

Sri Ramcharitmanas in the Sixteenth Century: A New Historicist Study of Socio-Political Crisis, and Cultural Response

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<https://doi.org/10.61410/had.v21i3.320>

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to critically examine Goswami Tulsidas's *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* in the socio-political and cultural context of sixteenth-century India through a New Historicist perspective. The theory of new historicism examines "the textuality of history and historicity of the text". It means the text is not only a devotional retelling of the Ramayana but also a literary and cultural response to the religious tensions, social changes, and political uncertainties during the Mughal rule of that time. The study discusses the impact of Muslim rule on Hindu society. It also discusses the rise of the Bhakti movement as a spiritual and social response of the time, and Tulsidas's use of vernacular Awadhi to make sacred literature accessible to common people. It further analyses how the ideals of devotion, moral order, and Ram Rajya in *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* reflect a desire for justice, harmony, righteousness, and cultural continuity in a period of crisis. By applying the theory of New Historicism, it shows that Tulsidas's work is deeply connected to the historical realities of its age. It functions as both a spiritual text and a cultural intervention. Tulsidas's epic poem *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* played an important role in preserving religious identity, promoting devotional equality, and shaping the literary and cultural imagination of Indian society.

Keywords: Bhakti Movement, Awadhi, Mughal, New Historicism, Socio-political, Cultural, Religious tension, Vernacular.

Introduction

Sri Ramacaritamanasa is one of the most significant literary and devotional texts in the Indian tradition. It was written by Goswami Tulsidas in the sixteenth century in Awadhi. It retells the story of Lord Rama. Tulsidas wrote *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* in a vernacular language that was accessible to ordinary people instead of Sanskrit, which was mainly limited to the learned class. Because of this, the text became much more than a religious scripture. It became a cultural force that shaped moral values, devotional practices, and social imagination across North India

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for centuries. *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* is therefore important not only as a literary work but also as a historical and cultural text that was deeply connected with the age in which it was produced.

The sixteenth century was a period of political reorganization, cultural anxiety, religious change, and social tension in northern India. Mughal power was becoming stronger, according to historical accounts such as those by Al-Biruni and later travelers like Ibn Battuta they portrayed in their works, they discussed about forced conversions, heavy taxation on non-muslims (like the jizya), the devastation and destruction of Hindu religious symbols like temple, libraries, manuscripts, and idols of Hindu gods and goddesses. “So thousand of Hindus suffered for their faith, and the sacred shrine was sacked to the joy of the true believers” (poole.27). Hindu rituals were also banned in this period, particularly under orthodox sultanes like Sikander Lodi and Firoz Shah Tuglaq. Because of all these circumstances, the common people often faced insecurity in both social and spiritual life. Against this historical background, devotional literature emerged as a powerful response to crisis. Among such works, *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* occupies a special place because it combines religion, poetry, ethics, and cultural identity in a single narrative form.

We study *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* through the lens of New Historicism. New Historicism views literature as a product of its age and argues that literary texts are deeply connected with structures of power, ideology, religion, and society. A text is not separate from history; it both reflects and responds to the conditions of its time. When this approach is applied to *Sri Ramacaritamanasa*, the text can be read as more than a devotional retelling of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, it reflects the social and political condition of the Mughal age. The text also becomes a cultural response to the religious, social, and political tensions of sixteenth-century India. In his sacred epic Tulsidas emphasis on devotion, righteousness, and social harmony for society in a state of constant change. *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* worked as a spiritual, literary, and cultural response to the socio-political and religious challenges of its time. Tulsidas made it accessible to the common people through the use of vernacular language and Bhakti ideology. He represents Rama as an ideal ruler, savior of mankind, epitome of righteousness, and ideal son and husband. Tulsidas created a text that both preserved Hindu tradition and adapted it to new historical realities of his time. In doing so, he turned his epic poem *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* into a major work of cultural restoration and devotional democratization.

The medieval period of Indian history we saw major shifts in political authority and cultural life. Particularly, the successive establishment and expansion of Islamic dynasties in northern India changed not only political rule but also the religious and social structure of society. Before the Islamic invasion took place, India had experienced various invasions in the past from the Greeks and Scythians to the Huns, but the advent of the Mughal rulers had created an enduring impact on the social, political, and religious fabric. Temples, libraries, and centers of education often suffered damage or devastation. This affected the continuity of older Hindu religious and intellectual traditions. As a result, many sections of Hindu society experienced a strong feeling of cultural dislocation and insecurity.

Historical experience during this period was complex. There were many rulers who known for their strict measures against the Hindu religion like temple destruction, and heavy taxation. There were also rulers like Akbar who adopted policies of comparative tolerance and encouraged dialogue among religious communities. “Akbar did not hesitate to interfere with some of their most cherished practices when they offended his sense of humanity” (poole.252) Similarly, Islamic influence on Indian culture was not only destructive. Sufi thought for example, created important spiritual connections with Bhakti traditions, especially in the field of devotion, music, and interior spirituality. Yet even within this complexity the broader Hindu social imagination remained deeply marked by a sense of loss, adjustment, and the need to preserve cultural identity.

This atmosphere of instability and destruction is important for understanding *Sri Ramacaritamanasa*. Tulsidas wrote his great epic in a world where many people felt that moral order had weakened, sacred traditions were under pressure, and social life had become uncertain. His work therefore needs to be read not simply as a retelling of an ancient epic but as a socio-political and religious connections in a hopeless and troubled age. The text offered not only devotion but also a model of ethical order, social harmony, and spiritual continuity.

The Bhakti movement also flourished in medieval Indian culture. This movement was at its peak between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in different regions of India. It not only challenged the strict and orthodox rules made by Brahmins but also emphasized personal devotion to God as the path to salvation. Bhakti saints taught that caste, gender, and birth should not be important for limit spiritual access. This made devotion emotionally powerful and socially meaningful for ordinary people who had little place in elite religious structures. In North India,

the Bhakti movement gained particular strength during a time of cultural and political uncertainty. Bhakti poetry provided hope, intimacy, spiritual equality and emotional solace at a time when social divisions were sharp and public religious life had become strained. The saints used local languages rather than Sanskrit, which allowed devotional ideas to reach lower class of people like peasants, artisans, women, and marginalized communities. Bhakti saints emphasis on using local language in religious texts by removing the monopoly of elite learning over sacred truth.

Tulsidas was a renowned saint of the bhakti tradition. He does not reject tradition completely, yet he clearly values devotion above social rank, wealth, lineage, or intellectual pride. This is visible in his epic poem *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* by the portrayal of figures like Shabari, Hanuman, and Vibhishana. These characters are not celebrated for birth or caste status but they are honored because of their devotion and sincerity. Through such portrayals, Tulsidas presents Bhakti as a spiritually inclusive force that gives dignity to those who might otherwise remain outside religious prestige.

One of the most revolutionary aspects of Tulsidas's work was his decision to compose *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* in Awadhi. In the sixteenth century, Sanskrit still held authority as the language of scripture and theology, while Persian had become the language of administration and court culture under the Mughals. Ordinary people were largely excluded from both these worlds. By choosing Awadhi, Tulsidas positioned his work within the language of the common people and gave vernacular expression spiritual authority and made sacred text accessible to common people.

This linguistic choice had literary, social, and political significance. It made the story of Rama accessible to men and women who were not part of Sanskrit learning. It also strengthened local literary culture and brought sacred knowledge into domestic and communal spaces. Through recitation, singing, storytelling, and performance, the text entered everyday life. The use of Awadhi thus transformed *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* from a literary composition into a living social tradition.

In *Sri Ramacaritamanasa*, Rama is not merely a heroic figure from an old epic tradition. Tulsidas presents him as the representative of dharma, justice, compassion, and ideal kingship. He is divine, but he is also ethically exemplary. This dual character makes Rama central not only to devotion but also to moral imagination. For people living in a time of uncertainty, such a figure represented both spiritual refuge and ethical clarity, like a silver lining among the disappointed people of the medieval era.

The ideal of Ram Rajya is especially important in this respect. Tulsidas describes Rama's kingdom as a realm of justice, harmony, prosperity, and mutual affection. There is no sorrow, fear, or deep social hostility. People follow their duties, live in peace, and remain protected by a righteous ruler. This vision has theological value, but it also carries historical meaning. It offers an ideal model of rule in contrast to the disorder, fear, and exploitation associated with the age of Kali and, symbolically, with the anxieties of contemporary life. Tulsidas portrayed the goodness of Rama raya in these verses in (Uttar Kanda,1066.67)

“Rama raja baithe triloka, Harasita bhaye gaye saba soka.

Bayaru na kara kahu sana koi,Rama pratapa bisamata khoi”.

“Daihika daivika bhautika tapa, rama raja nahi kahuhi byapa.

Saba nara karahi paraspara priti, calahhi svadharma nirate sruti niti.”

Ram Rajya should therefore be read as more than a mythical age of prosperity. It is also a political imagination. Tulsidas uses the figure of Rama to construct a vision of ethical sovereignty that would have deeply appealed to a society troubled by unstable institutions and oppressive structures. Through this ideal, the text provides an alternative image of governance rooted in justice rather than fear, moral law rather than arbitrary power, and compassion rather than domination.

A New Historicist reading of *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* focuses on the ways in which the text indirectly represents the tensions of its time. Tulsidas rarely names the political realities of the sixteenth century directly. Yet the text strongly reflects concerns about social corruption, failed rulers, weakening religious authority, and moral decline. His portrayal of Kali Yuga creates an atmosphere in which duties are forgotten, hypocrisy increases, rulers oppress the people, and sacred teachings lose their force. Such descriptions, while framed in mythic and theological language, can also be read as symbolic reflections of contemporary anxieties. Tulsidas criticize the contemporary social conditions in these verses in (Bala Kanda,208).

“Ayasu karahi sakala bhayabhita, navahi ai nita carana binita.

Bhujabala bisva basya kari rakhesi kou na sutamtra,

Mamdalika mani ravana raja karai nija mamtra”.

This symbolic method is important. Direct criticism of political power was not always possible or safe, but mythic narrative allowed writers to express social concern in indirect ways. Tulsidas uses the language of spiritual decline to comment upon a

broader crisis of order. His lament over corruption is therefore not only religious but also cultural and social. By presenting the age as morally degraded, he prepares the ground for Rama's world as an alternative model of justice and harmony that contrasts with the world of demon Ravana.

New Historicism teaches that literature does not passively reflect history, it participates in shaping historical consciousness. In this sense, *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* does not simply mirror sixteenth-century conditions. It actively responds to them by offering a morally structured universe in which righteousness still has meaning. Tulsidas transforms historical anxiety into sacred narrative, and this is one reason the text became so powerful. It allowed readers and listeners to interpret their own troubled world through a larger moral and spiritual framework. Tulsidas did not write only for kings, scholars, or priests. His text speaks to farmers, householders, ordinary devotees, and socially vulnerable communities. The figure of Rama as a just king who protects the weak would have been especially meaningful to those who felt ignored or oppressed by the structures of their time.

The text also flourished in oral culture. It was sung, recited, enacted, and shared in community life. In marketplaces, homes, village spaces, and festivals, *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* became part of public moral education and shared emotional experience. This public life gave the text enormous cultural power. It did not remain confined to manuscript form; it became woven into the social body of North India. The influence of *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* extends far beyond the sixteenth century. Over time, it became a major cultural institution in North India. It shaped household rituals, public festivals, storytelling traditions, Ramlila performances, ethical teaching, and even political language. Its verses entered daily life, and its characters became models of devotion, duty, sacrifice, and moral order.

The ideal of Ram Rajya continued to resonate in later centuries and even entered modern political imagination. At the same time, the text has remained open to debate. Modern scholars and readers have discussed its treatment of caste and gender, showing that its legacy is not fixed but active and contested. This continuing interpretive life proves that *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* is not merely a medieval relic. It is a living text that continues to shape and challenge Indian cultural consciousness.

Its historical importance lies in the way it joined devotion with cultural survival. In a period of upheaval, it preserved an inherited sacred narrative while reshaping it for a new audience and a new age. Tulsidas created not only a literary

masterpiece but also a durable framework through which communities could imagine justice, devotion, and collective belonging.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* is not only a devotional retelling of the story of Rama but also a deeply historical and cultural text. Written in the complex atmosphere of sixteenth-century North India, it shows the anxieties of the medieval era marked by political change, religious pressure, social fragmentation, and moral uncertainty. Through Bhakti devotion, vernacular language, and the ideal image of Ram Rajya, Tulsidas offered a powerful response to these conditions.

A New Historicist reading reveals that the text is closely related to the ideological and social and political realities of its time. It encodes concerns about rulers, religious decline, corruption, and social disorder through symbolic narrative rather than open political statement. At the same time, it offers not despair but reconstruction. Through Rama, Tulsidas imagines a world of justice, compassion, and spiritual order. In this way, *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* becomes both a mirror of history and a means of shaping cultural hope.

Its lasting power comes from this double function. It is sacred literature, but it is also social thought. It is poetic art, but it is also historical response. By combining theological devotion with cultural sensitivity and literary elegance, Tulsidas created a text that continues to speak across centuries. *Sri Ramacaritamanasa* remains one of the finest examples of how literature can preserve tradition, respond to the social and political crisis of its era, and imagine a more meaningful moral order for society.

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