

Ramlila: Tradition and Styles

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कुरु रामकथां पुण्यां श्लोकबद्धां मनोरमाम् ।
यावत् स्थास्यन्ति गिरयः सरितश्च महीतले ॥
तावद् रामायणकथा लोकेषु प्रचरिष्यति ।
यावद् रामस्य च कथा त्वत्कृता प्रचरिष्यति ॥

(*Valmiki Ramayana* 1.2.36-37)

(Thus Brahma spoke to Valmiki, "O Sage, compose the story of Rama in the beautiful *shloka* metre and I assure you that as long as the great mountains stand steadfast and the deep rivers flow on this holy land, your *Ramayana* will be cherished by the people. The Rama story sung by you will be immortal".)

Brahma's boon has come true. Through the ages the *Ramayana* has permeated the very core of the Indian mind. We have several Sanskrit plays and narrative poems which tell and retell the story of Rama. Temples in all corners of the country present Rama episodes: they are painted and carved on their walls. The Rama story becomes a motif in the folk, miniature and modern painting styles and is the subject of innumerable folk songs, folk dances and ballads. From the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, after the emergence of the Bhakti cult and the acceptance of Rama as a divine incarnation, *Ramayana-s* were composed in almost all the regional languages of India and Rama was deified as an incarnation of Vishnu. Hindi was blessed by the advent of the great Rama devotee and poet-thinker Tulsidas, who, in his epic poem *Ramcharitmanas*, enriched the Rama story and Ramabhakti. Brahma's boon bore fruit for all time to come.

Ramcharitmanas occupies a unique place in the poetic works on the Rama saga. It follows the Vaishnava and Pauranic tradition of handling the story of Rama as a basis for Bhakti. It is at the same time a sensitive, poetic work on the Rama theme. That is why it is the most respected work both in the Bhakti and literary tradition, and has influenced the social conduct, the values and the ideals of the people of North India. There is another dimension which gives it power and popularity: its integral link with the Ramlila, that ancient and most widely spread form of India's traditional theatre.

The story of Rama has been the subject of Sanskrit as well as language plays, but there is a basic difference between the literary Rama-plays and Ramlila. The objective of the Ramlila is to propagate Ramabhakti. Structurally, it does not consist of dialogues alone as in the Rama-plays, but is totally based on the recitation of the epic *Ramcharitmanas*. The Ramlila is thus a vernacular edition of the age-old performing tradition of the

Ramayana. The *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas soon became part of this performing tradition owing to its popular appeal, and its epic design, conceived dramatically.

Origins

Mention of the dramatic presentation of the Rama theme based on Valmiki's *Ramayana* occurs for the first time in the *Harivamsha Purana* which is believed to have been compiled in the fourth century A.D.

ततः स ननृते तत्र वरदत्तो नटस्तथा ।
स्वपुरे पुरवासीनां परं हर्षं समादधत् ॥
रामायणं महाकाव्यं उद्देश्यं नाटकीकृतम् ।
जन्म विष्णोरमेयस्य राक्षसेन्द्रवधेऽप्यस्य ॥

(*Harivamsha* II.43)

(Then the actor called Varadatta danced and gratified the people of Vajrapur. He presented a performance based on the *Ramayana*, depicting how Lord Vishnu incarnated himself to kill the Rakshasa King.)

This reference from the *Harivamsha* is important as it indicates that the performance was not a classical Sanskrit Rama-play, but a dramatic presentation based on the *Ramayana* of Valmiki.

After this, there is no reference to this type of epic-based performance for several centuries. Much later than the bulk of great Sanskrit plays, it is *Mahanataka* or *Hanumannataka* which is of special interest. Its unique form suggests the continuity of the traditional *Ramayana* theatre. It was believed to be the oldest among the Sanskrit plays by some scholars of Sanskrit drama, but that theory has now been refuted. The critic Sharada Tanaya in his *Bhava Prakashana* has placed *Mahanataka* in a special category, calling it a *Samagra* play and has defined a *Samagra* play thus:

नाटकं नृत्तवाराख्यं तत्समग्रं इतीरितम् ॥

The *Samagra* play is a play which is embellished with music and dance. *Mahanataka* violates some of the conventions of Sanskrit drama: it does not have Prakrit dialogues for the minor characters, and there is no Vidushaka, but the most significant difference is that its textual material is a compendium of verses taken from many sources: *Valmiki Ramayana*, *Adhyatma Ramayana*, the classical Sanskrit Rama-plays, from *Uttar Ramacharit* to *Anar-gharaghava*, and the well-known *Rama Kavya*-s, *Raghuvamsha*, *Janaki Haran* and *Bhatti Kavya*. On the basis of these characteristics of *Mahanataka*, we may presume that it is an early composition of the traditional *Ramayana* theatre.

In Hindi, the first examples of Rama plays which seem to belong to a living and popular theatre tradition are also named *Hanumannataka* and *Ramayana Mahanataka*. These plays written in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century follow the model of the Sanskrit *Mahanataka*. It seems

that by this time the name *Hanumannataka* or *Mahanataka* had become a generic name for the traditional *Ramayana* theatre. This is also indicated in *Gautam Chandrika* which refers to Tulsī's life and achievements. The writer Krishna Dutt Misra claims to be a disciple of Tulsidas and presents his descriptions as those of an eye-witness. According to the *Gautam Chandrika*, the idea of starting Ramlila entered Tulsī's mind while he was reading the *Valmiki Ramayana*. The incident has been narrated thus:

श्रवन किये षट्काण्ड सुहावन । वाल्मीकि रामायण पावन ॥
 चिंतित भरतभारतीनिरनय । मन दृग देखत हनुमत अभिनय ॥
 पूजि कबीस कपीस पुजारी । रामराजलीला विस्तारी ॥

(Tulsī heard the recitation of the chapters of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, pondered over Bharata's dictates, and tried to recreate *Hanumat-Abhinaya* in his mind's eye. The next day, after worshipping the monkey-god and doing obeisance to the great poet Valmiki, he arranged the presentation of the episode of Rama's coronation.)

Whether we accept this description in the *Gautam Chandrika* about Tulsī's starting the Ramlila or not, the reference to a *Ramayana* performance as *Hanumat Abhinaya* is significant. It suggests that the Sanskrit *Mahanataka* was an early composition, used in traditional Rama performance and that is why similar compositions of a later period were also given the name *Mahanataka* or *Hanumannataka*.

By this time the Rama story had become very popular in its theatrical presentation in various forms of traditional theatre all over India. Anki Nat of Assam, Kathakali of Kerala, Yakshagana of Karnataka, and Dashavatar of Maharashtra, all have Rama plays in their repertoire. Kathakali is said to have evolved out of *Ramanattam* which was a serialized presentation of eight *Ramayana* episodes (from the birth of Rama to his coronation). *Rama Vijaya* in Anki Nat is one of the form's most popular presentations. In the Dashavatar of Maharashtra, the Rama episodes were presented serially and became very popular. The Bhavai of Gujarat also had Ramlila *Vesha-s* (episodes) which used to be performed along with their usual secular *vesha-s*. Yakshagana also had various Rama *prasanga-s* which won appreciation and were performed serially. Almost all the forms of puppet theatre present the *Ramayana* stories.

These forms evolved independently, utilizing elements from the indigenous theatre. They seem to have artistic links with Ramlila, and follow a similar structural pattern. In this context it is noteworthy that in the Hindi region, the *Ramayana* theatre is based on the *Ramcharitmanas*. Similarly in the other regions, the various language *Ramayana-s* became the basis for their *Ramayana* theatre (both human or puppet) and supplied episodes and textual material.*

In the Hindi region we have the first reference to *Ramayana* enactment in *Sandeha Rasak*, an Apabhramsha work written in the thirteenth

century by the poet Addahman. Describing Multan, the venue of the poem, a traveller says:

कहवु ठाई, प्रसीसिय चाइहि दयवरहि ।
रामायणु अहिणवियइ कथहि कयवरहि ॥

(*Sandesha Rasak* II.44)

(At some places, Brahmins, who have renounced the world, bless the people and in others the Kavyavarih (the great poets) are enacting the *Ramayana*.)

In the *Asa di Var* of Guru Nanak, mention is made of a dance-drama pertaining to the Rama theme. Referring to certain dramatic performances, Nanak says that to earn a livelihood the people of Vrindavana sing and dance as Krishna and Gopis as well as Sita and Rama:

रोटियां कारन पूरें ताल, आप पिछारें घरती नाल,
गावन गोपियां गावन कान, गावन सीता राजे राम,

(*Asa di Var* Mahala 1)

The statement of Kagabhushundi, in the *Uttara Kanda* (the last chapter of *Ramcharitmanas*), shows that Tulsidas was familiar with *Ramayana* performance which later on he chose to propagate and expand. Kagbhushundi says:

खेलुँ तहुँ बालकन्ह मील्ल । करुँ सकल रघुनायक लीला ॥ २ ॥

(*Ramcharitmanas, Uttara Kanda, 109,4,2*)

(I used to play there with the children and enact the *lila* of Rama, the great among the Raghuvanshis.)

It is evident that Tulsidas recognized the popularity and power of this type of *Ramayana* performance prevalent at this time, called it Ramlila and gave it a powerful literary base in the form of his great epic *Ramcharitmanas*.

A study of the structure of the *Ramcharitmanas* reveals such a sound dramatic design that it seems to have been written to be performed. Each episode has been conceived as a single dramatic unit, following the pattern of the traditional theatre. The narrative and dramatic portions are properly balanced, fulfilling appropriate dramatic requirements. The narrative portions introduce the story, describe the locale and the characters involved in that particular episode and the dialogue part can easily be assigned to the characters. One might refer to episodes like the first meeting, *Swayamvara* and marriage, the Kaikeyi-Manthara dialogue, the departure for the forest, the Shoorpanakha event, the abduction of Sita, Ashokavatika, and finally the battle between Rama and Ravana. They are so dramatic that even their recitation is like a theatrical experience. This dramatic design of the structure makes it possible for the episodes from the *Ramcharitmanas* to be lifted and presented on the Ramlila stage without much change.

Ramlila has now become an important part of our traditional theatre. Due to its popularity and pervasiveness, it occupies an important place among the people. It will be correct to say that Ramlila is the only theatre form which symbolizes the religious, cultural and artistic expression of the mass of people. This theatre is not merely a stage presentation; it is one of our major cultural festivals. It would, in fact, be quite impossible to meet anyone in North India who is not familiar with Ramlila.

Ramlila is one of the most widely spread forms of our traditional theatre, being the major dramatic form of all the Hindi-speaking states (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan) and it is also presented in certain cities of Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra and in the hill regions. In the Terai area of Nepal, the Ramlila has a strong tradition. Apart from performances by the local people, it is also presented by Ramlila troupes from India. In Orissa, Ramlila is presented in the form of a fascinating dance-drama. It can, therefore, be stated that Ramlila performances extend to Kumaon and Nepal in the north, Punjab in the west, Orissa in the east and Maharashtra in the south.

It is only natural that a drama form so widely staged should have its regional variations. What surprises one is the measure of uniformity in this diversity. Whether it is the Ramlila stage in Janakpur Dham (a town near the

Coronation: Assi Ramlila



Bihar-Nepal border) or the Assi Ramlila in Varanasi (supposed to be started by Tulsidas) or the Ramanagar Lila or the Ramlila of Satna in Madhya Pradesh or the Ramlila of Pataunda in Rajasthan, the story, characterization and, consequently, the impact and atmosphere remain the same. There are shared elements in the style of presentation. These include presentation in the form of cycle plays; uniformity in the portrayal of specific situations; a sincerity and sense of identification of the performers and audience; the significance of ceremonials and rituals in the performance; and, most important of all, the recitation of the *Ramcharitmanas* as the basis of the performance.

The recitation of *Ramcharitmanas* is an integral part of all types of Ramlilas; the performance is conceived along with the recitation, which has a religious significance. A group of singers called the Ramayanis are attached to the performance and they recite the entire text, sequence by sequence, pausing at various points to give scope to the actors to present the same sequence in dialogues, which are quite often a paraphrase of the verses of the *Ramcharitmanas*. Thus the structure of the Ramlila performance is determined by the recitation of *Ramcharitmanas*. Indeed it appears that Ramlila was conceived as a commentary on the work.

In Ramnagar (near Varanasi) the object of Ramlila is described thus:

पहिलो तिलक रामलीलावर । जिहि लखि परति न तिमिर कूप नर ॥
जाको जहाँ अर्थ है जैसो । लीला ललित लखावहि तैसो ॥

(The great Ramlila is the primary commentary, and seeing it helps man to avoid a fall in the dark chambers of hell; all the concepts and utterances of the *Ramcharitmanas* are elaborated and become clear in the Ramlila.)

While the recitation is on, the actors stand on the stage in a frozen position. Our modern audience with its weakness for dramatic illusion—an offshoot of the western dramatic tradition—may complain that the sudden interruption of action and dialogues by recitation can hamper the dramatic flow. But in all our traditional drama, greater attention is paid to the atmosphere of the play and its poetic aspects rather than to dramatic interplay. In religious plays the atmosphere becomes all the more important. The ordinary spectators, who delight in witnessing the *lila*, find nothing lacking in the style of presentation. They are fully acquainted with not only the story but even its dialogues in the minutest detail. That is why the intervening recitation does not in any way mar their appreciation. Rather, this kind of break affords them an opportunity to retain the emotional state a little longer. It also fulfils the real object of Ramlila: giving the audience a sense of fulfilment and an identification with the divine characters.

The most prominent characteristic of Ramlila is its presentation for many days in succession. The story, from the birth of Rama to his coronation, is divided into various dramatic episodes and one or more episodes are enacted on one day, depending on the time-limit of the particular Ramlila. Ramlila is staged for 10 or 11 days at one place, 15 days at another, 21 days at the third, and there are places where it continues even



Rama's marriage: Ayodhya Ramlila

for a month. But nowhere is the Rama story enacted in a single day. This practice of presenting the story as a cycle play holds the audience in one mood for several days and makes the dramatic production more effective. Continuous contact with the audience endears the *Swaroopa*-s (the images of god, as the characters are called by the audience) to them. Ramlila is staged at many places around the Dashera festival in the month of Ashwin. The situations in the story are so presented on different days that the war between Rama and Ravana and the ultimate slaying of the latter can be shown on the day of Dashera, the tenth day of Ashwin. In some regions, however, Ramlila is staged around Ramanavami. For example, in Pataunda and the adjoining villages in Rajasthan and in some parts of Malwa and in Orissa. According to tradition, Tulsidas had Ramlila performed in Ayodhya on the eve of Ramanavami and in Varanasi on the eve of Dashera. The practice in Ayodhya has now been abandoned, and the main celebrations of Ramlila take place on the eve of Dashera. Ramlila in Bharatpur (Rajasthan) and Chetganj Mohalla in Varanasi is performed between Dashera and Diwali and the coronation of Rama is shown a day prior to Diwali. Thus the dates of the performances of Ramlila vary from region to region. But in every region the dates fixed traditionally are adhered to every year.

This theatrical form, based on recitation, was primarily evolved to propagate Ramabhakti. The word *lila* itself means the actions of the incarnation and it has a theological significance, Ramlila has, therefore, been conceived as a religious ritual and to act in it or even to witness a performance is regarded as an expression of devotion to Rama. It is a religious act. Besides, the entire performance is full of rituals and ceremonies. Before the Ramlila performance begins, the crowns of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Shatrughna and Sita are worshipped and consecrated on an auspicious day. The *Swaroopa*-s are conceived as images of gods and endowed with divine qualities once they wear the crowns. Every day at the beginning and the end of the performance the *Swaroopa*-s are worshipped and the *arati* is performed with great pomp and show. The last episode—the coronation of Rama—is celebrated with songs and dances. In Ayodhya, Rama's birthplace, there is music and dance all through the night. In Ramanagar, the whole town flocks for a *darshan* of the *Panchayatana Jhanki*, the grand tableau of the five epic characters in the coronation scene.

The stage used for Ramlila is its most interesting element. It has evolved forms and structures which retain many elements and conventions of medieval staging practice. The two basic values of the medieval theatre, namely multiplicity of locale and simultaneity of action, determine the nature of the Ramlila stage and its staging conditions in different regions and various styles.

An interesting feature of the Ramlila 'stage' can be observed in Varanasi, where various episodes are enacted in different locales, suited to the setting of that particular sequence. It is believed that this practice was started by Tulsidas himself, and he used this device to involve people from all parts of the city in the performance. The Maharaja of Ramanagar went a step ahead and built palaces, gardens and ponds in Ramanagar to depict the various locales of the story as described in the *Ramcharitmanas*. Thus the whole town is used as a theatre with permanently built locales such as Dasharatha's palace, Janaka's palace and his garden, Chitrakuta, Panchavati, Ravana's palace and the Ashoka garden, where Sita is kept in captivity. In Mathura, they follow another interesting practice. During the day Ramlila is presented as an open-air pantomimic show in a large field and at night the same episode is performed on a platform-stage. The need to preserve the continuity of action, essential for its epic character, led to the convention of multiple setting, which is now followed even in the Ramlilas of the professional troupes and in modern experiments in the dance-drama style.

Rama has been conceived as an ideal human being ever since the time of Valmiki. But Tulsidas lent to the story of Rama and his character a glory which is manifest in each and every production of Ramlila. The atmosphere of the entire performance remains sacred and orderly as becomes a devotional assembly. The witnessing of Ramlila by the spectators also signifies the same kind of devotion and faith attached to the *darshan* of the deities in temples.

Ramlila receives maximum identification from the spectators. It is a collective effort and the people of the village or the locality where it is staged feel fully involved. In several situations, there is no gap between the



Rama worshipping Shiva: Ramnagar Ramlila

actors and the spectators and the emotional partnership of the audience is ensured in the dramatic experience. When Rama arrives for the wedding, all the dwellers of the region of the Ramlila welcome the bridegroom, almost as if they are all the subjects of Raja Janaka. At the time of Rama's banishment, the weeping multitude representing the dwellers of Ayodhya, follow Rama, Lakshmana and Sita to the forest. During the episode of Rama's coronation the spectators imagine that they are the subjects of an ideal Ram Rajya and rejoice at his coronation. This may be because the Rama-story has

Sita: Ramnagar Ramlila



been so splendidly conceived or due to the reputation enjoyed by *Ram-charitmanas*, but this degree of involvement by the spectators can hardly be found in any other theatre form. This fact alone lends a different dimension to Ramlila.

The actors participating in Ramlila are amateurs, who receive no fees for their performance. The offerings made during the *arati* of Ramlila are distributed among them. Sometimes they are given just a part of the amount. Sometimes the whole amount is given to them. Most of the artistes take great pride in playing a role in Ramlila and each of them tries to live the role. Money itself has little attraction for them. In many Ramlilas the key roles are played by persons from a particular family and this continues from generation to generation. Those who earn their livelihood in other cities return to their home-towns almost as if they were there to participate in a family celebration.

There are specific rules regarding the selection of 'actors' and these are followed in all Ramlilas. For example, all the roles, whether male or female, are played by men. The roles of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Shatrughna and Sita are enacted by Brahmin boys between the age of twelve and sixteen. They are required to be attractive and well-built to suit the images of divine characters. During the days of Ramlila, these boys, called *Swaroopas*, are required to conduct themselves in a virtuous manner and receive respect and reverence from all.

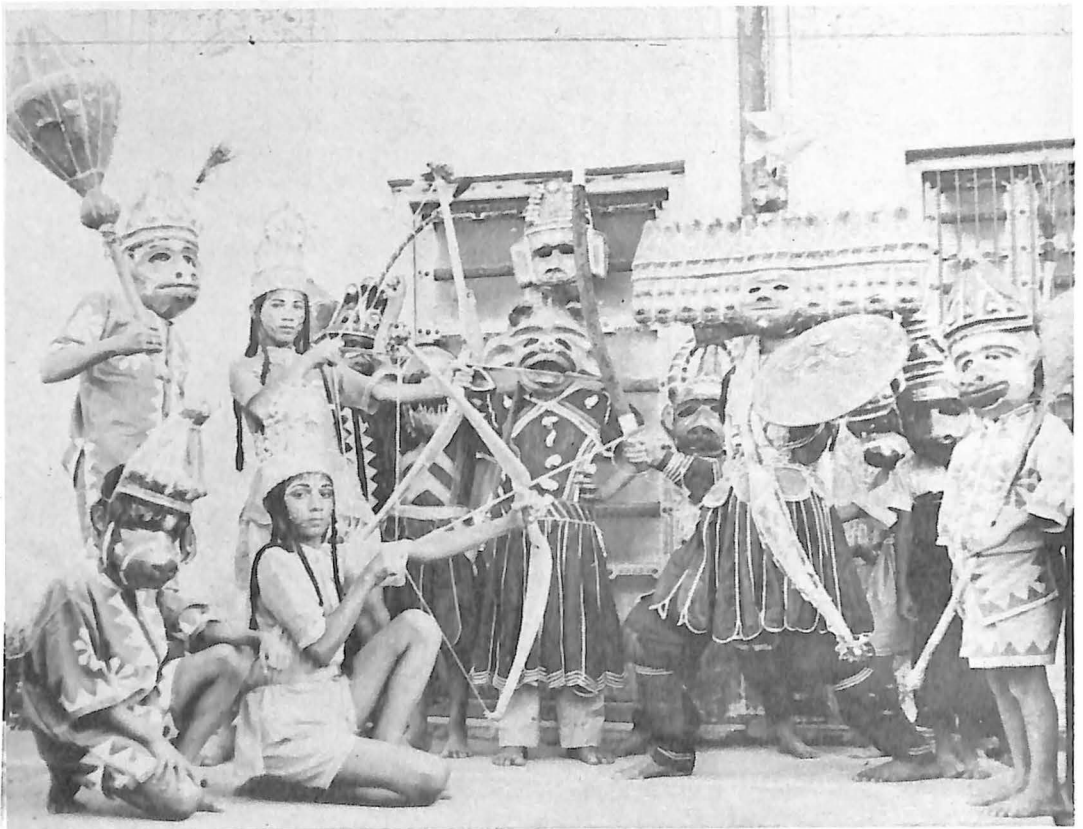
Ramlila performances are organized on an amateur basis, except for the Ramlilas presented by professional Ramlila troupes. There are Ramlila Committees to look after the management of the Ramlila performances and the members are selected jointly by those interested in the production of Ramlila. The Committee raises donations for the Ramlila performance. In most places there is one Ramlila Committee for one Ramlila. In the big towns, however, there are several Ramlila Committees and as many Ramlilas. The Ramlila Committees take great pride in discharging their duties and all the members work actively to make the show a success. This is how Ramlila is organized, year after year, without any adequate funds or aid from the Government.

There are four main styles of the traditional Ramlilas. Despite the variety in style, some of the episodes are presented in the same manner in every style. For instance, the birth and coronation of Rama are always presented in the form of tableaux. On the day of Ravana's killing, huge paper-effigies of Ravana and his brother Kumbhakarna are erected. Rama and Lakshmana appear on the stage seated in a chariot-like van, they engage in 'battle' for a while with Ravana and shoot burning wooden arrows which set the effigies on fire. This announces the victory of good over evil and is accompanied by flames and bursting crackers. This *lila*, presented on the day of Dashera, forms the chief attraction of every Ramlila; to most people Ramlila means this festival of Dashera. On the day of Rama's wedding and Bharata's union with Rama, there are processions with music bands, decorated chaukis and beautiful tableaux. As they wend their way through the towns and villages they are met with joyous acclaim and stopped at different places where offerings are made to them.

The importance and popularity of the tableaux and pageants in Ramlilas and the inclusion of the recitation of *Ramcharitmanas* lead one to conclude that the style of pantomime was perhaps the initial form of Ramlila. Besides, whatever historical evidence is available with regard to traditional Ramlilas suggests that the *lila*-s in their initial period were pantomimic, and that the addition of dramatic dialogues was a later development. The Chitrakut Ramlila of Varanasi, which is said to be the oldest (Adi) Ramlila, is pantomimic, even to this day. In Mathura, where both the styles prevail, it is believed that the pantomime-based style is the earlier one. Thus there are two major traditional styles of Ramlila presentation; one with tableaux and pageants (pantomimic) and the other, dialogue-based (dramatic). In the former the dialogues, if any, are very brief. In the enactment of some of the situations, the *Swaroop*-s and other characters are seated on decorated chariots and carried in processions, while Ramayanis sit reciting the *Ramcharitmanas* in the other chariot. The Chitrakut Ramlila of Varanasi and the arena Ramlila of Mathura are good examples of this style.

The second style of production of Ramlila is dialogue-based. Situations of the story are converted into dialogues, and a script is prepared for each situation, giving it a dramatic form. Dialogues are borrowed from other

Rama-Ravana battle: Bisau (Rajasthan) Ramlila





King Janaka and a courtier: Mathura Ramlila

Rama literature; popular lyrics and folk songs are incorporated, and where necessary even new characters are introduced. Among the traditional Ramlilas perhaps it was the Ramanagar Ramlila where such an extensive dramatic script was prepared for the first time. But now this practice has been adopted at most places. Even so, the most important Ramlila of this style is the Ramlila at Ramanagar. The Ramlila at Assi (Varanasi) believed to be propagated by Tulsidas is also dialogue-based.

The third style, namely the operatic style of Ramlila, gained currency only a century ago. In the operatic style of Ramlila, the text of *Ram-charitmanas* is set to classical *raga-s*, and the dialogues are also sung in classical *raga-s*. The Ramlila at Almora and of the village Patunda in Rajasthan are good examples of this style.

The fourth style of Ramlila, presented by the professional Ramlila troupes, is becoming increasingly popular. There are many Ramlila troupes in Mathura, Ayodhya and Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh and in Darbhanga in Bihar. These troupes visit towns and villages and present Ramlilas. The troupes are professionally organized. There is a manager who can be said to be the director-producer of that Ramlila. He looks after the make-up and costumes. Besides, a harmonium and a tabla player are permanent fixtures. The *Swaroopas* and other actors keep changing. Each troupe has about twenty members, and they depend for their livelihood on Ramlila shows. It is evident from the theatre style of the professional Ramlila that it is influenced by the tradition of the Parsi Theatre, the successful professional

theatre of India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Bearing in mind the taste of Hindu theatre-goers, the Parsi theatre had incorporated certain popular traits of the *Lila* plays such as *Jhanki-s* (tableaux) and recitation. The first Ramlila troupes, which were founded about this time, preserved the religious and ritualistic nature of the traditional Ramlila and also used the theatrical conventions of the Parsi theatre. Hence, these Ramlilas, which incorporated both these conventions, became very popular.

During the last thirty years performances in various forms of ballets, dance-dramas or shadow-plays, based on the Rama story, have been created and have usually been described as Ramlila. The Ramlila of Uday Shankar was presented as a shadow play, that of the Little Ballet Troupe in puppet movements. The Ramlila Ballet of the Bharatiya Kala Kendra also features among these new experiments. In all these creations the bulk of the textual material has again been drawn from the *Ramcharitmanas*, and the costumes, music, stage-conventions are similar to those of the traditional Ramlila.

Studying the vast tradition of the Ramlila, one realizes that a very large part of our cultural heritage is contained in this theatre form. It is through this performing tradition of the *Ramcharitmanas* that the ideals and values of the epic become part of the social and ethical life of the Indian people. The Rama story is part of the traditional theatre of the whole country; it is charged with the deep devotion, the poetic beauty and the dramatic power of the *Ramcharitmanas*. Thus Ramlila has now become one of the most popular among the traditional *Ramayana* presentations of India.

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*We find that Tulsidas and his *Ramcharitmanas* are greatly respected in various other languages. In Orissa the *Ramcharitmanas* was read and recited for centuries, and has inspired and influenced the Oriya *Ramayana* theatre, also called Ramlila. In Gujarata and Punjab, recitations of the *Ramcharitmanas* are quite popular. It is interesting to note that in *Ramkathe Dodatta* of the traditional theatre form of Karnataka, Tulsidas is referred to with great respect as Kavi Maharaj—the king of poets. In the prologue the Sutradhara remarks that the *Ramkathe* is based on the *Ramayana* of Tulsidas because Tulsidas, being an incarnation of Shiva, has written the best *Ramayana*. Later Shiva, Parvati and Narada quote couplets from *Ramcharitmanas* while discussing the oneness of Shiva and Vishnu Bhakti.

सिवद्रोही मम भगत कहावा । सो नर सपनेहुँ मोहि न भावा ॥

(*Ramcharitmanas*, Lanka Kanda)

(Rama says, "I cannot accept any devotee, even in a dream, who professes devotion to me and is disrespectful to Shiva".)

In the course of the performance, other couplets are also recited. The words from the *Ramcharitmanas* are included to emphasize the greatness of the work and the contribution of Tulsidas towards removing the enmity between the Shaivites and Vaishnavas.