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Modernising the *Rāmāyaṇa* Tradition: M. Gupta's *Sāket***Introduction**

In 1932, the Hindi-reading public received *Sāket*, a modern retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, written by Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta (1886–1964). Initially it was intended as a poem concerned with Ūrmilā — Lakṣmaṇ's wife, a minor character of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, here exemplifying female characters neglected by Indian authors of all epochs. Gupta began it in response to Mahavīrprasād Dvivedī's essay entitled *Poets' Indifference to Ūrmilā* published in 1908 in an influential Hindi journal "Sarasvatī".¹ Dvivedī, drawing inspiration from an article by Ravīndranāth Thākur, in his essay concerned himself with Ūrmilā as an exemplification of female characters neglected by Indian authors; he postulated that such treatment of Ūrmilā should change. The young Gupta, who regarded Dvivedī as his own *kāvya-guru*, decided to accept that challenge and started writing a poem entitled *Ūrmilā*. At a somewhat later period, Gupta was also encouraged by Choṭelāl Bārhaspātya, an erudite contributor to "Sarasvatī".² From their correspondence we know that between 1909–1915 Gupta several times had discontinued and resumed his work on the poem, before its opening canto could be published in 1916 in "Sarasvatī" (under the title *Sāket*).³ Yet, the work on the poem took a further sixteen years before it was finally published in 1932.⁴ On the basis of the analysis of *Sāket* and

¹ Dvivedī's essay, entitled *Kaviyō kī Ūrmilā-viśayak udāsīntā*, was written under a pen name Bhujāṅgbhūṣaṇ Bhaṭṭācārya. At that time Dvivedī was the editor of "Sarasvatī" and M. Gupta was beginning his literary career as the main poet contributing to the journal. See Ṛṣi Jaiminī Kauśik 'Baruā' (ed.), *Rāṣṭrakavi Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta abhinandan-granth*, Jaiminī-prakāśan, Kalkattā 1959, pp. 49–50, 86–87, and Kamlākānt Pāṭhak, *Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta: vyakti aur kāvya*, Raṅjit printars and pablisars, Dillī 1960, p. 393.

² E.g. Bārhaspātya advised Gupta on how the poem should be written. See his letter to Gupta, dated 1 January 1911, in: Baruā, op. cit., pp. 86–87.

³ Ibid., pp. 88, 89 and 194–195; Pāṭhak, op. cit., pp. 177–178 and 394–395.

⁴ For more on this subject see: D. Stasik, *Sāket: Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta's Version of Rām-kathā*, in: P. Balcerowicz and M. Mejör (eds), *On the Understanding of Other Cultures*.

of other sources there is no doubt that the long years of Gupta's work on the poem are, among other things, expressive not only of the author's changing view of it but also of his problems with several traditions he wanted to incorporate in it.

In our paper we seek to analyse *Sāket* from the point of view of the impact of these traditions which express themselves in different layers of Gupta's poem. We begin by seeking to answer the question: why did Gupta entitle his retelling of *rām-kathā Sāket*? In our discussion, we refer first to the *rām-bhakti* tradition and in particular to one of its currents called *rasik-sampradāy*, into which Gupta happened to be initiated. In the main part of our paper we are concerned with the figure of Rām. He appears to be the most convenient focus for further discussion, as his character is expressive of different traditions, ideologies and influences, which served Gupta as the means of constructing his own retelling.

But before we concentrate on the figure of Rām, we would like to summarise the plot of the poem. It will not only make our arguments easier to follow but will also enable us to analyse briefly *Sāket*'s narrative strategies, considered to be the most original and innovative feature of Gupta's retelling.

Sāket's Narrative

Canto 1 opens up with clarifying the reasons of Rām's *avatār* in this world. He is said to be born to show people the [right] way to a fulfilled existence.⁵ After a very brief introduction to Rām's family, Gupta proceeds to describe the prosperity of Sāket-Ayodhyā⁶ and then concentrates on a lively dialogue between Lakṣmaṇ and Ūrmilā which is first and foremost expressive of their happy married life; it also refers to the investiture of Rām as Crown Prince⁷ and Bharat's absence from Ayodhyā⁸ (Canto 1). Then we are witnesses to the dialogue between Kaikeyī and her shrewd maid, Mantharā, who succeeds to convince her that holding the ceremony during her son's absence is a conspiracy. As a result Kaikeyī demands two boons from Daśarath — the crown for their son, Bharat, and fourteen-year exile to Rām (Canto 2). Rām, having learnt about his fate, not only accepts it quietly but tries also to console a terribly distressed

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⁵ Maithiliśaraṇ Gupta, *Sāket*, Sāhitya-sadan, Cirgāv (Jhāsi) 1961, p. 18; see further in the present study.

⁶ The first of these names is more often used; at some places Gupta uses them interchangeably; see e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Daśarath and to appease Lakṣmaṇ's burst of rage. Eventually, Lakṣmaṇ without having thought much, decides to join Rām in his exile (Canto 3). Sītā, having learnt about everything, has no doubts what she should do and thinks of the forest exile as of her paradise to be.⁹ Also Ūrmilā, deep in her heart, wants to accompany her husband but she fears that her presence will prevent him from being always ready to serve Rām and Sītā with an intense devotion, therefore she decides to stay behind (Canto 4). Rām and his companions, dressed in bark as ascetics, are ready to set off from Sāket. They are surrounded by crowds of citizens for whom Rām is their chosen *rājā* and for quite a while they do not want to let him go.¹⁰ At last the trio leave the city and after some time reach the kingdom of Niṣads whose king, Guh, helps them to cross the river Gaṅgā. They proceed to Prayāg to meet ṛṣi Bharadvāj. Following his advice they go to Citrakūṭ and on their way they meet V ā l m ī k i. They decide to stay in Citrakūṭ (Canto 5).

In Canto 6 G u p t a for some time reverts to Sāket, where all wait for the return of Sumantra, Daśarath's minister, who was accompanying Rām up to the river Gaṅgā. The anguish of Daśarath is so great that he dies after hearing from Sumantra the news about his beloved son, Rām. Bharat and Śatrughna, who at that time were paying a visit to Kaikeyī's paternal home, are promptly recalled to Sāket by the family priest, Vasiṣṭh (Canto 6). On coming home and learning the awful truth, Bharat treats his mother with great contempt. He is highly disturbed but Kausalyā and Vasiṣṭh eventually manage to pacify him and the funeral rites of Daśarath can be duly performed (Canto 7).

With Canto 8 we move once again to Citrakūṭ and witness the enjoyable life that Sītā and Rām lead there. Their peace is interrupted by a tumultuous advent of Bharat with the army, the queens and the retinue together with the citizens of Sāket. Bharat's aim is to bring Rām back home and restore the kingdom to him. But despite his most earnest persuasion Rām stays in the forest and Bharat returns to the capital to reign as regent with Rām's sandals as a symbol of his royal power. Before the whole retinue sets out for Sāket, Sītā arranges a secret meeting between Ūrmilā and Lakṣmaṇ (Canto 8).

In Canto 9 the narrative comes to a standstill; this section is entirely devoted to the description of Ūrmilā as a *virahinī*, i.e. suffering the pangs of separation from her beloved Lakṣmaṇ. This theme is continued in Canto 10, in which Ūrmilā's thoughts flash back to her own and her sisters' childhood and adolescence, and to the bow tournament followed by her and her sisters' marriage with Daśarath's sons. She confides all her memories to the river Sarayū.

The beginning of Canto 11 introduces us to Bharat's hermitage with a golden temple, in the vicinity of the royal palace. There he leads a renouncer's life worshipping Rām's sandals enthroned on a magnificent jewelled footstool

⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 128–132.

(*maṇimay pād-pīṭh*).¹¹ After a while, Māṇḍavī, Bharat's wife, joins him and, later still, Śatrughna, who tells them what he heard about Rām from a certain merchant visiting their city.¹² He tells them about Rām's departure from Citrakūṭ for the Daṇḍak forest where the incident of the severing of Śūrpaṇakhā's ears and nose took place and was followed up with a battle in which Rām killed Khar and Dūṣaṇ. While they are still wondering about Rām's victory, all of a sudden Bharat aims an arrow at a dark object he has noticed in the sky. Considering it a demon, he actually wounds Hanumān flying for *sañjīvanī*, a life-saving herb, for Lakṣmaṇ. Luckily, Hanumān recovers very quickly, thanks to some amount of *sañjīvanī* which Bharat was given earlier by a *yogī*,¹³ and narrates how Śūrpaṇakhā persuaded his brother Rāvaṇ to take revenge on Rām and kidnap his wife Sītā. He tells also how finally Rām, assisted by Sugrīv's monkey-troops, invaded Laṅkā to recover Sītā. Many brave warriors were killed on both sides during that war; Lakṣmaṇ, seriously wounded, was waiting for *sañjīvanī* that could save his life. Therefore, Hanumān — eager to fulfill his mission — leaves Sāket immediately after finishing his story (Canto 11).

The last Canto 12 opens with the description of great agitation, which seized the city at the news of the war and the critical state of Lakṣmaṇ. Bharat — at the instigation of Māṇḍavī — orders Śatrughna to get the troops ready for the attack on Laṅkā. Almost all the citizens of Ayodhyā, and among them also Kaikeyī and Ūrmilā, are prepared for the battle. But then Vasiṣṭh intervenes and persuades them to calm down and to look into the sky where, thanks to his inner powers, they can see what is happening in Laṅkā.¹⁴ And thus they learn about the fate of Lakṣmaṇ, the final victory of Rām over Rāvaṇ, and the release of Sītā. After Rām's return to Sāket everyone rejoices and Ūrmilā especially, reunited with Lakṣmaṇ, is unable to contain her happiness.

Let us look at the poem's plot from the point of view of its narrative strategies. Up to Canto 8 we witness the events covering roughly the story of the traditional Book 2, the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, presented to us in a conventional way, i.e. either — in most of the cases — through the characters' dialogues or through the poet's descriptions. Then follow Canto 9 with the account of Ūrmilā as *virahinī* and Canto 10 in which her memories go back to the events of Book 1, the *Bālakāṇḍa*. The two last cantos — 11 and 12 — cover the story of Books 3 to 6, though most of the events are narrated in an unconventional manner — first by Śatrughna repeating what he heard from a merchant, then by Hanumān shot down by Bharat, and then visualised and projected onto the sky by Vasiṣṭh.

Thus it becomes obvious that the narration in Gu p t a's poem is constituted in such a way that almost the whole of the story is told from one place, i.e. Sāket.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 389.

¹² Ibid., pp. 410–415.

¹³ Ibid., p. 417.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 477 ff.

One minor exception seems to be encountered in Canto 8 when the action moves to Citrakūṭ. Indian critics, however, do not treat it as a departure from this rule of the unity of place and point to the fact that the whole society of Sāket was present in Citrakūṭ¹⁵ (*samprati Sāket-samāj vahī hai sārā*¹⁶). But it should be noted here that before Bharat with others reach Citrakūṭ, G u p t a makes us experience for quite a long while its quiet atmosphere.¹⁷ What is more, this rule, otherwise almost consistently obeyed by G u p t a, is broken once more (critics seem to overlook this fact) in Canto 5 when Rām with his brother and wife leave Sāket and, having crossed the river Gaṅgā, proceed on their way to the wilderness.¹⁸

Why Sāket?

With the problem of Sāket as the place from which the poem's narration is carried out, we touch on one of the most intriguing questions connected with G u p t a's retelling: why was it given this name — *Sāket*? In one of the most influential works on the history of Hindi literature, Rāmcandra Ś u k l a's *History of Hindi Literature*, we read that G u p t a's poem was entitled *Sāket* which means that it is preoccupied mostly with the presentation of the events (together with their circumstances) that took place in Ayodhyā (!).¹⁹ Similar explanations can be found in other works on the poem,²⁰ if their authors take the trouble to give one at all. But can we call it a real explanation?

With the word Sāket we enter into the realm of diverse sources of G u p t a's inspiration. We should remember that his family were devout Vaiṣṇavas. His father was practising the so-called *sakhī-bhāv upāsanā*, which is one of the modes of *rām-bhakti*, a branch of its important current known as *rasik-sampradāy*, into which G u p t a was also initiated.²¹

Without going into too many details,²² we can say that the majority of *rām-bhaktas*, the devotees of Rām, adore him as his most devoted servants (*dās*),

¹⁵ See e.g. P ā ṭ h a k, op. cit., p. 412.

¹⁶ G u p t a, op. cit., p. 222.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 220–236.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 114–158.

¹⁹ *Kāvya kā nām Sāket rakhā gayā hai, jiskā tātparya yah hai ki ismē ayodhyā mē honevālī ghaṭnāō aur paristhitiyō kā hī varnaṇ pradhān hai*; Rāmcandra Ś u k l a, *Hindī sāhitya kā itihās*, Nāgarī pracārīṇi sabhā, Kāśī 1960, p. 587.

²⁰ Cf. P ā ṭ h a k, op. cit., p. 412.

²¹ B a r u ā, op. cit., p. 18 and P ā ṭ h a k, op. cit., pp. 408–409.

²² For more details the most comprehensive study on this sect can be consulted, viz.: Bhagavatīprasād Siṁ h, *Rām-bhakti mē rasik sampradāy*, Avadh-sāhitya-mandir, Balrāmpur 1957. See also: Ph. L u t g e n d o r f, *The Secret Life of Rāmcandra of Ayodhya*, in: P. R i c h m a n (ed.), *Many Rāmāyaṇas. The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1991, pp. 217–234 and P. v a n d e r V e e r, *Gods on Earth. Management of Religious Experience and Identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre*, Athlone Press, London 1988, esp. pp. 159–172.

full of unselfish love for their Lord, ever-ready to attend him. This main current of *rām-bhakti*, propagated in the 16th-century *Rāmcaritmāns* of Tulsīdās, is termed *dāsya-bhakti*.²³ About the middle of the 16th century, another mode of worship evolved under the influence of *kr̥ṣṇa-bhakti*.²⁴ The object of worship here is the divine couple, Sītā and Rām, called the *yugal-sarkār* (lit. 'the ruling couple'), exercising their sweet play (*mādhurya-līlā*) in the divine world (*divya-lok*) of Sāket. This type of devotion, called *mādhurya-bhakti*,²⁵ is fundamental in the ramaite sect known as *rasik-sampradāy*.²⁶ The doctrine and practice of the sect is esoteric, available only to initiates,²⁷ although in principle it is said to belong to the main current of *rām-bhakti*, based on Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas*. But the fact that for *rasiks* the most important period, practically the only one that really matters, is when Rām and Sītā dwell in Ayodhyā, is the cause of their departure from the common practices and beliefs of other *rām-bhaktas*. According to *rasiks*, the abode of Rām can be perceived on two levels. Firstly, it is the earthly, real (*laukik*) Ayodhyā, the physical dimension of which can be experienced empirically (*bhūlok*). Secondly, it is the heavenly, transcendent (*alaukik*) Sāket, attainable only by means of esoteric practices (*divyalok*).²⁸ Rām is here the archetypal actor performing his cosmic drama for his audience, i.e. *rasiks*, the initiated devotees, who are capable of savouring its *ras*, the essence.

It should also be added here that worshipping the couple jointly and a very strong stress on its propriety (*maryādā*) pose a problem — how can men serve the *yugal-sarkār* without robbing Sītā of her dignity? In order to avoid such a situation, a man has to think of himself as Sītā's female attendant (*sakhī*), practicing thus the *sakhī-bhāv upāsanā*.²⁹

This is not to say that Gupta aimed at creating a devotional poem in an esoteric mood, which *Sāket* is not, by any means. However, naming it in such a way, he made use of the tradition which looks at Rām's life from the perspective of the heavenly Sāket, the abode of his divine play. This device enabled the poet to narrate the story of his favoured deity (*iṣṭ-dev*) and simultaneously to devote his attention to Ūrmilā, a female character belonging to the circle of people close to Rām who, nevertheless, did not accompany him during the time of his exile.³⁰

²³ Lit. 'devotion typical of servant', i.e. full of humility.

²⁴ Simh 1957, op. cit., p. 143 and van der Veer, op. cit., p. 170; see also Lutgendorf 1991, op. cit., pp. 228–230.

²⁵ Lit. 'sweet, delightful bhakti'.

²⁶ See: Simh 1957, op. cit., pp. 141–143, 149–161 and Bhagavatīprasād Simh, *Rāmkāvyaadhāra: anusandhān evam anucintan*, Lokbhāratī prakāśan, Ilāhābād 1976, p. 25.

²⁷ Simh 1957, op. cit., pp. 66 and 175.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 273–278 and Lutgendorf 1991, op. cit., pp. 220–221.

²⁹ Simh 1957, op. cit., pp. 157–159 and 162–163; see also van der Veer, op. cit., p. 162.

³⁰ Cf. Gupta's letter to Gandhi (dated rāmnavamī 1989) in: Baruā, op. cit., p. 199. Ūrmilā's character will not be discussed in the present paper. For more on this subject see: Stasik 2000, op. cit.

G u p t a used it in order to present his vision of world, seen by him as the stage on which the drama of humanity (*manuṣyatva kā nāṭya*)³¹ is being performed by Rām with Sāket as the symbol of heaven on earth.

In the following discussion, by concentrating on the figure of Rām, we seek to answer how this device is employed in the poem and what elements of other traditions, ideologies and influences served Gupta as the means of constructing his own retelling.

G u p t a ' s R ā m

G u p t a ' s poem is preceded by a very revealing stanza (printed on a separate page), which can be interpreted as an expression of perplexity of a modern man living in a rational world, who, pressed by reality, is confronted with the question of the existence of God.

Rām, are you a man, not God,
 who dwells in every corner of this world?
 So I have no God, God forgive me!
 And if you do not dwell [here], my mind will dwell upon you.³²

The very personal tone of these words makes us treat them as the author's profession of the lack of faith, allowing him to treat Rām only as a human being. But it is not so — this stanza rather seems to be the reaction of a tradition-loving man to a contemporary reality, in which reason tends to take over faith. It is seeking the answer just in case should Rām turn out to be not God but a human being only. Such explanation can be inferred from the words in which Gupta first expresses his seeming atheism: "So I have no God" but then adds immediately: "God forgive me!" It is also attested by a number of other passages expressive of the nature of Rām, of which especially two stand out from the rest, when we consider their importance from the point of view their immediate impact on Gupta's audience.

The first of them comes almost at the very beginning of the poem, in the ninth verse of Canto 1.

He, who is without qualities, has got a form with qualities,
 The Lord of All has become incarnate.
 For what reason has the Lord played this game?
 Having become a human being drank milk of a woman?

³¹ See further in the present study.

³² *rām, tum mānav ho? īśvar nahī ho kyā? / viśv mē rame hue nahī sabhī kahī ho kyā? / tab maī nirīśvar hū, īśvar kṣamā kare; / tum na ramo to man tummē ramā kare.* Gupta, op. cit., unnumbered page.

He has done it out of³³ love for his devotees,
 He, [who] is the Lord of Universe, the Abode of Play.
 In order to show the way to the world,
 to deliver earth from the burden of [sin],
 to fulfill people's expectations,
 why wouldn't he bring into existence his own creations?
 [Now] it's a cold winter of the demons' rule
 but very near is the spring of Ram's reign.³⁴

The second passage comes from Canto 8 describing the life of the exiles in Citrakūṭ. The poet, in a very thorough way, develops the characteristics of Rām and clearly states the reasons for his appearance in this world. This passage forms the core of Rām's answer to Sītā's queries about, among other things, the meaning of existence. He explains to her that his forest exile, which means suffering, is in fact his individual sacrifice for the well-being of the rest of society (*samaṣṭi ke lie vyaṣṭi-balidānī*).³⁵ His aim is to change people and to build a new society by means of spreading Aryan culture among those who either are not familiar with it or, for certain reasons, are deprived of it. We may add here that Gupta also makes Rām speak about every man's right to self-determination and practically creates the vision of the welfare state responsible for its citizens.³⁶ Below follows an extensive fragment of Rām's speech:

I came to tell about the ideal for Aryans,
 I came to explain that riches mean nothing as against a man.
 I came to bring about the revolution for happiness and peace,
 I came to protect the faith of the faithful. (...)
 [I came] so that they, whose fear is manifest,
 who in silence endure the rule of demons, can become fearless.
 I came so that propriety lasts,
 pure and simple life is not fated to be extinguished.
 I came to give happiness and to experience pain,
 I came to play in the drama of humanity. (...)
 I came not to enjoy rule myself but to make others enjoy it,
 I came to feed the pearls of freedom to those who are virtuous like swans.
 I came to spread new grandeur in the world,

³³ Lit. 'it (i.e. this reason) is called'.

³⁴ *ho gayā nirgunṇ sagunṇ-sākār hai, / le liyā akhileś ne avatār hai. / kislīe yah khel prabhu ne kiyā? / manuj bankar mānavī kā pay piyā? / bhakt-vatsaltā isīkā nām hai, / aur vah lokeś līlā-dhām hai. / path dikhāne ke lie saṁsār ko, / saphal karne ke lie jandṛṣṭiyā, / kyō na kartā vah svayam nij sṛṣṭiyā? / asur-śāsan śīśir-may hemant hai, / par nikaṭ hī rām-rājya-vasant hai.* Gupta, op. cit., pp. 18.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 233.

³⁶ *nij rakṣā kā adhikār rahe jan jan ko, / sabkī suvidhā kā bhār kintu śāsan ko.* Ibid.

I came to cause people to obtain divine nature!
 I didn't bring here the message of heaven,
 I came to make this very earth heaven. (...)
 Those who will remember just my name,
 they will cross the ocean of existence without any effort.
 But those who will assume my virtues, works and nature,
 they will also take others across.³⁷

The contents of this and two other fragments of the poem quoted above show clearly that Gupta's image of Rām is characterised by traditional features stemming directly from the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, established in the Hindi speaking area mainly on the basis of Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas*. These features, as well as other features related to this tradition, are combined with modern characteristics which substantially are the poet's original contribution to the image of Rām. In other words, the traditional image is intertwined with ideas expressive of later developments which took place both inside and outside the tradition and four main sources of Gupta's inspiration become prominent:

1. Tulsīdās's *bhakti*;
2. the tradition of *rasik-sampradāy*;
3. Gandhi's socio-political philosophy;³⁸
4. Indian national movement drawing inspiration from the ideal of India's past.

Thus, Rām in *Sāket* is the Ultimate Being, Brahman without qualities, who has manifested himself to the world as God, Lord of All (*akhileśvar*). He has descended from heaven assuming the form of a man out of love for his devotees and for their well-being. Such an image, typical of *bhakti* expounded in the *Rāmcaritmānas*, is strengthened by the lines beginning with the words "those who will remember just my name." Being in the form of a traditional *phalaśruti*,³⁹ they are expressive of the power of Rām and his name. It should be stressed here that — contrary to the opinion of some critics who incorrectly interpret the stanza preceding the poem and tend to see in Gupta's Rām a human

³⁷ *maĩ āryō kā ādarś batāne āyā. / jan-sammukh dhan ko tucch jatāne āyā. / sukh-sānti-hetu maĩ krānti macāne āyā, viśvāsī kā viśvās bacāne āyā. / (...) ho jāyā abhay ve jinhē ki bhay bhāsit haĩ, jo kaunap-kul se mūk-sadrś śāsīt haĩ. / maĩ āyā, jismē banī rahai maryādā, / bac jāy pralay se, miṭai na jīvan sādā. / sukh dene āyā, duḥkh jhelne āyā, / maĩ manuṣyatva kā nāṭya khelne āyā. / (...) maĩ rājya bhogne nahĩ, bhugāne āyā, / haṁsō ko muktā-mukti cugāne āyā. / bhav mē nav vaibhav vyāpt karāne āyā, / nar ko iśvartā prāpt karāne āyā! / sandeś yahā maĩ nahĩ svarg kā lāyā, / is bhūtal ko hī svarg banāne āyā. / (...) jo nām mātr hī smaraṇ madīy karēge, / ve bhī bhavsāgar binā prayās tarēge. / par jo merā guṇ, karm, svabhāv dharēge, / ve aurō ko bhī tār, pār utrēge. Gupta, op. cit., pp. 234–235.*

³⁸ See e.g.: Nagendra, *Sāket: ek adhyayan*, Sāhitya-ratna bhaṇḍār, Āgrā 1960, pp. 97–98.

³⁹ Lit. 'fruit (i.e. result) of hearing'.

being only⁴⁰ — there is no doubt that for the author of *Sāket* he is the Ultimate Being and God incarnate. However, it is also true that having acknowledged Rām's divinity once, further in the poem, Gupta does not develop this trait, concentrating rather on his hero's earthly exploits. The divinity of Rām symbolises an ideal of humanity, an exemplar to be imitated by all people in order to bring out the divine in them.⁴¹

Rām, the Abode of Play (*līlā-dhām*), like an actor has entered the stage of the world in *Sāket* to play the drama of humanity. Such a treatment draws our attention to the tradition of *rasik-sampradāy* which looks at Rām's life from the perspective of the heavenly *Sāket*. As has already been noted, *Sāket* is the main place from which the poem's narration is conducted and it thus becomes a point of reference for the entire reality, in which Rām carries out his mission aimed at making the whole earth heaven.

This vision is evidently filtered through the poet's modern outlook and especially by Gandhian thought. It finds its expression in thinking about heaven on earth in very worldly terms, i.e. in terms of the betterment of people's existence. As a result it seems more proper to view Rām not so much as an ideal king known from the very beginnings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, but rather as an ideal leader influenced by democratic ideals (coloured strongly with a utopian concept of society) who wants to invest his people with power and manifests his humanist belief in man. He also appears to be a resolute reformer ready for revolution, who by means of his mission intends to change the world and people living in it. Gupta believes that Rām's rule is a safeguard to achieving these aims. How meaningful in this context is Gandhi's opinion referred to by authors interested in the righteous reign of Rām: "Rāmraj means rule of the people. A person like Rām would never wish to rule."⁴² No wonder Rām in *Sāket* says: "I came not to enjoy rule myself but to make others enjoy it." It is worth mentioning here that Gandhi further adds that "God calls himself a servant of servants."⁴³ The echo of these words is also to be found in the poem and is verbalised by Bharat saying that the person appointed as a ruler is only a servant of the people (*niyat śāsak lok-sevak mātr*⁴⁴).

⁴⁰ Cf. e.g.: Dhīrendra Varmā (ed.), *Hindī sāhitya*, Bhāratīy hindī pariṣad, Prayāg 1959, vol. 3, pp. 159–160 and B.H. Rājūrkar, *Rāmkaṭhā ke pātr: Vālmīki, Tulsī evam Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta ke sandarbh mē*, Grantham, Kānpur 1972, pp. 98–99.

⁴¹ Cf. Pāṭh k, op. cit., p. 459.

⁴² A.G. Menon and G.H. Schokker, *The Conception of Rāma-rājya in South and North Indian Literature*, in: A.W. van den Hoek et al. (eds), *Ritual, State and History in South Asia. Essays in Honour of J.C. Heesterman*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1992, p. 623 and Ph. Lutgendorf, *Interpreting Rāmraj. Reflections on the Rāmāyaṇ, Bhakti, and Hindu Nationalism*, in: D. Lorenzen (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India. Community Identity and Political Action*, Suny, New York 1995, p. 254.

⁴³ Menon and Schokker, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Gupta, op. cit., p. 93.

Very revealing also is a reference to the ideal for Aryans, which is to be taught by Rām. On the one hand it is indicative of Gupta's times when India was swept by the tide of the national movement. Looking back to India's glorious past (which for Gupta is synonymous with the Veda and Vedic tradition⁴⁵) served, among other things, the purpose of building up national identity and preparing Indians for the struggle with the British. On the other hand it reminds us of the influence of Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī (1824–1883), the founder of the Ārya Samāj (1875), who preached the revival of Hinduism according to the spirit of the Veda.⁴⁶ It seems very meaningful that Rām reveals the purpose of his coming to this world during forest exile. Thus a very important question arises, i.e. why does the forest become the scene of Rām's mission?

To seek an answer to this question we should refer to the verse which says that Rām came "to make this very earth heaven". Sāket, as his heavenly abode, in the poem symbolises heaven, therefore Rām's mission has to be addressed to those who live in the forest, i.e. the natural antithesis of Sāket,⁴⁷ which is not only a symbol of heaven but also of civilisation, Aryan civilisation. Thus contact with demons, the culmination of which is the fight between Rām and Rāvaṇ, receives here a new dimension — it is viewed as a conflict between two civilisations and Rām's victory, of course, as the victory of Aryan civilisation. It is evident from the words summing up his victorious battle with the demons Khar and Dūṣaṇ: "Aryan civilisation has been established, Aryan *dharm* has been confirmed."⁴⁸ When Rām's mission comes to an end, the whole earth will be cleansed of demons. There is no doubt that these demons, the epic enemy of Rām, for Gupta also have a much more familiar countenance, that of the British who ruled his country — Rām's victory is an allegory of an imminent triumph of Indians, the noble, civilised Aryans, over the British, the incarnate forces of evil.

In the end of his poem Gupta once again gives a vivid expression of his attitude towards Rām, which can be termed as the attitude of a *bhakta* reformed

⁴⁵ E.g. *ibid.*, p. 235; cf. Nagendra, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁴⁶ J.N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi 1977 (First published in 1914), pp. 102–129. For more about the life and beliefs of Svāmī Dayānanda see: J.T.F. Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī: His Life and Ideas*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1978.

⁴⁷ On the connotations of the opposition between the forest and the city and the nature of kingship in Indian tradition see: S. Pollock (trans.), *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, vol. 3, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1991, pp. 12–54 and 68–84; cf. also Lutgendorf 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

⁴⁸ *ārya-sabhyatā huī pratiṣṭhit, / ārya-dharm āśvast huā*. Gupta, *op. cit.*, p. 415; cf. Dhīrendra Varmā (ed.), *Hindī sāhitya koś*, Jñān maṇḍal limited, Vārāṇasī 1986, vol. 2, p. 622. We should note that *Sāket* is considered to be the first literary work in Hindī which interprets Rām's exile and his struggle with demons in terms of the conquest of (uncivilised) non-Aryan peoples. Cf. Rāma Dhārī Singh 'Dinkara', *Maithilīśaraṇa Gupta as a Poet of the Renaissance*, in: Nagendra (ed.), *Maithilīśaraṇa Gupta. An Anthology*, Bansal & Co., Delhi 1981, p. 102.

in the spirit of modernity. He continues to worship Rām but basically, due to developing his human features which are in keeping with a rational viewpoint, he makes him an exemplar of a fulfilled existence.⁴⁹ In such a way an image of Rām in *Sāket* combines characteristics of tradition and modernity, of human and divine nature.

Conclusions

The foregoing discussion indicates that Gupta's poem is an interesting evidence of the period of Indian national and social awakening when modern Hindi authors turned their attention to the well-known epic and mythological sources. It seems thus natural that a very popular story of Rām, who, at least from the times of Tulsīdās, functions in the Hindi speaking region as God-King protecting his devotees-subjects, proved to be ideal material for the poem. Gupta, far from being silent about Rām's divinity, first and foremost tried to expose his human nature and to make him a true leader of his people for whom, thanks to his righteous deeds and steadfastness, he could bring well-being and peace. It is justified to say that although Gupta created a modern poem, having retained both aspects of the nature of Rām (with the indisputable dominance of the human aspect), he situated its hero between tradition and modernity.

Sāket, like other modern retellings of *rām-kathā*,⁵⁰ reveals a multi-layered approach to a story which by its nature is a repository of myth. Gupta built his retelling on the original myth of Rām but interpreting it by means of rationalising, demythologising and introducing new original elements,⁵¹ and the most vital of them, i.e. determining the interpretative frames of the poem already indicated by its title, was the choice of *Sāket* as the place of narration. It intermingled with other elements of this retelling and as a result Gupta's Rām appears to be not only a master of the hearts and minds of his subjects but also their most devoted servant willing to provide them with all that was his lot, i.e. with all that was the embodiment of his very self and of his abode, *Sāket*.

Gupta was one of the first really successful poets who looked for inspiration from Indian tradition and believed that interpreting it anew could serve the cause of the national movement and social change. As a result his retelling evolved into another myth — a myth of heaven on earth, which is to come soon due to the divine nature of humankind brought out in them under the leadership

⁴⁹ "Our Lord is our ideal" (*ādarś hī īśvar hai hamārā*). Gupta, op. cit., p. 500. It is worth noting here that the word *īśvar*, used in the original, denotes both the personal god and the earthly king.

⁵⁰ See D. Stasik, *On Modern Retellings of Rām-kathā in Hindi Literature: Bhagvān Simh's Novel Apne-apne Rām*, "Berliner Indologische Studien", no. 11–12 (1998), pp. 259–268.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 267.

of Rām. Therefore the choice of the poem's title seems clear. *Sāket* is a symbol of heaven on earth, where nothing is mundane and all is divine — as long as the faithful have faith, the drama of existence takes place in Sāket.

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