

Let the feast go on: Food and eating on the battlefield of Lankā

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The cultural landscape of India, from the earliest Vedic period to contemporary times, is littered with food.
Patrick Olivelle¹

The eater of food and food indeed are everything here.²

1. *Introductory remarks*

In the opening lines of the battle passages in Book 6 (*Lankā*) of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, where the climax of the war between Rām and Rāvaṇ (6.39-103) is described,³ Rāvaṇ, reacting to the war cries of his adversary's troops, utters some very significant words:

‘Monkeys have come encouraged by Death,
[While] all my demons are hungry’,
Said that ignorant villain, bursting out with a loud laughter.
‘Vidhi⁴ has sent [us] food just straight home’.⁵
(6.40.2)

These lines introduce Tulsīdās's audiences to the battle of Lankā, considered by Rāvaṇ, one of its chief actors, as an occasion for a meal to appease the demons'

1. Olivelle 1995, 367.

2. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.1.6.19; see Smith 1990, 177.

3. All references to Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* are to the text as constituted in the Gītā Pres edition.

4. ‘Vidhi/Bidhi’ – a title of Brahmā as Creator. However, since in the *Rāmcaritmānas* it may also refer to Rām in his unqualified (*nirguṇ*) aspect of the Supreme Being, I have decided to leave this epithet in its original form in order not to narrow its multilayered meaning.

5. *āe kīsa kāla ke prere / chudhāvanta saba nisicara mere // asa kahi aṭṭahāsa saṭha kīnhā / gr̥ha baiṭhe ahāra bidhi dīnhā.*

hunger. They also bring to mind an inspiring article by Vidyut Aklujkar in which she discusses a banquet metaphor employed in the early manuscripts of Sūrdās's poems describing the battle between Rām and Rāvaṇ.⁶ Underlining the novelty of the metaphor in this context, Aklujkar notes that while uncommon, it is not unprecedented,⁷ and her main argument allows her to reveal new sources for Sūrdās's Rām poems – the *Ānandarāmāyaṇa* and the *Hanumannāṭaka*. Observing the unusual choice of imagery in this context,⁸ she also very rightly notes that while the figure of speech used by Sūrdās in his poem is a '*sāṅga rūpaka*, or extended metaphor, where a situation is paralleled with another in a number of details', which is common in Sanskrit as well as in vernacular poetry, '[t]he imagery used in numerous Rāma-kathā texts almost always is from the realm of nature'.⁹ Aklujkar refers for example to the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* where we read of Rāma's and Rāvaṇa's '*showers of arrows*' or that 'Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa being shot by Indrajit's arrows appear *like two mountains being drenched by torrential rain*', 'Rāma covered with blood resembles *a kimśuka tree in blossom*' or that '[t]he brilliance of warrior Rāma is *like the blinding brilliance of the Sun at the end of an eon*'. She also notes that the same applies to Tulsīdās, the key author of this paper, who 'confines himself to the traditional choice of nature imagery and uses the metaphor of torrential rains at the time of the deluge in describing the shower of arrows in this battle'.¹⁰ In fact, Tulsīdās goes far beyond this in his use of nature imagery. And we can best illustrate this point by quoting a few examples from his work, some of which very interestingly refer to phenomena that can, even if only by the power of convention, be observed in the animal realm:

[Rāvaṇ said:] 'All champions, set forth in four directions,
Seize bears and monkeys and eat them all!'
'O, Umā', said Śiv, 'Rāvaṇ is so self-conceited
As a *tittibha* bird¹¹ that sleeps with its feet up!¹²
(6.40.3)

6. Aklujkar 1991. The poem in question, which does not appear in the *Sūrsāgar*'s edition published by the Nāgarī Pracārīṇī Sabhā (esp. 191-254), is number 373 in Bryant–Hawley 2015, 633-39.

7. For more details see Aklujkar 1991.

8. *Ibid.*, 353.

9. *Ibid.*, 354.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Identified as the red-wattled lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*; see e.g. <http://aranyaparva.wordpress.com/tag/tittibha/>; access on 10 August 2014), believed to sleep in such a manner in order to prevent an unexpected falling of the sky. Its way of sleeping is also said to indicate how self-conceited it is. In the quoted lines, Rāvaṇ is said to be a *tittibha* bird and Rām is the sky that may fall; Añjanānandanāśaraṇ 1998, 229-30.

12. *subhata sakala cārīhū disi jāhū / dhari dhari bhālu kīsa saba khāhū // umā rāvanahi asa abhimānā / jimi tittibha khaga sūta utānā.*

They [demons] rush forth
*As if a flock of meat-eating foolish birds who,
 Having seen piles of bloodred stones,
 Do not even think that their beak may break on them.*¹³
 (6.40.5)

Kumbhakarṇa, having seized myriads of monkeys, was devouring them,
 [And it looked] *like a swarm of locusts filling a mountain cave.*¹⁴
 (6.67.1)

Those hit with [Rām's] arrows *thunder as rain clouds.*¹⁵
 (6.68.4)

Bear and monkey troops fled,
*Like a flock of sheep at the sight of wolves.*¹⁶
 (6.70.1)

Each of his ten heads was hit with a hundred of [Lakṣmaṇ's] arrows,
 And they looked *like serpents entering the top of the mountain.*¹⁷
 (6.83.3)

Who will count elephants, footmen, horses, donkeys
 And various vehicles that are like *aquatic animals [living in that river of
 blood],*
 Arrows, spears and lances that *are like serpents, bows – its waves,
 And shields – a mass of turtles?*¹⁸
 (6.87 *chand*)

Although nature imagery prevails in the *Rāmcaritmānas*, the battlefield descriptions in the poem also use imagery founded on food on more than one occasion. One such example comes from the scene in which Aṅgad and Hanumān enter the fort of Lāṅkā and fight with demons – the poet uses a simile that likens the demons' heads to vessels with yogurt:

They crush one [demon] against another
 And [then] tear off their heads

13. *jimi arunopala nikara nihārī / dhāvahī saṭha khaga māsa ahārī // cōca bhaṅga dukha tinhahī na sūjhā / timi dhāe manujāda abūjhā.* This image is based on equating meat and rubies with monkeys and bears, all of which are of a red or russet-red colour.

14. *koṭi koṭi kapi dhari dhari khāi / janu tīrī giri guhā samāi.*

15. *lāgata bāna jalada jimi gāyahī .*

16. *bhāge bhālu balimukha jūtha / bṛku biloki jimi meṣa barūthā .*

17. *sata sata sara māre dasa bhālā / giri sṛṅganha janu prabisahī byālā.*

18. *jalajantu gaja padacara turaga khara bibidha bāhana ko gane / sara sakti tomara sarpa cāpa taraṅga carma kamaṭha ghane.*

That fall under Rāvaṇ's feet
 And burst open like vessels with yogurt.¹⁹
 (6.44)

Returning to Sūrdās and Aklujkar's article, we may conclude that she demonstrates how the use of a metaphor, which in her opinion is not well suited to describing a well-known topic, allows the poet to display 'his originality and to use the metaphor in an off-beat situation quite successfully'.²⁰

This lengthy reference to Aklujkar's article is an indispensable introduction here, since it was actually her work that started me thinking about Tulsīdās's choice of imagery in his treatment of the battle between Rām and Rāvaṇ, which outwardly, especially after reading Aklujkar, may seem so traditional and usual. However, is this really so? My paper offers an investigation into the battle imagery used by Tulsīdās. Focusing on the relevant portions of the *Rāmcaritmānas*, it seeks to analyse the importance of food and eating in Tulsīdās's treatment of the battle and their role in creating the poem's symbolic and metaphorical imagery. It also forms an attempt at a discussion of the role of references to food and eating in the construction of the narrative of the battle portion of the *Rāmcaritmānas* and of its message.

2. The battlefield of Laṅkā

Let us first recapitulate the situation on the battlefield of Laṅkā, where the fight between the two contending armies of the two opponents, Rām and Rāvaṇ, takes place during the daytime, i.e. from sunrise to sunset.²¹ As is well known from tradition, the first army is formed of bears and monkeys, the other one from the host of demons, usually referred to in the poem as *nisācara*,²² lit. 'walking by night'.²³ Throughout the battle, Lakṣmaṇ fights by Rām's side, while Rāvaṇ is at times supported by his kinsmen, in particular by his son Meghnād and his brother Kumbhakarna.

The above-mentioned words uttered by Rāvaṇ before the beginning of the battle (6.40.2), as well as a number of other passages from the poem (6.40.3, 6.40.5, 6.67.1, 6.70.1) and the words of one of his ministers (6.8.5),²⁴ visualize

19. *eka eka sō mardahī tori calāvahī muṇḍa / rāvana āgē parahī te janu phūṭahī dadhī kuṇḍa.*

20. Aklujkar 1991, 355.

21. E.g. *sandhyā bhāi phiri dvau bāhanī* (6.55.2); *dina kē anta phiri dvau anī* (6.72.1); *nisā sirāni bhayau bhīnusārā* (6.78.2).

22. Please note that all words cited from the *Rāmcaritmānas* are given in their Avadhī forms used in the poem.

23. Referred to twice as *pisāca/pisācā* (6.68.2 and 68).

24. This line features not only bears and monkeys but also men, who occupy the prominent first place here: 'men, monkeys and bears are our food' (*nara kapi bhālu ahāra hamārā*).

bears and monkeys as the natural food of demons, so it is logical that during the battle they become their easy prey. However, sometimes bears and monkeys are lucky enough to escape with their lives, and one of the most spectacular examples is lines 6.67.1-4,²⁵ featuring Kumbhakarṇa in a martial mood:

He caught myriads of them and crushed them against [his] body,
Myriads of them he rubbed into the dust,
While crowds of bears and monkeys
Escaped through his mouth, nose and ears.²⁶
(6.67.2)

This tragicomic image is followed by a very significant line, worth quoting here, especially in view of the discussion that will follow in the subsequent part of the paper:

The demon [Kumbhakarṇa], overcome with a warlike mood, was so self-conceited
As if Vidhi had sacrificed to him the universe which he was about to swallow.²⁷
(6.67.3)

In this context, we may add that Kumbhakarṇa enters the battle after a long sleep, having eaten myriads of buffaloes and having drunk alcohol.²⁸

In another place, frightened monkeys are depicted as turning to Rām for his help, when Rāvaṇ is devouring them like Time/Death (*kāla*):

O, Raghubīr! O, Lord, save us, save us!
This villain is eating us like Time!²⁹
(6.82.4)

However, throughout the battle and on more than one occasion, bears and monkeys empowered with Rām's energy and glory (*rāmapratāpa prabala*; 6.42.1) prove their might.³⁰ Not only do they not fall prey to the demons but, changing the normal course of things, they also make the demons their own prey:

25. For line 6.67.1 see above.

26. The two last lines mean that he was gobbling them up! *koṭinha gahi sarīra sana mardā / koṭinha miji milava mahi gardā // mukha nāsā śravananhi kī bātā / nisari parāhi bhālu kapi thātā.*

27. *rana mada matta nisācara darpā / bisva grasīhi janu ehi bidhi arpā.*

28. *koṭi ghaṭa mada aru mahiṣa aneka* (6.63) and *mahiṣa khāi kari madirā pānā* (6.64.1).

29. *pāhi pāhi raghubīra gosāi / yaha khala khāi kāla kī nāi.*

30. Cf. e.g. 6.81.2: 'monkeys [are] victorious thanks to the power of Rām' (*kapi jayasīla rāmbala tāte*).

Bears and monkeys perform the unusual –
 They seize fleeing warriors and dash them down to the ground.
 They grab [demons by] their feet and throw them to the ocean.
 Crocodiles, serpents and fish seize hold of [demons] and eat [them].³¹
 (6.47.4)

These lines address a crucial problem: those who are initially considered to be eaters of food are actually eaten here – they become food,³² and the poet stresses that the unusual happens, making use of the phrase *adbhuta karanī* for this purpose. It is also worth noting here that monkeys and bears do not eat their prey themselves, but feed them to aquatic animals. The commentators on the *Rāmcaritmānas* see this as repaying the debt of gratitude for the help these animals had given to Rām's army during the ocean crossing.³³

There is also another, quite similar, situation at a later stage of the battle (6.81.2-4), when the monkeys and bears, caught up in this martial mood, launch a frenzied attack on the demons. They not only crush their foe but, what is more, they tear their faces apart, pull out their entrails and hang them around their own necks (6.81 *chand* 1-2), as if they were victory garlands (*jayamālā*). According to the commentators, this happens in retaliation for all the cows and Brahmins who had ever been eaten by the mouths of demons and filled their bellies.³⁴

Not only warriors are present on the battlefield. With the advancement of military activities and as the number of victims increases, the battlefield becomes flooded with those who feed on the fallen in the battle. There are flocks of carnivorous creatures – birds such as crows (*kāka*), white kites (*kañka*) and vultures (*gīdha*) and packs of jackals (*jambukā*), but the most prominent among these are *bhūtas*, *pisācas*, *betālas* as well as *joginīs*³⁵ and *cāmuṅḍas*. They really feast on the battlefield and/or rejoice in being there:

Bhūtas, pisācas, betālas and terrifying Śiv's attendants
 With matted hair bathe [in this river of blood].
 Crows and kites grab [cut-off] arms and fly with them,

31. *bhāgata bhāṭa paṭakahī dhari dharanī / karahī bhālu kapi adbhuta karanī // gahi pada dārahī sāgara māhī / makara uraga jhaṣa dhari dhari khāhī*.

32. Cf. Añjanānandaśaraṇ 1998, 255. Brian K. Smith's extremely apt observation also catches our attention in this context: 'Eating is, then, both the destruction of food and the continual reappropriation of it as it ever regenerates itself. Eating and killing were two sides of the same coin. But eating was also frankly regarded as the perpetual reenactment of the defeat and subjugation of one's rival'; Smith 1990, 185; cf. Smith's part of *Introduction* to Manu, xxv.

33. Añjanānandaśaraṇ 1998, 255. See also Smith 1990, esp. 177-79.

34. Añjanānandaśaraṇ 1998, 433. Cf. also 6.45.2 where *nisācaras* are referred to as man-eaters (*manujāda*) and Brahmin-eaters (*dvijāmiṣa*).

35. Explained by *Mānas-pīyūṣ* (Añjanānandaśaraṇ 1998, 465) as 'companions of Kālī' (*Kālī devīkī sahcarīyā*). In modern Hindi dictionaries, the noun *joginī* is glossed as 'war-goddess' (*ek prakār kī raṇ devī*) or 'demonness' (*piśācinī*); Varmā 1992², 386.

Having snatched them from one another, they devour them.

Some of them say: ‘Hey, you fools! Even in such an abundance
Cannot you forego this your [mentality of] paupers?’
(...)

Vultures pull out entrails in such a way as if
Giving themselves over to fishing on the river bank.
Many warriors are carried away by the river
And birds go on top of them as if playing boat-games on the river.

Joginīs collect skulls, filling them [with blood].³⁶
Wives of *bhūtas* and *pisācas* dance in the sky.
Cāmuṇḍās beat time by sounding cymbals of warriors’ skulls
And sing in various ways.

Packs of jackals, gnashing their teeth, tear [corpses] apart
And eat them. They growl at one another, eat their fill and bark at one
another.³⁷
(6.88.1-5)

Betālas, *bhūtas*, *pisācas* and *joginīs* also appear when demons resort to their power of illusion (*māyā*), as in the case of Meghnād (6.52.1) or Rāvaṇ, who used this ability just before his culminating duel with Rām (6.101.1-2).

It is worth noting here that during the night-time suspension of military activities, two sacrifices are performed outside the battlefield: one by Meghnād (6.75.1-76.1) and the other by Rāvaṇ himself (6.84-85), both of which are disrupted by monkeys. Meghnād’s sacrifice, meant to make him invincible (*ajaya makha*), is a fire offering of blood and buffaloes (*āhuti deta rudhira aru bhaīśā / kīnha kapinha saba jagya bidhāsā*; 6.76.1). The text, however, remains silent as to who the beneficiary or beneficiaries were of both sacrifices, nor do we know what was offered in the sacrifice performed by Rāvaṇ. I mention these here not only because they are in the form of food offerings, but also with regard to the centuries-old Indian tradition – noted by many scholars³⁸ – of identifying feed-

36. Cf. 6.101.2 where *joginīs* drink fresh blood from human skulls (*kari sadya sonita pāna*).

37. *majjahī bhūta pisāca betālā / pramatha mahā jhoṭiṅga karālā // kāka kanka lai bhujā uṛāhī / eka te chīni lai khāhī // eka kahāhī aisī saūghāī / saṭhahu tumhāra daridra na jāī // (...)* *khaīcahī gīdha āta taṭa bhae / janu baīsī khelata cita dae // bahu bhaṭa bahāhī caṛhe khaga jāhī / janu nāvāri khelāhī sari māhī // jogini bhari bhari khappara saīcahī / bhūta pisāca badhū nabha naīcahī // bhaṭa kapāla karatāla bajāvahī / cāmuṇḍā nānā bidhī gāvahī // jambuka nikara kaṭkkata kaṭṭahī / khāhī huāhī aghāhī dapaṭṭahī.*

38. See e.g. the article of Brian K. Smith where he observes that ‘[s]acrifice, cooking, feeding, and eating were close kin in Vedism’ and points to the fact that ‘[t]he identification of ordinary eating and drinking with the sacrifice (the stomach envisioned as an internal sacrificial fire) is already found at ŚB 10.5.4.12 where what man drinks is equated with sacrificial oblations and

ing and eating with sacrifice; these offerings are also food for supernatural beings, who should at least be mentioned in the discussion of the diners at Laṅkā.

3. *Who actually eats what in Laṅkā? The symbolism of food and eating in the Rāmcaritmānas*³⁹

While the above-described feast takes place on the battlefield and in its vicinity, the protagonist and the antagonist of the story, Rām and Rāvaṇ, are almost absent from the picture. In fact, contrary to what might be expected, they do not figure prominently on the scene almost until the climax of the battle. Of course, this may simply be explained by their roles as commanders in chief, who – as a rule – were not overexposed in the front line. A more critical explanation relates this to strategies employed by Tulsīdās in the composition of his poem with the aim of clearly defining its leading characters (to a great extent shaped by tradition) and of putting forward his work's ideological message that translates into the use of figurative language. Thus, before we focus on Rām and Rāvaṇ, who – notwithstanding – are the key actors in the battle, and examine three crucial situations that directly and indirectly relate to them, let us briefly recount the main characteristics of the poem's protagonist.

In my earlier research devoted to the *Rāmcaritmānas* as one of the best, most accomplished and most interesting expressions of north Indian Bhakti,⁴⁰ I paid special attention to its protagonist, the God Rām. In his complete, i.e. an earthly – or more precisely, kingly – manifestation of the Ultimate Being, he epitomizes the most characteristic features of north Indian Bhakti and has also become an important cultural figure. He is God of composite nature, infinite in his mercy. In his non-manifested form, he is a *nirguṇ Brahman* – the unknowable, unqualified Ultimate Being, and in his manifested form, he is a *saguṇ Brahman* – the qualified, personal Supreme Being. He is seen as the foundation and soul of the world (*jaḡadādhārā*, 6.77.2; *jaḡadātma*, 6.35.3) which he pervades, dwelling in 'the city of the hearts of all' (*saba ura pura*; 1.120.3). As the Supreme Being, who has become incarnate as a human, he has to overcome numerous adversities. The intertwining elements of Rām's nature are often impossible to separate, but Tulsīdās's poem leaves no doubt – whatever Rām does in this world, having appeared in the form of Daśarath's son, it is a divine drama or *līlā*. In the context of our discussion, it is also important to note that Tulsīdās pictures Rām as a God who is ready to protect anyone, irrespective of

what he eats is identified with the fuel for the sacrificial fire. Cf. ŚB 11.1.7.2. This theme recurs frequently in later texts'; Smith 1990, 181 together with note 11 and *Introduction to Manu*, xxii-xxx.

39. I draw here on the subtitle of Jonathan Parry's inspiring article: Parry 1985.

40. See e.g. Stasik 2009 and Stasik 2013.

their status or morals, and it is not difficult to secure his compassion. He is compassionate not only towards the *bhaktas* who are sincerely devoted to him, but even to those who (albeit demons) incidentally, or even in hatred, utter his name: having done so, they become released from the wheel of birth (6.45.1-3). Time/Death, deeds and lives are in Rām's hands (*kāla karama jiva jākē hāthā*, 6.6.5). Last but not least, he is the Devourer of the Serpent of Time (*kāla byāla kara bhacchaka*; 6.54.4), the one at whose will Death dies (*kāla mara jākī icchā*, 6.102.2), he is – the Death of Death (*kālahu kara kālā*, 5.39.1).⁴¹

One of the most important questions for Tulsīdās is *dharma* and following its path, which seems to be a natural consequence of the reasons for Rām's *avatāra* who 'descends to earth for the sake of *dharma*' (*dharama hetu avatarehu*, 4.9.3). There are many passages in the *Rāmcaritmānas* that refer to *dharma* directly.⁴² In the culminating stage of the war, before his decisive encounter with Rāvaṇ, Rām sets off for the battle on foot, with *dharma* as his chariot (*dharmamaya ratha*); thanks to this, he is able to defeat not only Rāvaṇ but also life and death, the most potent of foes from the human perspective – the cycle of rebirths (6.80.2-80).

Let us now proceed to examine the aforementioned situations that directly or indirectly relate to Rām and Rāvaṇ, i.e., firstly, Hanumān and Aṅgad's treatment of the demons when they both attack the fort of Lānkā; secondly, the death of Kumbhakarna, and thirdly – Rāvaṇ's death.⁴³

Especially when discussing the first of these situations, one should remember that the monkeys fight empowered with Rām's might and glory (*pratāpā*), and whatever they do, such as killing demons, they do it in the name of this God or even on his behalf. They kill demons with Rām's name on their lips, yelling to their enemy that this is the result of their not worshipping him (6.44.1-4). Their war cry: 'Reap the fruit of not worshipping Rām!' (6.44.4),⁴⁴ is

41. For more on Rām's nature see Stasik 2009, esp. 227-47. It is worth noting here that when Lakṣmaṇ falls on the battlefield struck by Rāvaṇ with a terrible Brahmā spear (n.b. he is referred to here as 'Master of Three Worlds', *Tribhuvanadhani*, not recognised by Rāvaṇ!), Rām tells him: 'Consider this in your heart: you are the devourer of death and the saviour of gods' (*samujhu jiva bhrātā / tumha kṛtāntabhakṣaka suratrātā*; 6.84.3).

42. Their exact number is 172; Callewaert–Lutgendorf 1997, 147-49; cf. Sūryakānt 1973, 265-56 and 268.

43. An analysis of these situations, in which special attention would be paid to verbs and direct object arguments, although beyond the scope of the present study, seems interesting and only natural, especially in view of the fact that certain Hindi verbs, among them *khānā* 'to eat', do not allow for the omission of their direct object. Cf. a Polish sentence '*Jan je*', an English sentence '*John is eating*' or a Hindi sentence '*Mohan khānā khā rahā hai*' in which, as observed by S. Löbner, even if the direct object is omitted, it is understood that 'the concept "eat" necessarily involves a second argument. Eating cannot be defined without relating to something that is eaten. Therefore that argument is understood to be involved in the situation described, even if it is not specified'; Löbner 2013², 114.

44. *bhajahu na rāmahi so phala lehū*.

expressive of the Bhakti dimension of the poem, elaborated in the following lines:

The greatest of the greatest chiefs caught by them [Hanumān and
 Aṅgad],
 Are dragged by [their] feet and taken to [the] Lord.
 Vibhīṣaṇ tells Rām their names
 And even to them he bestows [a place] in his own abode.⁴⁵
 (6.45.1)

The last line of this passage expresses the actual meaning of the war in Laṅkā and, in fact, of all the encounters of this kind with Rām, i.e. when he sets out to eliminate unrighteousness, the symptom of chaos in any sphere. The sense of such an encounter for a wrong-doer is to die at the hands of Rām and go straight to his abode. The paradox is that thanks to Rām's compassion and mercy, refuge – liberation – is so easily attained by wicked men- and Brahmin-eating demons, while accomplished ascetics have to humbly ask for it (*khala manuṣṛā dvijāmiṣa bhogī / pāvahī gati jo jācata jogī*; 6.45.2).

Let us now recount the second of these situations, i.e. the episode ending with Kumbhakarṇa's death, in which the poet continues the same train of thought but, in the most crucial moments, uses imagery based on food and eating. Kumbhakarṇa, before he enters the battle to relieve Rāvaṇ and his army, virtually scolds his brother for leading Laṅkā into war with Rām who has gods (e.g. Śiv, Brahmā) as his servants (6.63.3).⁴⁶ This episode reveals its Bhakti dimension especially in the lines that depict Kumbhakarṇa looking forward to feasting his eyes on the beauty of the dark body and lotus eyes of Rām who relieves all from the three sufferings⁴⁷ (*locana suphala karaū mā jāi / syāma gāta sarasīruha locana / dekhaū jāi tāpa traya mocana*; 6.63.4). He is also depicted as being lost for a moment in contemplation of Rām's nature and his qualities (*rāma rūpa guna sumirata magana bhayau chana eka*; 6.63) – conduct which is typical of a *Rām-bhakta* but rather unexpected on the part of Kumbhakarṇa. This mood continues in Kumbhakarṇa's meeting with Vibhīṣaṇ in whom Kumbhakarṇa is happy to recognize a *Rām-bhakta* (*raghupati bhakta jāni mana bhāyo*; 6.64.2). He even calls Vibhīṣaṇ 'the ornament of the family of demons' (*nisicara kula bhūṣana*; 6.64.4) and says that he has made their family illustrious by worshipping Rām, the ocean of splendour and happiness (*bandhu bamiṣa tai kīnha ujāgara / bhajehu rāma sobhā sukha sāgara*; 6.64.5).

However, as is well known from tradition, Kumbhakarṇa entered the battlefield to fight against Rām's troops. He succeeds in breaking the morale of the

45. *mahā mahā mukhiā je pāvahī / te pada gahi prabhu pāsa calāvahī // kahai bibhīṣaṇu tinha ke nāmā / dehi rāma tinahū nija dhāmā.*

46. *siva birañci sura jāke sevaka.*

47. Namely, material, supernatural and spiritual; cf. Prasād 2005⁷, 475.

monkey troops and in subduing Hanumān and Sugrīv, their commanders. The poet comments on this through the words of Śiv, one of the chief narrators of the story in the *Rāmcaritmānas*, who says that Rām, without batting an eye, devours Time/Death. Allowing for such a state of affairs, he is simply playing his role as a man (*naralīlā*).⁴⁸ Tulsīdās draws his audience's attention here to Rām as the Ultimate Being – the Devourer of Time, Death. When the situation so requires, he enters the battlefield in this form and everything is then conclusive, brought back to normal and to harmony.

At the final stage of his duel with Rām, it seems as if Kumbhakarṇa wants to devour the three worlds (*grasana cahata mānahū trailokā*, 6.70.6). However, not long after, he is the one to be 'devoured' by Rām:

He [Kumbhakarṇa] fell to the ground like [two] mountains from the sky,
Crushing monkeys, bears and demons that were below him.
His [life] energy filled the mouth of Lord (...).⁴⁹
(6.71.4)

In this multi-layered image, Rām figures as the all-devouring Time/Death, the Death of Death that stops the cycle of rebirths, bringing about liberation and allowing one to commune with the Lord in his abode. Such an understanding is further corroborated by Śiv's words in the closing couplet of the whole stanza: '[O, Girijā! Rām] gave [a place in] his own abode to that vile demon, a mire of sin' (*nisicara adhama malākara tāhi dīnha nija dhāma*, 6.71).

Finally, we come to the third situation, Rāvaṇ's death, which is one of the culminating moments in the poem's narrative. It ensues after a long duel with Rām, who had learnt the secret of Rāvaṇ's immortality from Vibhīṣaṇ. He shoots thirty-one arrows – one at Rāvaṇ's navel, in which *pīyūṣ*, the food of gods, had been hidden, and the rest at his ten heads and twenty arms (6.102-103.1). This results in a horrifying scene, in which Rāvaṇ's head- and handless trunk dances on the earth which begins to sink, causing Rām to shoot again and divide the trunk into two parts (6.103.1-2). The earth quakes, seas and rivers seethe, and the elephants of the quarters (*diggaṇā*) and mountains are restless. When Rāvaṇ finally collapses, Rām's arrows lay Rāvaṇ's heads and hands in front of Mandodarī⁵⁰ and obediently return to Rām's quiver (6.103.4). Rāvaṇ meets the very same end as Kumbhakarṇa – he is 'devoured' by Rām: 'His [life] energy filled the mouth of Lord' (*tāsu teja samāna prabhu ānana*, 6.103.5). All

48. (...) *karata raghupati naralīlā / (...) bhṛkuṭi bhaṅga jo kālahi khāi / tāhi ki sohai aisi larāi* (6.66.1).

49. *pare bhūmi jimi nabha tē bhūdhara / heṭha dābi kapi bhālu nisācara // tāsu teja prabhu badana samānā*.

50. According to the commentators on the *Rāmcaritmānas*, this happens out of a special kind of respect paid to Rāvaṇ, a measure that is meant to protect his corpse against being eaten by dogs and other carnivorous animals. Añjanānandaśaraṇ 1998, 529.

gods and the entire universe rejoice over Rām's victory and he is addressed here three times as Mukunda/Mukundā, i.e. as the one who, in the common Vaishnava understanding of this epithet, is believed to bestow liberation (*mukṭi*)⁵¹ (6.103.6, 6.103 *chanda* I, 6.103).

Tulsīdās's account of these events, known from the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, with the use of his particular figurative language, brings about a novel result – a passage with a soteriological load in which death, eating, and liberation are interconnected: in the battle of Laṅkā, to be eaten is to be liberated.⁵² Of course, this imagery is not all new and original, and although it may be novel in this context, it is well-rooted in Indian thought, validating the enduring cultural potential of its oldest layers.⁵³ In Vedic literature, as Brian K. Smith notes: 'An "eater of food" is a ruler and conqueror, and possessing food is often depicted as "defeating" and "gaining supremacy over" it', where 'Consumption was (...) the ultimate victory of the consumer over the consumed, of the victor over the vanquished, and of the self over the rival. Eating and winning were fully equatable, as were being eaten and losing'.⁵⁴

Thus, on the basis of the textual evidence analysed here, my central conclusion is that Tulsīdās repeatedly uses food and eating imagery in the battle passages of the *Rāmcaritmānas* to expound the soteriological dimension of Rām Bhakti.⁵⁵ Despite Rāvaṇ's words, in which he rejoices at the news of war, commenting that Vidhi has sent food straight home to demons, the real sense of the battle is not to eat one's fill, but to appease one's hunger for being liberated by being 'eaten' by Rām. This imagery, first of all, refers to Rām's image as the all-devouring Time/Death and to the *bhakta's* longing to be united with his Lord. Dying at his hands, or in his presence, means to be liberated and, paradoxically, this understanding is heralded in Rāvaṇ's words which allude to *mukṭi* that just comes to one by itself. However, it seems that Rāvaṇ's self-conceit and ignorance do not allow him to grasp the real meaning of his own words.⁵⁶

51. Cf. 'muku (= mukṭi) – a word formed to explain *mukun-da* as "giver of liberation"; Monier-Williams.

52. Cf. Francis Zimmerman's very apt observation: 'Food, sacrifice, and the cycle of rebirths: all belong to the same constellation of ideas'; Zimmermann 1987, 206, quoted after Smith 1990, 183.

53. Visible also in later key cultural texts of Hinduism, see e.g. Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā*.

54. Smith 1990, 186.

55. Cf. Parry 1985, 612.

56. Añjanānandaśaraṇ 1998, 229.

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Eating and fasting to liberate the Mind.
Some remarks on the theme of food in Keśavdās's *Vijñānagītā*

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Many remarkable studies in the past decades have investigated the crucial role of food in Indian culture in its wide-ranging cultural meanings and uses (see, for example, Khare 1992; Olivelle 1992, 2011, Sen 2015). 'Food in India is never merely a material substance of ingestion, nor only a transactional commodity. It is synonymous with life and all its goals, including the subtlest and the highest' (Khare 1992, 1). According to Khare (1992, 8) three food discourses overlap within a Hindu's life – one ontological and experiential concerned with the cultural sphere and worldly life, one therapeutic connected with the sphere of healing and happiness and one transcending the first two aiming to self-control and salvation. Several theoretical dogmas are formulated around the issue of food and a number of socio-cultural institutions develop, since 'the cultural construction of food is part of the broader social construction of reality' and the 'rules regarding food transactions constitute a social code that strengthens the hierarchical organization of society and demarcates the boundaries of purity' (Olivelle 2011, 71; 77). In cosmological speculations, food is the source of life, playing a central role in several creation myths of ancient India (Olivelle 2011, 73). But it can also be a cause of attachment, fostering greed and vices. Especially in the ascetic ideology and practice, the fear of food becomes a crucial path towards detachment from the world and salvation (Olivelle 1992, 105). In the medieval period, after the organization of monastic orders ascribed to the Advaita School, many theoretical texts based on ascetic ideologies were composed, and it is precisely in this philosophical context that we can insert the observations proposed in this paper.

The theme of food offers an interesting key to the interpretation of a philosophical text such as the *Vijñānagītā* by Keśavdās (1610), since it is used as a metaphor for any worldly temptation binding the self to the *saṃsāra*, but also represents the means to restrain one's own appetites and advance spiritually and ethically towards liberation.

The *Vijñānagītā* (VG) is a Braj Bhāṣā adaptation of the Sanskrit drama *Prabodhacandrodaya* (PC), composed by the poet Kṛṣṇamīśra at the court of