

Illustrations from the Two Dated Rāmacaritamānasa Manuscripts from Banaras : A Note

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A comprehensive history of the evolution of Banaras painting styles, both of wall painting and small-scale painting on paper, especially from the eighteenth to the early-twentieth century, has yet to be written. In the absence of a consolidated record of documented specimens scattered in various private collections and museums all over the world, it is always an uphill task to interpret some of the intriguing phases of development and to give shape to a chronicle. Interestingly, illustrated folios from two dated Rāmacaritamānasa discussed in this article would help one to locate a certain facet of the less-exalted patronage that conditioned the execution of painter-scribes and the emergence of a characteristic popular style, in tune with the aesthetics of the majority of contemporary city-based bibliophiles. These manuscripts, once belonging to the family of priests living in this pilgrimage city for centuries, with lively painted passages, indeed, represent a particular genre that might help us to understand the wide-spread transfusion of Rajasthani idiom into the local Banarasi tradition of iconic-narrative painting, that had so frequently been incorporated into the art of the book.

In 18th and 19th century Banaras, ever-changing urban growth and societal changes under the impact of trans-regional commerce enhanced the re-location of cultural identities. As was natural, migrant patrons and the mobility of artisans including painter-scribes quickened the diffusion of skill and technique, destined to culminate in a syncretic style of considerable charm. A centre of scholastic pursuit since the ancient period, the city attracted philanthropists from Rajasthan belonging to the ruling dynasties of Amber-Jaipur and Bundi-Kota who established residential Sanskrit academies for their princes to get initiated into the traditional sciences and master sacred texts of Hinduism. Operating simultaneously, numerous monastic seats of scholar-monks were flocked by students of pan-Indian origin, eager to master metaphysics and modalities of esoteric ritual practices. The oral tradition went side along with the mode of imparting knowledge through transcribed texts. Rajasthani scribes of Channyati Brahman caste, Matheran scribe-illustrators, Kayastha scribes and itinerant Kashmiri kātib cum musavvars residing in the city were commissioned on

regular basis with the task of preparing commodity manuscripts, both illustrated as also unillustrated, for the consumption among scholars and their disciples. Apart from Sanskrit treatises, Avadhi and Brajabhasha volumes, both of hymnal and secular variety, were also much in demand among the townsfolk. Written in Devanāgarī script an entire lot of such manuscripts were illuminated by the painters, displaying at times remarkable imaginative strength to give form to the textual content. Thus, book-production became a major industry in Banaras, and, from the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a number of accomplished scribes and painters were employed by the local publishers of the litho-printed volumes, an affordable substitute for illustrated as well as non-illustrated manuscripts.

Since the time of its composition, the Rāmacaritamānasa, Tulsidas's magnum opus in Avadhi, besides being a key text of the Rāma-bhakti stream of Vaiṣṇavism continued to have had its widespread influence in north India. The poet embarked upon the project in Ayodhya in 1574. The two profusely illustrated big-format presentation volumes of this popular religious classic in vernacular idiom were prepared in Banaras by a group of itinerant Jaipur painters in the opening decade of the nineteenth Century. One out of these, bearing a dated colophon of 1808 CE, was commissioned by Maharaja Udit Narayan Singh (1795- 1835) of the local ruling dynasty whereas the other, datable to c. 1810, was prepared for Raja Patani Mal, an aristocrat who acquired remarkable aesthetic sensibility and was known for his munificence. In Banaras, the Rāma-līlā enactments based on the legend were thoroughly anchored to Tulsi's text that, over the centuries, became a common man's volume of spiritual wisdom.

One common thing about both the manuscripts that form the subject of this paper is that they were ready for sale inexpensive volumes available at the bazaar for an anonymous clientele. This can be further testified by the, nature of the colophon as also by the coarseness of the Devanāgarī calligraphy. The colophon page (Fig.4) of Sundarakāṇḍa, the Fifth Canto of Rāmacaritamānasa, from the manuscript A bearing the date Saṁvat 1878 (1821 CE), contains the following text :

इती श्री कथा सुंदरकांड रमाएन क्रीत तुलसीदास ॥
 जी का समापते ॥ सुभमस्तु सीधीरस्तुः पंडीत ॥
 जनसों बीनती मोरी ॥ टुटल आखर वांचव जोरी ॥
 मोरे आखरजोरी न जाई . पंडीत होए शोलेइ मेरा ॥
 इ ॥ मीती माघ वदी ८ रोज मंगर के लीखतै आ ॥
 रमइल. संवत १८७८ साल. ।

(Here concludes the sacred narration of Sundarakāṇḍa of Rāmāyaṇa by Tulsidas. May this be conducive to auspiciousness and prosperity. My appeal to the learned gentry, do

connect while reading the disjointed alphabets. I am unable to unite the alphabets. Whoever is enlightened shall link up (the disjointed alphabets). Started transcribing (the text) on Tuesday, 8th day of the darker half of Magha (mid Jan. - mid Feb.), Samvat 1878 year).

The apparent naivete of the anonymous calligrapher and his rejoinder addressed to the prospective owner of the manuscript is a pointer to the existence of this particular class of scribes engaged in making numberless copies of the text, irrespective of the desired perfection, in order to cater to the growing demand for a certain volume. In the present case the scribe left blank space, mostly at the middle or towards the lower half of the vertical format of the folios, virtually in all the three hundred pages, and, on both sides of the leaf in quite a few of the total lot. In accordance to the prevailing collaborative norm in the artisan circle, the manuscript was passed on to the painter after completing the transcription of the text. The anonymous painter of the city, possibly a multi-media artist, delighted in visualizing an image for almost every crucial sequence of the legend that culminated in a total number of illustrations going beyond five hundred.

It is interesting to note that in Banaras in 1736, an illustrated volume of Hari Carita Bhākhā,¹ replete with four hundred twenty-three illustrations in folksy Rajasthani idiom, was prepared by the scribe (cum illustrator?) Locha Singh Gwal who moved from Allahabad and settled down at Konia Mohalla. The 1821 Rāmacaritamānasa² has a certain undeniable similarity with Hari Carita, essentially in terms of the illustrator's approach to represent the episodic progression with impeccable clarity and vividness. In Rāmacaritamānasa, one would notice the repeated use of a palette limited to dull yellow and ochre, vermilion and carmine, subdued lapis lazuli and terre-verte in addition to a charming lilac-pink, white and black. The background in every case was left unpainted. Calligraphic outlining in black enhances the rhythmic movement of the figures, a feature so closely associated with the style of wall painters active in Banaras till to this date (Figs. 2, 3 & 4). The painter hardly tried for the inclusion of expansive scenic backgrounds to his otherwise figure-dominant compositions. Figure 1, illustrating Nārada's visit to Pampā Lake has emblematic landscape details of trees, craggy mounds and fish-infested lake Pampā, worked out in a slipshod manner. The master artist must have been made familiar with the precise text-details of this particular context of Araṇyakāṇḍa that was intended to communicate a persistent moral note by way of an allegory :

Under its cover of dense lotus-leaves the water was as difficult to distinguish as is the unembodied supreme spirit under the veil of delusive phenomena. The happy fish were all in placid repose at the bottom of the deep pool, like the days of the righteous that are passed in peace.

(tr. F.S. Growse)

Cryptic representation of a swan finial added to Nārada's rudra-viṇā is a minute detail that would help us gauge the visual vocabulary of the painter. Hanumāna confronting Surasā (Fig.2) against an expanse punctuated with sparsely grown tufts of grass instead of the watery stretch of the ocean, is a depiction deviating from the text. Equally simplistic yet charged with action is the performance-inspired depiction of the moment when Hanumāna reveals his mighty self in front of Sītā (Fig.3). As mentioned before, the compositional format as also the treatment is reminiscent of the wall painting style practiced widely by the local artisans belonging originally to the potter community. With their hands clasped in a monotonous fashion, Sītā and Queen Mothers (Fig.5) gather on an open terrace, covered partially by a frilled canopy. Again, in this sleek horizontal composition we would notice the painter restricting himself to a limited set of details that are all along at their suggestive best for every key passage of the epic.

The handy manuscript B of Uttarakāṇḍa, the sequel or the Seventh Canto of Rāmacaritamānasa, has a dated colophon (Fig.6) of Saṁvat 1880 (1823 CE) that reads:

..... वैसाख वदि ७ गुरूवा
 सरे जप्र नाम संवासरे संवार १८८०
 सके १७४५ लिखितं पं पाठक
 हिर ॥ जो वाचै सुनै ताकौ जै जै जै सी
 ता राम ॥ राम लछमन जानकी जय
 बोलौ हनुमान की ॥ राम राम

(...Copied on Thursday, 7th day of the darker half of Vaiśākha (mid April-May) in the era named Japra, Saṁvat 1880, Śaka 1745, by Pandit Pathak ... Jai Jai Jai Sītārāma to whoever reciting or listening to (the text). Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Jānakī, hail victory to Hanumāna. Rāma. Rāma).

While the painter of the 1821 series was pre-occupied with the narrative pith that was reflected in his illustrative nuances born of textual fidelity, in the case of Uttarakāṇḍa we detect a more restrained approach and simplistic compositional device. Out of the three miniatures, one has a synoptic portrayal of Garuḍa at the abode of Kāka-bhuṣuṇḍī, both seated on a rocky cluster under the sacred banyan tree, (Fig.7). The two celestial birds are the protagonists of the last Book of Tulsī's Rāmacaritamānasa and partake in 'a series of laboured disquisitions on the true nature of faith.' Against a background of hurriedly washed terre-verte, the divine characters were depicted with an economy of details and an austere colour scheme predominant in terms of warm chrome green, vermilion and black. However, this overtly composite portrayal retains a certain quality of iconic painting. The two following illustrations (Figs. 8 & 9) form a double-page composition depicting the coronation of Rāma with

a calculated inclusion of only seven characters of vital importance. The right half of the scene shows a close-knit group of enthroned Rāma and Sītā, attended by Lakṣmaṇa and Hanumāna. Technically less sophisticated, the execution has a delightful linear candour. On the left half, the three Queen Mothers clad in all-enveloping tie-dyed dupaṭṭā line up, progressing slowly in a princely gait, to bless the divine couple.

Hereditary musicians, weavers and multi-media artists of Banaras, with great amount of assimilative energy and inventiveness, had all along been responsive to freshly-arrived creative diction and expressive modalities. The illustrations from the two manuscripts discussed above are the notable examples to locate, the absorption of the elements of Rajasthani painting at the level of a characteristic popular expression that may suitably be referred to as a candid form of urban-folk carrying the distinguished imprint of 'a personal state of mind.'

References

1. R.C. Sharma, Kamāl Giri et.al., Indian Art Treasures – Suresh Neotia Collection, New Delhi, 2006, p.204; Rāmāyaṇa of 1774-83 in Peabody Essex Museum, vide acc.no.2001 (E300647-2) is a document showing the extension of the style in the eastern part of India, see Susan S. Bean, 'An Art World Transformed : Paintings from 19th century Calcutta at the Peabody Essex Museum,' Orientations , vol.34, no.6, June 2003, p.46, fig.12.
2. Rāmacaritamānasa, codex format, ff. more than three hundred, approx 29.1 x 22 cms, creamy white Sāṅgānerī paper, unburnished, much damaged at edges, calligraphy in black ink and vermilion, Private Collection.
3. Uttarakāṇḍa of Rāmacaritamānasa, codex format, ff.106, 20.8 x 14.8 cms, creamy white thick Sāṅgānerī paper, unburnished, damaged at edges and much wormed, calligraphy in black ink and vermilion, Coll. Jñāna-Pravāha, Varanasi, acc.no.2008. 104.

इतीश्रीमद्रामयरीत्रेमानसेसकलकलीकलुषवीयंसनीवीमल
वीरपानसेवादीनीनामरामपंपास्ववासवरननः ॥२॥ ॥॥

॥ योषा ॥

वैठैपरमपुसन्पकीपाखाः ॥॥॥ कहत्तत्रनुजसोकधारसाखाः ॥
वीरहवंतभगवंतहीदेधीः ॥॥॥ नारदमनभासोयवीसेधीः ॥
मोरस्त्रापकरीअंगीकाराः ॥॥॥ शहत्तरामनानादुधजायः ॥
असेपुत्तुहीवीलोकोजाइः ॥॥॥ पुनीनवनीहीअसत्रौसरआइः ॥
ऐहवीयारनारदकरवीनाः ॥॥॥ गऐजाहंपुत्तुसुधअसीनाः ॥
जायतरामयरीतन्नीदुवांनीः ॥॥॥ ऐमसहीतबहुभातीवधानीः ॥
करजहंडकतलीपेठठाइः ॥॥॥ राधेवडीवारछरखाइः ॥॥॥
इयागतपुष्टीनीकटवैठारेः ॥॥॥ लछुमनसादरयरनपघारेः ॥॥॥

॥ दोहा ॥

नानावीधीवीनतीकरी ॥ पुत्तुपुसन्पजीअजानी ॥
नारदवैदेवयत्तव ॥ जैरीसरोनुहपानी ॥॥॥



Fig.1 Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa at Pampā Lake visited by Nārada, Araṇyakāṇḍa, Rāmācaritamānasa, dated Saṃvat 1878 (1821 CE), folio 1(r), approx. 29.1 x 22 cms, vermilion, black ink and opaque watercolour on Sāṅgānerī paper, Private Collection.

वातजातसतवातसमानाः ॥१॥ यद्वेवेगीकहवेदपुराणाः ॥१॥
 अर्थनीमेधनवीतेउजयतेः ॥१॥ बारीधमय्यगएकपीतवतेः ॥१॥
 जखनीधीरघुपत्नीदुतवीमारीः ॥१॥ तेमैनाकहोहीस्त्रमहारीः ॥१॥
 पवनतनेजोदाआकरहीः ॥१॥ कीथीतयनतोहीपरघरहीः ॥१॥

॥सोरा॥

सीधुवचनउरआनी ॥१॥ उठीमैनाककीन्हस्त्रमः ॥१॥
 रामदुतजीअजांनी ॥१॥ पुलकीततनकरजोरीकहः ॥१॥
 शुनीऐपवनकुमार ॥१॥ कीपासेंघुजनडुषहरनः ॥१॥
 तुमहरीअगतउदारः ॥१॥ करहुमोहीपावनपरमः ॥१॥

॥दोहा॥

हनुमानतेहीपरसीकरी ॥१॥ उठीमैनाककीन्हस्त्रमः ॥१॥
 नामदुतजीअजांनी ॥१॥ पुलकीततनकरजोरीकहः ॥१॥
 हनुमानतेहीपरसीकरी ॥१॥ पुनीतेहीकीन्हपुनामः ॥१॥
 रामकाजकीन्हेथीना ॥१॥ मोहीकहावीस्त्रामः ॥१॥
 जऐमैनाकशवाघामफिरीः ॥१॥ मानुतसुतसुषमांनीः ॥१॥
 तेजकोटीरथीवज्रतनः ॥१॥ सुमीरतसारंगपांवीः ॥१॥

॥चौपाइ॥

जातपवनसुतहेवन्हदेघाः ॥१॥ जानेकहवखबुधीवीसेघाः ॥१॥
 शुरसानामअहीनीकोमाता ॥१॥ पठइन्हआइकीन्हतेयाताः ॥१॥



Fig.2 Hanumāna Confronting Surasā, Sundarakāṇḍa, Rāmacaritamānasa, dated Śaṁvat 1878 (1821 CE), folio 1(r), approx. 29.1 x 22 cms, vermilion, black ink and opaque watercolour on Sāṅgānerī paper, Private Collection.

कनकजुंघराकारसरीराः ॥१॥ शम्भरजत्रंकरत्रतीरनधीराः ॥॥

पामसुमीलसमीरसतः ॥ महावीरबलध्यानः ॥
हाटकपवतिसरीसर्तनः ॥ हीट एवसहीजगवानः ॥

सीत्रसनीपजसवेषः ॥ पुगटकीन्हमानुतसुत्रनः ॥
तसकहीसकहीनसेषः ॥ जोसपनेहनीषे पुनहीः ॥
शुभीरीहिरेभतीवीकमयरनाः ॥ कपीजनेकपीसरीरकद्युवनाः ॥
अदनुदनुपकीन्हहनुमानाः ॥ राजतवपुषतभारीसमानाः ॥
काषकराखप्रहीजेहीदेघतः ॥ जनतनत्रजैहोहीजेहीपेषतः ॥
अशशनुपजानकीहीदेघावाः ॥ औरनकाहुमर्मसोपावाः ॥॥॥



शीतामनजरोसतवजैः ॥१॥ पुनीलद्युनुपवरनसुतकैः ॥
जदीपनकपीकीतकद्युत्रजीमानाः ॥ तदीपसुनहुमुनीससुजानाः ॥
रमायरनसीरनाइसपीतीः ॥१॥॥ हरीकीन्हीवीनतीसुतीरीतीः ॥
जगजननीवहुजांतीपुसंसाः ॥१॥॥ बोखोपुनीकपीकुलश्रीतसाः ॥

Fig.3 Hanumāna revealing his mighty self to Sītā in aśoka grove, Sundarakāṇḍa, Rāmacaritamānasa, dated Śaṃvat 1878 (1821 CE), folio 1(r), approx. 29.1 x 22 cms, vermilion, black ink and opaque watercolour on Sāṅgānerī paper, Private Collection.

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इतीश्रीकथामुंहरकांश्रभाएनक्रीततुलसीदास॥
जीकासभापते सुजमस्तु सीधीस्तुः पंडित॥
जनसोवीनतीमोरी ॥ दुटलआषरवांयवजोरी॥
मोरेआषरजोरीनजाइ पंडितहोऐशोलेइमे॥
इ ॥ मीतीमाद्यवदीघरोजमंगरकैखीषलतैत्रा॥
रमइल संमतवट्टुटसाल ॥ ४४४४४४॥

॥१॥
॥१॥



Fig.4 Colophon page of Sundarakāṇḍa, Rāmacaritamānasa, dated Saṁvat 1878 (1821 CE), folio 39(v), approx. 29-1 x 22 cms, vermilion, black ink and opaque watercolour on Sāṅgānerī paper, Private Collection.

कहरामवटुपदपुजीः ॥१॥ ॥ मममनसीनहीकछु दुजीः ॥१॥ ॥
 नरीत्रैतुकीन्हीहारः ॥१॥ ॥ जोरहाकाजहभारः ॥१॥ ॥ ॥१॥ ॥
 नवसहससंमतशाजः ॥१॥ ॥ ममपीतेकीन्हाराजः ॥१॥ ॥ ॥१॥ ॥
 श्रापुनगएनीजघाम . ॥१॥ ॥ ममहेतुअपरनकामः ॥१॥ ॥ ॥१॥ ॥
 ऐकसहससंमतसोइः ॥१॥ ॥ शोअंसमोनजोहोइः ॥१॥ ॥ ॥१॥ ॥
 नरीकरवसोहीनराजः ॥१॥ ॥ शुतीरीतीकरीशवकाजः ॥१॥ ॥ ॥१॥ ॥
 तवअइहोनीजघाम . ॥१॥ ॥ ममवयनसीपरीनामः ॥१॥ ॥ ॥१॥ ॥
 अन्वोनप्रमुदीतजाधीः ॥१॥ ॥ जोवीप्रप्रनुधराधीः ॥१॥ ॥ ॥१॥ ॥

॥ दोहा ॥

राममेनीजघामतवः ॥ वीप्रयनउरराधीः ॥१॥ ॥
 ऐहसंवादउदारहरः ॥ कहउउमांसोनाधीः ॥१॥ ॥

रतीश्रीमदामयरीत्रमानशेशक शकतीकखुपुवीधशीनीवीम
 यवीपानसिवाहीनाखवनागुरवधमधुपुनीशुवशवशाम्बनश
 सुसदनअवयअगामनजाववानन . ॥१॥ ॥ ॥१॥ ॥

॥ योपाइ ॥

नरवरकखाउमापुभुकेरीः ॥१॥ ॥ वंधुसनाजनकाहुनहेरीः ॥१॥ ॥
 ऐहीवीधीतेवीतावहुकाखाः ॥ करतसुधदनीतीहीनदआखाः ॥१॥ ॥
 ग्रंभवंतीसीतातेहीश्रीसरः ॥ सासुसकखआनंदमोद नरः ॥१॥ ॥



Fig.5 Sitā and the Queen Mothers, Uttarakāṇḍa, Rāmacaritamānasa, dated Saṃvat 1878 (1821 CE), folio 31(r), approx. 29-1 x 22 cms, vermilion, black ink and opaque water colour on Sāṅgānerī paper, Private Collection.

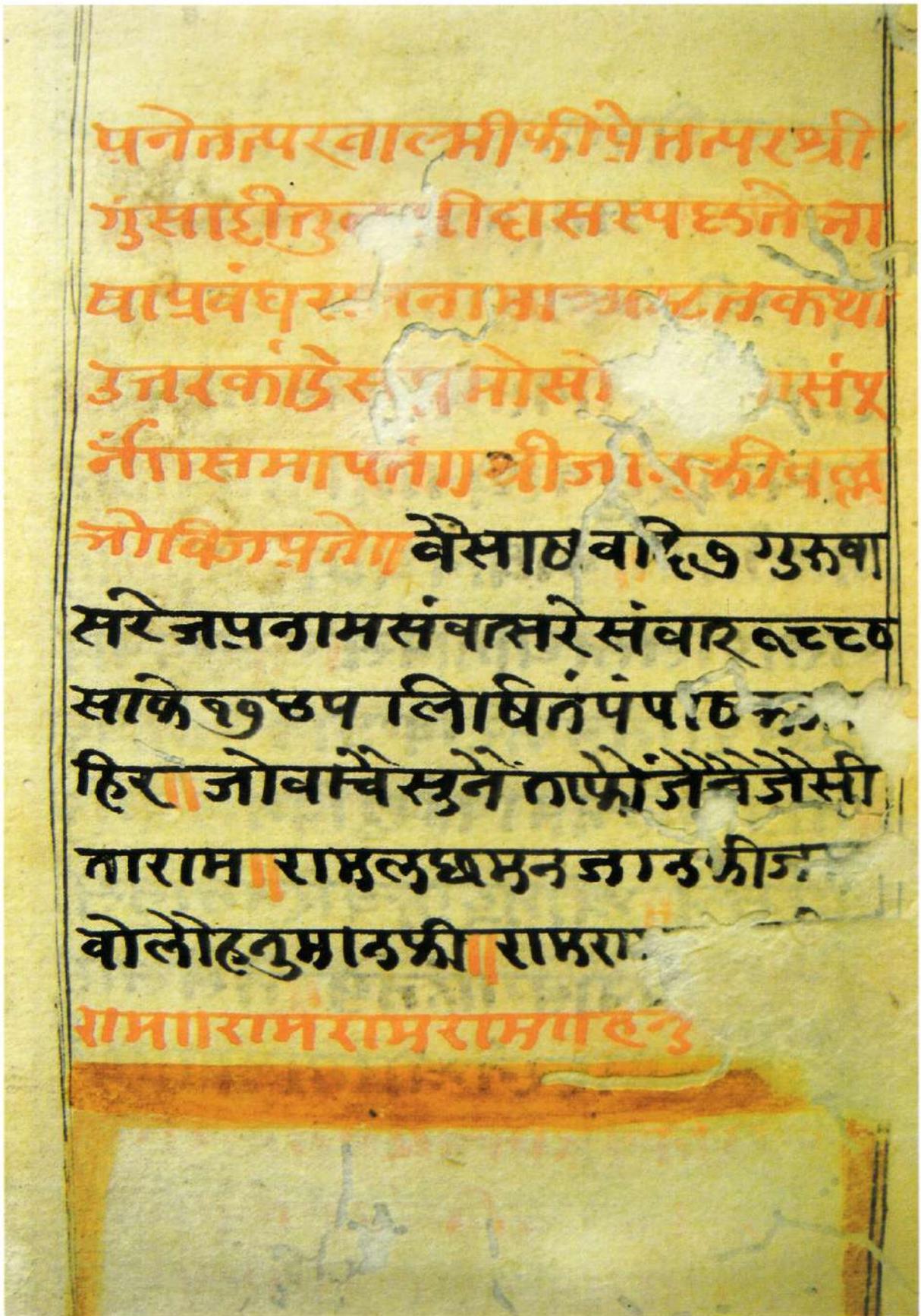


Fig.6 Colophon page, Uttarakāṇḍa of Rāmācāritamānasa, folio 106(r), dated Śaṁvat 1880 (1823 CE), 20.8 x 14.8 cms, calligraphy in vermilion and black ink on unburnished Sāṅgānerī paper, Jñāna-Pravāha Collection, acc.no.2008.104.

॥१२॥

लनिजमानि ॥४८॥ सुनिषगेसतेहि
श्रुत्वा सर्वं सासिषमुनिबंध चठि
विमानश्रसिसकलसुरदेवनसुष
कंद ॥४९॥ चोपही ॥ प्रभुविलोकि
मुनिमनश्रकुरागे ॥ तुरतहिदिव्यसिं
हासनमागे ॥ रविस्मेतजसवरनि
नजाशी ॥ वैठैरामडुजनसिनुकाशी ॥



Fig.7 Garuḍa and Kāka-bhuṣuṇḍī, Uttarakāṇḍa, folio 12(r), dated Śaṃvat 1880 (1823 CE), 10.7x 8.8 cms, vermilion, black ink and opaque watercolour on unburnished Sāṅgānerī paper, Jñāna-Pravāha Collection, acc.no.2008.104.



Fig.8 Rāma and Sītā enthroned, attended by Lakṣmaṇa and Hanumāna, Uttarakāṇḍa, folio 12(v), dated Śaṁvat 1880 (1823 CE), 10.8 x 10.5 cms, vermilion, black ink and opaque watercolour on unburnished Sāṅgānerī paper, Jñāna-Pravāha Collection, acc.no.2008.104.

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सुतविलोकितहरषहिमहतारी॥ वा
स्वारथारतीडतारी॥ विप्रनदानविवि
धिविधिधहा॥ ज्ञाचकसकलश्रजा
चककीहा॥ सिंहासनपरत्रिभुवन
सांशी॥ देधिस्वरनई इनीवजशी॥



Fig.9 Queen Mothers, Uttarakāṇḍa, folio 13(r), dated Śamvat 1880 (1823 CE), 10.8 x 10.7 cms, vermilion, black ink and opaque watercolour on unburnished Sāṅgānerī paper, Jñāna-Pravāha Collection, acc.no.2008.104.