitramanas* wasn't the poet's only creation; he was the author of such important minor works as *Dohavali*, *Kavitavali* and *Hanuman Chalisa*. For the writing of his novel, Mr. Nagar gleaned through these lesser works for details about the poet's life. He found a different perspective to Tulsidas when he learnt about the poet as a 'producer of manas theatre'. Tulsidas was the originator of Ramleela, a fair the girmitiyas tried to re-create in Fiji. Tulsidas staged his drama all over Varanasi. In my own *Ramcharitramanas country*, we would wait the whole year for this *mela*, demanding new clothes from our parents and collecting pennies for the merry-go-round. Relatives who hadn't seen each other for years would meet at the *mela* ground and around the precinct of the temple where they performed Ram's *leela* (the exploits of Lord Rama). The performance would end with the burning of a giant effigy of Ravana.

During one of my extended stays in India, I went to Jawaharlal National University to find out more about Kushwaha Kant from the Professor of Hindi there. As I suspected, there was no biography of the writer.

Just as with Tulsidas, there was that one epiphany that remained in the popular imagination - the writer's romantic affair with the Turan of the dedication page.

Even minor works of literature can move us in a profound way - this I learnt from my own experience and from reading about Mr. Shyam Narayan Sharma of Nalanda district of Bihar. The story moved me in the same way some of Kushwaha Kant's stories used to affect me when I was a child. Shyam Narayan Sharma was a dangerous criminal who ran an illegal gun factory and carried out contract killing in and around Nalanda. In the year 2000, he turned himself in. In prison, he said he read a 'revolutionary novel' by Kushwaha Kant that radically transformed his life. He started a literacy program for the inmates, and educated over 600 prisoners. He aptly called himself Dayasagar, Ocean of Compassion. After coming out of prison, he sold his property and established a school for the poor calling it Naya Subha, New Dawn. He started wearing a garland of sandals and shoes and garments made out of rough jute as a way of atoning for his criminal past. The script of his life could have been written by Kushwaha Kant himself. I wondered which of the Kushwaha Kant novels he had read. Certainly it could not have been *Khoon ka Pyasa!*

As for Mahipal, no one knew much about him or his films. He was a forgotten hero. He apparently couldn't make the transition to the new type of cinema that emerged after the mythological films were gone. I had to be content spending an engrossing morning with Mr. Rajesh Khanna. I was so entranced by the animated conversation with the ill-fated romantic hero of *Anand* (who could have been a Kushwaha Kant protagonist) that I was prepared to see a faint semblance between him and my childhood deity.

India could never be 'an area of darkness' for the children of Ramcharitramanas country. Our India was the India of myths, legends, gods and heroes. We were brought up to admire the values of keeping one's promise, filial loyalty, sacrifice, valour and nobility, and facing struggles in life with equanimity. Later, travel allowed many of us to make closer contact with India; some, like the testy Trinidad writer, who gave us the phrase 'an area of darkness', grumbled; others didn't want to be anywhere else in the world: India's multilayered reality had enough for a whole lifetime's journey. Even the Trinidadian writer couldn't remain disenchanted forever. I have learnt now he listens to K.L. Saigal's songs and says, 'Hmm, he does make complex seem simple.'

India, on the other hand, has also re-discovered its diaspora: India and its diaspora is the subject of numerous seminars and conferences, books

and films. I have often wondered what separated me from someone like V.S. Naipaul who, for many of us, had opened up a whole new way of looking at the world and writing about it. I am convinced what marked us off was Hindi, *Ramcharitramanas* and the movies we saw as children. According to Naipaul, he had only a smattering of the language. Therefore a whole universe was closed to him. Professor Harish Trivedi is right in his assessment when he says had V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie written in Hindi instead of English, the entire complexion of world's literature would have been permanently altered. The greatness of Naipaul is that what he lacked he transformed into his strength. The sense of dereliction and the feeling of anguish is precisely what enabled him to create the brilliant masterpiece of ennui called *The Enigma of Arrival*.

Most of my contemporaries at the Suva Grammar School on the main island of Fiji, where I had to go to study for university entrance and scholarship abroad, knew little Hindi; the image of India they carried was picked up from the local media. They had no deeply-felt need to trace their roots or search for their identity either. They anglicized their names, their conversations were in English, and they had dark views about India. The negative image of India was imbibed from the local newspaper that delivered regular stories on poverty and drought in India, and printed pictures of spindly children with begging bowls, cows in crowded streets, and skeletal figures dying in drought-ridden Bihar or Bengal. The damage done by the propagandist media to the psyche of young Indo-Fijians has never been fully scrutinized. Already the colonial education system had inculcated a sense of inferiority through a curriculum that had little room for local languages, local history or geography. The arts, sciences and mathematics were all great achievements of the West. All that I had learnt through informal education in the *Ramcharitramanas* country was irrelevant, and was never mentioned in the syllabus. And then this media had its own foxy political agenda. The greatest gift from my *Ramcharitramanas* country was the strength to resist the colonizing thrust in the school syllabus and the media. A number of my contemporaries went through serious crises of identity; some never recovered, and one or two found themselves again later in life through some form of spiritual re-awakening.

Those of us who grew up in the *Ramcharitramanas* country were never in doubt about our identity. We were independent-minded: no one was there to hold our hand, to tell us to keep going, or to persevere. We didn't have to travel to distant places searching for our identity because we didn't suffer the popular malaise of identity crisis. We always knew who we were: we were the children of *Ramcharitramanas* country.

Tulsidas, Kushwaha Kant, Mahipal - the three heroes of my childhood - still remain relatively mysterious to me. All I know is that they transported me into three different kinds of worlds. I have learnt that, as with creativity itself, this mystery is also necessary for our imagination to go on inventing and re-inventing.