Ramlila of Ramnagar: An Introduction

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Texts, Oppositions, and the Ganga River

The subject of Ramlila, even Ramnagar Ramlila alone, is vast... It touches on several texts: Ramayana of Valmiki, never uttered, but present all the same in the very fibre of Rama's story; Tulsidasa's Ramcharitmanas chanted in its entirety from before the start of the performance of Ramlila to its end. I mean that the Ramayanis spend ten days before the first lila up on the covered roof of the small 'tiring house-green room next to the square where on the twenty-ninth day of the performance Bharata Milapa will take place; there on that roof the Ramayanis chant the start of the Ramcharitmanas, from its first word till the granting of Ravana's boon: "Hear me, Lord of the World (Brahma). I would die at the hand of none save man or monkey." Shades of Macbeth's meeting with the witches: "For none of woman born shall harm Macbeth." Ravana, like Macbeth, is too proud.

Nothing of this until the granting of Ravana's boon is heard by the Maharaja of Benares, or by the faithful daily audience called nemi-s, nor by the hundreds of sadhu-s who stream into Ramnagar for Ramlila summoned by Rama and by the Maharaja's generosity in offering sadhu-s dharamshala-s for rest and rations for the belly. The "sadhu rations" are by far the largest single expense in the Ramnagar Ramlila budget—Rs. 18,000 in 1976. Only the Ramayanis hear the start of the Ramcharitmanas—they and scholars whose job it is to "do and hear and see everything." But this, we soon discovered, is impossible: too many things happen simultaneously, scattered out across Ramnagar. While Rama is in Chitrakut, Bharata sits at Nandigram; when the army of monkeys and bears moves toward Ramswaram, already Sita, with a band of devoted female spectators, awaits them in the Ashoka Garden of Lanka; when Lakshmana is wounded by Meghanada's shakti and Rama pitifully mourns his fallen brother, Hanuman is more than a mile away chasing after the herb that will revive Lakshmana. And even when the story itself is over, and Rama coronated, his lesson preached in the marble gazebo of Rambagh, his crown removed for the last time back in the dharamshala near Ayodhya, and the five boys who are the swarupa-s returned to ordinary life, the masks—some of papier-maché, some fashioned from copper and brass—put away for a year, the Ramayanis continue to chant until every last syllable of Tulsidas's text is sounded.

But there is more to the Ramlila texts than the Ramcharitmanas. Tulsi's masterpiece is the generating kernel of the performance, but like a tree springing from a great tap root, the branches are spread far and wide. There are the samvada-s, dialogs actually spoken during the 30 or 31 nights (depending on the lunar calendar) of the performance. These samvada-s were assembled and written during the 19th century. They are intended to translate the feeling—the bhava-s and rasa-s, if you will—of the Ramcharitmanas into a spoken language that ordinary people can understand. Thus Rama's story is twice told, at least. For each segment of narrative the chant of the Ramayanis alternates with the dialogs of the characters speaking samvada-s. And if the Maharaja is the principal audience for the Ramcharitmanas—the 12 Ramayanis always sit close to him—the sadhu-s and others especially devoted to Rama crowd up near the swarupa-s (who speak
most of the *samvada*-s). In between are vast numbers of spectators—literally people who see more than hear, as the story is acted out. Thus there are three main texts: *Ramcharitmanas, samvada*-s, spectacle.

Consider: the Ramayanis sit in a tightly closed circle, their leader concentrating on the palm-leaf manuscript on which Tulsi's text is written. This text is illuminated at night by burning torches. Far away from the Ramayanis, lit by petromax lantern, and sometimes by blazing flares, are the characters of the Ramlila who utter the *samvada*-s. There are many such characters: Rama, Ravana, Lakshmana, Sita, Hanuman, Angad, Guha, Narada, Bharata, Dasharatha, Sugriva, Shiva, Brahma, Indra, Mantara, Kaikeyi, Parashurama, Vasishtha, Sumantra, Janaka, Vibhishana. I list them this way, and not according to their ritual importance—the five *swarupa*-s first—because in Ramlila these gods-characters-beings present themselves to me simultaneously as actors, as performers of a story, as physical theatrical presences. I am not alone in considering them thus. I spoke to a man in the crowd of spectators:

Everything there (at Ramnagar Ramlila) has a naturality. If they say “Ashoka tree” they have an Ashoka tree, if they say “jungle” they go to a jungle, if they say “Ayodhya” they show Ayodhya. Other Ramlilas, it is more drama. There are fancy clothes and loudspeakers and electric lights. Here the Maharaja preserves the spiritual side. He makes certain everything is done right.

So there is, in addition to the literary texts, the performance text and the actual mise-en-scène, with the Maharaja, as uber-director, the overseer of everything, the director of the *vyasa*-s who do the day-to-day directing and who can always be seen standing onstage, *regiebuchs* in hand, whispering the dialog into the ears of the role-players, making certain that each *samvada* is correctly spoken, giving signals to the leader of the Ramayanis so that the alternation between *samvada*-s and *Ramcharitmanas* is correct. Behind this intricate staging is the Maharaja. The performance text he preserves is a 19th century one.
Actually, the mise-en-scene, and the Ramlila environments—the actual settings for Ayodhya, Janakpur, Chitrakut, Panchavati, Lanka, and Rambagh—were mostly constructed in the mid-19th century, when Ramnagar Ramlila most probably originated. Some parts of the environment—the pathways through the back parts of Ramnagar, the countryside setting of Nishada’s ashram, the great Durga tank and temple which serve as kshira sagara, Rambagh itself (which was once a Maharaja’s pleasure garden), the Maharaja’s many-chambered Fort (or palace) up against the flowing Ganga: these all pre-exist Ramnagar Ramlila, and have been absorbed into it totally—as Rambagh has, now no longer in use except as a staging place for Ramlila, and as temporary living quarters for the swarupa-s during some of the Ramlila, and, importantly, as the scene-and-technical shop where Atmarama, a man in the Maharaja’s employ for many years, constructs the effigies and props for the entire spectacle. Some environments, like the Durga tank and temple, maintain their own very powerful existence, and merely lend themselves to Ramlila once a year—in much the same way that Rama comes to worship Shiva during this season. For Benares is a Shaivite city, and the Maharaja is greeted by the crowd with approving chants of “Hara, Hara, Mahadevl!” But Kashi is, as I was told on many occasions, an island of Shiva in a sea of Rama. Nowhere, and at no time, is this more clear than during Ramlila season. The most ecstatic crowds, if not the largest, come twice during the month-long performance, when Rama himself performs the puja to the Shiva lingam: once after crossing the make-believe Ganga during his first day of exile; and once the day after Dasara at make-believe Rameshwaram.

I am still talking about the layering of texts: literary and performance texts. Each of these texts may be “read” independently of the others.

There is, too, the text of movement. For Ramlila is a performance of movements: pilgrimage, exile, circumambulation, pursuit, kidnapping and running away, processions. All this movement—movement in the story, actual movement through the environments of Ramlila, movement to get to Ramnagar from Varanasi, and back, by crossing the great Ganga—is balanced by the stasis of arati at the end of each day’s performance. Arati, where the swarupa-s freeze and become pure murtis: the images of what they are, pictures of action suspended in time, taken out of time, stopped. Thus also a text of complementary oppositions, of which there are many in Ramnagar Ramlila.

Let me name a few as they operate both conceptually and spatially, in both the narrative and the environments of Ramlila. These oppositions are more comprehensible if I summarize them in a chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maharaja &amp; Ramayanis: Shiva</th>
<th>vs Rama, Sita, and other swarupa-s &amp; sadhu-s: Vishnu</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tulsidasa, Valmiki, &amp; the Great Tradition vs Samvada-s, bhajana-s, and the Little Tradition²</td>
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<tr>
<td>West bank of Ganga, the Varanasi side vs East bank of Ganga, the Ramnagar side</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stillness: murti-s, arati, “stations“³ vs Movement; processions, pilgrimage, exile, flow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Town space vs Theatre space</td>
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<tr>
<td>Present historical time vs Time of Ramlila narrative</td>
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<td>Mela vs Lila</td>
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These oppositions—and there are more—are not mutually exclusive, or hostile to one another. They complement each other, constructing among themselves a vision of the world that is whole. For example, the Maharaja exists in the field of energy created by Rama; and Rama exists as arranged for by the Maharaja. Not any Rama, but the Rama of Ramnagar Ramlila—a Rama who has auditioned
for the Maharaja, who is to be paid (a token sum) after the month of performing is over. For his part, the Maharaja is in a way a fictional character. There is no kingdom in secular modern India over which Vibhuti Narain Singh actually rules (as his predecessors and he, himself, until Independence, actually ruled). His existence as Maharaja is confirmed by his function as sponsor-producer of Ramlila. For the month of Ramraj is when the Maharaja of Benares is most visibly and demonstrably a king. It is during this month, more than at any other time, that he rides on his elephant, or in his 1926 Cadillac, is accompanied by troops and a military marching band; that he shows himself again and again as a king to assembled thousands who chant, when they catch sight of him, "Hara, Hara, Mahadev!" — an homage to the king of the city of Shiva that corresponds neatly to the homage this Shaivite king gives to Rama, Vishnu incarnate. Thus it is that a mediation occurs between Shiva and Vishnu, between the west bank where Varanasi is and the east bank where Ramnagar is.

Nowhere is this mediating dynamic more clearly operating than in crossing the Ganga herself. The Ganga is no ordinary river; her waters are holy. And to the thousands who cross Ganga each day to attend Ramlila some special dharma is achieved. That the Maharaja's Fort, or palace, is across the river is a result of the way the British occupied the country in the 18th century. But this aspect of military strategy has had more than military consequences: I am of no doubt that Ramnagar Ramlila has gained in importance because it is just near enough to Varanasi to gather audiences from there, and far enough to require crossing the Ganga. A very special balance and tension is thus obtained. So, too, the sharp bend in the Ganga's flow, making it stream from south to north as it passes Varanasi, putting the city on the west (rather than south) bank, has more than geographical consequences. At dawn one can bathe in the Ganga and witness the sun rising over her vast waters (during flood season). Sometimes, even the surface of the waters is broken by the surging backs of the population of dolphin who inhabit the river.

To get to Ramnagar Ramlila from Varanasi one must cross the Ganga—travel in the afternoon away from the westward declining sun and toward the brightly illuminated face of the Fort. Each day many thousands cross the river to attend Ramlila. There are several ways of crossing. A large steel bridge spans the river a few miles below Varanasi; a motor ferry leaves from the ghat near Benares Hindu University and docks close to the Fort; many private small rowboats ply the river. It was my impression that most people who attended Ramlila from Varanasi went by boat. Because the ferry operated only during daylight hours, a great fleet of rowboats, each seating around thirty persons, assembled each night to take riders back to Varanasi.

What a trip. Leaving amidst the tumult of the after-show surge of people looking for their friends, their pre-arranged boats, the fleet separated on the river as each boat went its own way. On many boats persons sang bhajana-s. By mid-river it was as if the boat I was on, appropriately skippered by an old man, gaunt and beautiful, named Ramdas, was alone on the river. Another opposition: the seething surging crowds of Ramila versus the ascetic, quiet aloneness of the river. The Ganga is wide enough during flood season that it was almost as if we were rowing across the sea. Some nights blue lightning flashed, and the wind was fresh; we hastened to avoid storms—storms that could capsize a small boat. Toward the end of Ramila, as the rainy season gave way to the glorious autumn clear weather, and the moon ran to full, the river sparkled. I experienced the vastness of Ganga, and her intimacy. After about one-half hour of rowing, and being carried by the swift current, the west bank was reached.
Different passengers alighted at different ghats. I stepped off at Assi. Others went down toward Dashehswamed.

At least seventy-five boats worked the river. I realize that this accounts for only 2250 persons, and sometimes the crowds were closer to 50,000 and even, for Dasara, 100,000. Clearly many people walked home, and probably, also, my estimate both of the number of small boats, and their capacity, is underestimated. (I never cease to be astounded about the number of people who can crowd onto transport—bus, train, boat—in India.)

Be that as it may, the crossing to and from Ramnagar constitutes a big part of the experience of the Lila itself. For the Ganga is no ordinary river. Crossing it puts one in touch with a great life-stream. Songs sung upon returning from Ramlila included, in our boat at least (and many people travelled with the same boatman night after night, year after year), songs that were identified both with Rama and Gandhi:

King Rama, leader of Raghu dynasty,
Born from Shankara's drum,
Born from the waves of the Ganga,
Husband of pure Sita.
Born from the mouth of the wise,
Hail to Sita's Rama,
And to Hanuman, who relieves us of our burdens,
And grants us favors.
Hail to Mother Ganga.

This is very close to Gandhi's song (sung to the same tune):

King Rama, leader of the Raghu dynasty,
Husband of pure Sita:
May we worship this Sita-Rama.
He is known as Ishwara or Allah.
May this God bestow good sense on everyone.

But the crossing of the river is not always peaceful. Sometimes boats overturn and people drown. Always, in the afternoon, on the ferry, there is a great rush and crush.

For example, on 23 September 1978, I noted what it was like to cross the Ganga by ferry:

Boatrush. Pushing down the muddy flood-slicked slope of Somnaghat toward the ferry. People rush furiously to get on the old boat. There used to be two of them, but one is layed up about a half-mile upstream. Who knows why, or when it will return to service. The ferry is free. The private boats can cost a rupee or more. On the ferry people pile up, bikes and all. From the shore to the boat is a narrow gangplank not more than three feet wide. So soon a wild, shoving, shouting bottleneck develops. There is screaming and shouting and jostling. Bikes are handed over the tops of peoples' heads to friends already aboard. People squirm into the crowd or cling to the handrope and edge along the side of the gangplank. But often everything just stops: things get jammed up. There is a raging crowd on shore, an empty gangplank, a half-empty boat blowing its whistle signalling departure.

Three days ago as we arrived very early for the 3 o'clock boat three women with head-bundles of sticks squatted by the shore. They were the epitome of patience and labor. Their bodies were dark and as thin as the sticks they carried. (Someone told
us that these sticks would be made into toothpicks.) It was hot, in the 90s, and humid. After thirty minutes the boat arrived and the ordinary riot occurred. Finally the bikes were loaded, most of the men who wanted to go were on board. Only a few women. The three women with the loads of sticks waited patiently. Occasionally they approached the gangplank, and then they slid back as aggressive men shoved on by. The boat whistled: there was a last minute rush and surge of bikers. Always, here, there's more demand than supply. Over the little mud hill at the shore more passengers and bikers rushing to the boat. The boat's motor began. More men leaping from shore to ship. A single black bike passed over the heads of some men and thrown on board on top of the other bikes. Shouting. The boat pulls away.

And the three women were as they had been, standing helpless, and then squatting, to wait out the hour till the next boat.

I quote this because there is a tendency, in writing about Ramlila, to be swept up in devotion and admiration; and to forget the ordinary grind and helplessness of lots of people who may never themselves attend Ramlila in Ramnagar but who still, for me at least, comprise part of the Ramlila experience.

So one of the deepest oppositions is between the extraordinary time-space-narrative adventure of Ramayana versus the ordinary grind of daily living in north India. In a real way, Ramayana provides for a number of people a temporary relief from this grind, a festive season, a time out.

Narrative Structures

The narrative structure of Ramlila is very important: it is through the story that much information concerning values, history (both mythic and conceptual), hierarchy, and geography are transmitted. People begin attending Ramlila as children, even babies; much is learned through osmosis. Naturally, the basic story of Ramlila is that of the Ramayana and the Ramcharitmanas.

Every Indian knows this story: many believe it to be historical fact. In its details it combines narrative themes from both Iliad (the war) and Odyssey (the wanderings). There is something deeply Indo-European in Ramayana. For Indians Ramayana defines the subcontinent's landscape: Rameshwaram where the great bridge from India to Lanka was built is the site of a temple; pilgrims can walk from Ayodhya to Janakpur. A small book by H. D. Sankalia, Ramayana: Myth or Reality? deals effectively (in my opinion) with questions not only of Ramayana's historicity, but of the more interesting problem of its historical presence within the Indian popular consciousness. This presence is renewed, and enhanced, each year by thousands of Ramlilas performed all across northern India. And nowhere is this historical-mythical consciousness more effectively represented than at Ramnagar.

At Ramnagar the whole Ramayana story is told, but with a few emphases and an addition different than what is related in Valmiki or the Ramcharitmanas. The classic Rama story has three parts: (1) Initiations, culminating in the breaking of Shiva's bow and the marriage of Rama to Sita; (2) Exile and growth to maturity through battle and ordeal, culminating in the war against Ravana; (3) Ramraj, which barely begins as the narrative ends. This story is set within various frames, all of which are very interesting from a literary point of view—and for what they tell us about the Indian ways of viewing “reality,” but which are not altogether relevant from a theatrical perspective. That's because in theatre, in Ramayana, the story is shown, acted out, not told. At Ramnagar the story of Rama is divided into five parts: (1) A prelude where Brahma implores Vishnu to take the form of
a human and rescue the world which is being disturbed by demons (this section is in the \textit{Ramcharitmanas}); (2-3-4) as in the classic versions; and (5) a postlude performed only at Ramnagar where the Maharaja and his family welcome the swarupas to the Fort, feed them ceremoniously in front of a huge assembled audience, and honor them publicly. The next day, in private, the Maharaja pays the performers for their services. These two actions—honoring Rama and his party publicly, paying the actors—bring the story of Rama into the field of force controlled by the Maharaja. First as guests and then as employees, first as mythic heroes and then as subjects, the Ramlila characters are adhered to the world, and necessities, of the Maharaja of Benares. This five-part narrative scheme can be outlined thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>PRELUDE</th>
<th>INITIATIONS</th>
<th>MATURITY</th>
<th>EXILE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gods beg Rama to incarnate himself</td>
<td>Boyhood adventures Killing demons</td>
<td>Contest for Shiva's bow. Courtship of Sita. Marriage</td>
<td>Exile begins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVENT</th>
<th>CRISIS</th>
<th>WAR</th>
<th>RETURN</th>
<th>RAMRAJ</th>
<th>POSTLUDE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DAY</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17-19</td>
<td>20-26</td>
<td>27-28</td>
<td>29-30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of theatrical time, the whole cycle consists of a one-day prelude, seven days of initiations, twenty days of exile, two days of Ramraj, and two days of postlude.

This theatrical structure can be represented in another, more revealing, configuration:

Figure 1

Figure 2
Without the interruption of Rama's coronation brought about by Kaikeyi's insistence that Dasharatha redeem his promises to her, there would be no drama; just a straight line from Rama's birth to his Ramraj. And without the drama there is no exile, no kidnapping of Sita, no war against Ravana. In a word, no point for Vishnu to be incarnated as Rama: a kshatriya, a lover, a householder, a protector of brahmmins, a sanyasin. The loop from day 9 through day 28 is where most of the adventure takes place. It is, literally, Rama's journey in time and space from the safety of Ayodhya to the adventures that lay in store for him at Chitrakut, Panchavati, and Lanka.

Anthropologist Victor Turner has outlined a four-part sequence of what he calls "social dramas." These social dramas occur in trials, combats, rivalries, wars. Turner's idea applies very well to Ramlila of Ramnagar—where a great myth has been translated into a religious-aesthetic drama with many overtones of social drama. Turner:

I define social dramas as units of a harmonic or disharmonic social process, arising in conflict situations. Typically, they have four main phases of public action. These are: (1) breach of regular norm-governed social relations; (2) crisis, during which there is a tendency for the breach to widen. (3) redressive action ranging from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal juridical and legal machinery, and, to resolve certain kinds of crisis or legitimate other modes of resolution, to the performance of public ritual. (4) The final phase consists either of the reintegration of the disturbed social group, or of the social recognition and legitimation of irreparable schism between the contesting parties.

It is no surprise that Turner's scheme fits Ramlila exactly. Turner constructed his concept of social drama from what he knew of aesthetic drama. What is interesting is how well this model works cross-culturally—in India as well as Africa (where Turner developed it to account for conflicts among the Ndembu) and Euro America where Shakespeare's plays and the works of other dramatists can be analyzed according to Turner's model.

For Ramlila the phases of the social drama are: (1) breach—when Kaikeyi makes her claim on Dasharatha; (2) crisis—Rama's exile, complicated by the kidnapping of Sita; (3) redressive action—the war against Ravana; (4) reintegration—the re-uniting of Rama and Sita, the Bharata Milapa re-uniting the four brothers, the coronation of Rama, and Ramraj. At all levels a reintegration takes place: at the level of lovers, family, state, and cosmos. One could also look at Ramlila in a broader perspective and identify the breach as when Ravana obtains his boon and destroys the altars of the Brahmmins, terrifying the earth. Reintegration begins immediately with the incarnation of Vishnu as Rama. But then Vishnu's lila makes necessary the performance of the Ramlila story as a narrative within a cosmic reality in order to restore the earth to harmony. In this scheme, Ravana's surrender to Rama is the decisive moment of reintegration for it ends his rebellion.

At Ramlila itself, on Dasara day, this surrender of Ravana is performed with particular simplicity and beauty. On preceding days there have been great battles involving Lakshmana, Hanuman, Kumbhakarna, Meghnada, Ravana, and Rama. The victory in these battles goes to Rama's side, but not decisively enough to end the war. On Dasara day the narration of Ramlila itself is interrupted so that the Maharaja can play out his own story—a story that he shares with other Indian kings. On Dasara there is a special "weapons puja" in which the Maharaja displays in the courtyard of the Fort a panoply of swords, daggers, guns, and
other implements of war. We were not allowed to photograph this display—
signalling that in some ways it was a sacred, at least a very special, manifestation.

Then in an extraordinary and magnificently theatrical procession of
elephants the Maharaja makes his way amidst immense crowds of more than
100,000 from the Fort, down the main street of Ramnagar, and out to Lanka
more than 5 kilometers to the southeast. My notes for Dasara 1978:

Maharaja enters Lanka on his elephant, followed by the others. They ride straight
through the crowd past the battleground, turn and ride up and over the battle-
ground. They leave Lanka the way they came—having stayed less than 10 minutes,
ever stopping, just passing through and over. What is the meaning of this strange
procession that violates the performing space? It is the only time in the Ramlila that
the Maharaja literally invades the performing space. Otherwise he remains firmly
anchored at the back of the spectators, defining where the audience is. The “weapons
puja” is what’s left of a very war-like traditional display of kingly might that used to
occupy Maharajas on Dasara. They would march their armies to the borders of their
domain, proclaim the territory as theirs, confront their opposing number across the
border and go home. Thus they showed their ability to make war; and they identified
themselves, however vaguely, with the ancient horse-sacrifice, which Dasharatha
himself performs in the Ramayana. Thus the Maharaja here in Ramlila is staking out
his territory, saying in effect that the Ramlila is his. He boldly penetrates the performing
space and cuts across the battleground, showing who’s boss, who’s king, and over
what territory. He rides to the very edge of the Ramlila ground, the end of the Ramlila
world—and he goes a few hundred feet beyond, then turns his elephants, and
returns. This is the furthest out anyone playing a role in Ramnagar Ramlila
goes. Then the Maharaja leaves Lanka; he does not see Ravana defeated. “It is not
right,” he told me, “for one king to watch the death of another."

But this is not all there is to Ravana’s death.
Ravana actually doesn’t die in battle. Rather, he surrenders. On the afternoon of Dasara, after the Maharaja has come and gone, Ravana sits in his chariot across the battlefield from Rama. Then, without another arrow being shot, Ravana rises, takes off his ten-headed mask, walks the length of the battlefield—about 150 feet—and touches his head to the feet of Rama. Ravana literally surrenders, gives up, to Rama. The crowd surges to see this surrender; cops wave great sticks threatening the roaring, surging crowd. Then, after surrendering to Rama, Ravana turns and walks off into the crowd. His son carries his mask.

Later in that afternoon, after his role in Ramlila is over, Ravana will go to many of the owners of food and tea stalls to collect “Ravana’s rent.” In this way he gets paid for his performance. Those who operate businesses as part of the mela at Lanka pay Ravana for occupying space on his territory. Ravana does not stick around for the end of Ramlila, but returns to his village about 10 miles away. “I never see the end,” he told me.

Later, on the night of Dasara, the giant effigy of Ravana is cremated. Through fire his being is liberated and ascends to Vishnu. The war is over.

Environments, Mise-en scene, and Directionality

Just as there was a Troy and a Trojan War, so there were occurrences that underlay the Ramayana. These events probably took place in north and central India, from Ayodhya on the river Sarayu, south to Allahabad (Prayag), west to Chitrakut, and southwest to what was a forested area north of the river Narmada. But as the telling of the Ramayana spread southward along with, as part of, Sanskritization, so did its field of geographical references. “The gradual spread, first of the Mahabharata and then of the Ramayana into the Deccan, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, shows the slow absorption by society, high and low, of certain ethical values. (...) Simultaneously places all over India came to be associated with episodes in the Ramayana.”

As the Ramayana stories spread—were carried person-to-person south and east—they were identified with local deities and sacred places. Indian culture, like Japanese, does not reject its past when something new comes along. Rather the culture remembers everything and displays it in a palimpsest. Thus in many events, Ramilla among them, one can detect pre-Hindu, Hindu, Muslim, and English elements. Certainly the Hindu coloring is dominant, but it is not alone. The sacred rivers and crossings are surely pre-Hindu; the pomp of the Maharaja, and his very dress, owes as much to Mogul influences as to Hindu ideas of kingship; the Maharaja’s marching band, his Cadillac, the petromax lanterns that are “old-fashioned” in the minds of most spectators, and traditional, are all of Euro-American origins. These are just a few examples of many that could be cited demonstrating the multi-cultural dimensions of Ramilla. But this multi-culturality is natural in India (as elsewhere).

The very geography of Ramilla of Ramnagar echoes with very ancient pre-Hindu and Hindu references. And the geography of Ramilla—its hilltops, rivers and river junctures, cities, temples, caves, trees, wells, and paths—are models of actual places that carry and emit bundles of significance. “The number of Hindu sanctuaries in India is so large and the practice of pilgrimage so ubiquitous that the whole of India can be regarded as a vast sacred space organized into a system of pilgrimage centers and their fields.” The centers indicate stasis, and the fields motion: this is the pattern of Ramilla from intense activity to the stillness of the murti’s during arati. The Ramcharitmanas tells the story of Rama’s adventures as they were retold in the 16th century by Tulisidasa. These adventures differ somewhat from the Ramayana. In Ramcharitmanas Rama knows he is god, he knows the
outcome of his adventures. Thus the whole thing becomes a kind of conscious and reflexive display: a watching in the mirror. This makes it very natural to the story that a crowd of spectators follow Rama wherever he goes. Rama is twice-born, his story twice-told. And Rama’s adventures are actually his journey; and his journeys are the spectators’ pilgrimages. Without exile there would be no kidnapping, and without kidnapping no flight to Lanka, and without flight to Lanka no great war—a war that is prepared for by a great march south and east from Panchavati to Rameshwaram, and across the great stone bridge to Lanka. Many Ramlilas are staged in environments that are spread over distances that make the spectators move from place to place literally imitating Rama by following him in order to attend to his story. This kind of processional performance is very common around the world. But, in my experience at least, nowhere is it so highly developed, so sophisticated and full of levels of meaning, as at Ramnagar Ramlila.

The audience at Ramlila takes naturally to a performance that includes processions—the crossing by Rama of an imitation Ganga and Jamuna, the long journey of Hanuman from Lanka northward to the Himalayas in search of the herb that will restore Lakshmana after he has been wounded by Meghnada’s shakti weapon, the magnificently slow two-day return journey from Lanka to the boxing-ring like square where Bharata Milapa is staged, the regal procession on elephant from Rambagh to the Fort the night after Rama’s coronation when the Maharaja feeds Rama, Sita, and the other swarupa-s. Or, on a more modest scale the thin line of followers behind Rama and Lakshmana as they wind through the back pathways of Ramnagar on Rama’s first adventure—his encounter with the demon Taraka on his way from Ayodhya to Janakpur.

The Ramnagar Ramlila cycle condenses much of the Indian subcontinent into a comprehensible single sacred space with nine main stations: Ayodhya, Janakpur, Chitrakut, Panchavati, Rameshwaram, Lanka, Milapa Square, Rambagh, and the Fort. Add to these the ponds that serve as the Ganga and Jamuna and you have a map of sacred India according to the Ramcharitmanas. Remember that most of the spectators at Ramlila will not travel, even as pilgrims, far from where they were born. Their experience at Ramlila—during a month out from ordinary
time—is a very actual moving through of Rama’s India. Their experience of following Rama is somewhere between “going to a play,” an entertainment, and some kind of ritual procession through a space that has become what it represents in much the same way as the boys who play *swarupa-s* have become *murti-s*. Without suggesting any disrespect, the feeling is parallel to what happens to Americans when they go to Disneyland and enter the “magic kingdom” or visit any one of the hundreds of “restored villages” that mark the American landscape. These places create, or re-create, or actualize, American history and imagination. The stations of Ramlila are anchor points of a very carefully organized system of movements and directional significations.

Ramlagar, of course, literally means “town of Rama.” I’m not sure whether the town name or the Ramlila performance came first. But like so much that is part of Ramlagar Ramlila the doing of a thing—literally (in the Greek sense) a drama—is tied in with the name of the thing done: thus Ramlagar, the boatman Randas, the technical director Atmaram. Others have been absorbed into their roles. Narada is called Narada in his ordinary life where he is the mahant of two temples in Mirzapur—his authority and wealth considerably increased because of his reputation as a powerful performer in Ramlila. Brahma was played in 1976 and 1978 by a man who had performed the role for decades, a man now said (in 1978) to be 96 years old, and looking it: his feeble voice, gentleness, and very distant-looking eyes becoming, for me at least, an incarnation as well as a representation of the god Brahma. Other performers are more ordinary in their theatrical identities. There is nothing Hanuman-like about the man who plays Hanuman, and a number of other roles too. But then there is “old Hanuman,” now in his eighties, with a booming voice but not strong enough to carry both Rama and Lakshmana on his shoulders simultaneously, a requirement of Hanuman. But old Hanuman attends the *swarupa-s* wherever they are: in their *dharamshala-s*, resting, playing, eating, or rehearsing; or on stage where old Hanuman fans them with a fly whisk, holds their feet, and sees to their immediate needs. Thus this person who performed Hanuman in
OVERALL MAP OF RAMNAGAR
WITH PLACEMENTS OF RAMLILA ENVIRONMENTS
ENVIRONMENTS AT JANAKPUR

To Ayodhya

STREET

To Chitrakut

FEMALE SPECTATORS

20' x 20' x 20'

Rama

Lakshmana

OTHER KINGS

6' x 6' x 12'

VISITING KINGS

40' x 20' x 21/2'

JANAK'S THRONE

MAHARAJA COURT

VIPS UNDER AWNING

MALE SPECTATORS

WALL

20' x 20' x 10'

SHIVALAYA BOW

LARGE OPEN AREA

USED FOR PICNICS

ENVIRONMENT AT JANAKPUR: SIDE WITH SITA'S GARDEN

USED ON DAY 2. SIDE WITH SHIVA'S BOW USED ON DAY 4.

FEMALE SPECTATORS

Bamboo Fence

AREA OF FLOWERS

LIVE DEER

PAPER MACHE DEER

BIRDS TIED TO FALINGE

15' x 15' x 21/2'

MAHARAJA COURT

VIPS UNDER AWNING

MAHARAJA COURT

VIPS UNDER AWNING

RAMP

PLATFORM UNDER TREE

POTTED PLANTS

POTTED PLANTS

RAMP

RAMAYANIS

DURGA TEMPLE

POOL
Ramlila for more than 30 years now plays the role’s essence as a stage-hand and personal attendant.

As with the characters so with the town of Ramnagar. During the first third of the 19th century, under the direct supervision of the Maharajas of that time, numerous stage settings were built throughout the town in order to provide places for the various Ramlila events. Thus the construction of special buildings and areas for Ayodhya, Janakpur, Panchavati, and Lanka. A pleasure garden of the Maharaja’s was designated Rambagh and used for Rama’s teachings on the next to last, or last day (depending on the lunar cycle) of Ramlila. Next to Rambagh is a very old—some say more than 300 years old—Durga temple with its 1000 square feet tank. The outer walls of Rambagh are used for the first day’s lila where Ravana wins his boon and begins to terrorize the earth; next to the tank a great tent is set up to mark Rama’s residence-in-exile at Chitrakut. And the road to Panchavati leads around the great tank and directly in front of the Durga temple where the procession stops and a scene is played. The Jamuna River is a body of water analogous to the Durga tank, on the other side of Rambagh, and the Ganga is a medium-sized lake not far from the Jamuna. (In earlier days, I think the real Ganga was used; at least old photos show Rama emerging by boat from it. But persistent floods and a general, if slow, trend toward modernization has shifted the Ganga scenes to the lake.) Then there is the Maharaja’s Fort, certainly not built for Ramlila, but used in it. Finally there are the streets, pathways, and main square of Ramnagar which are used for processions, exile treks, and Milapa.

So there are theatrical environments of all types: built from scratch, adapted from what is already in use, and used as is as “found space.” This layering of the types of environments employed give Ramnagar Ramlila an impressive reality of its own. It seems to properly belong to and in Ramnagar, and the special environments—Ayodhya, Janakpur, Lanka—emerge naturally from adapted and found spaces.

Once more, and very significantly, the actual orientation of these spaces, as well as their positions relative to each other, is a reasonably accurate model not only of India and Sri Lanka but also of Rama’s movements through the countryside. Lanka is far to the south-east of Ayodhya (which is next to the Fort); Janakpur is to the north; Chitrakut and Panchavati to the north-east. Rambagh is also to the north-east—and this is where Ramlila begins and where Ramraj is celebrated with Rama’s teachings. The north-east, I’m told, is an auspicious direction.

The action of Ramlila is thus both physical and narrative. The actual movement of the characters is itself a decisive part of the story. The first night of the performance, when the gods implore Vishnu to incarnate himself and rescue the world, takes place on and around the kshira sagara (the tank of the Durga temple), in the good-luck north-east. When Rama goes into exile he crosses make-believe Ganga and Jamuna as he heads from Ayodhya in the north-west back toward the north-east. After Sita is captured, Rama’s army moves steadily south-eastward. This move is analogous to the historical movement through India of the Sanskritic culture the Aryan invaders of India brought with them. And it’s no accident that, in parts of the south, Ravana is thought of as a hero, for at one level of the Ramayana story he represents the original culture of the area. Among the poems the Aryans brought with them was the Ramayana—or at least an ur-Ramayana. For this story merged with the Dravidian tales, and other native traditions. This merging included absorption of sacred places and routes: And it is this movement and absorption of sacred action and place that the Ramlila re-enacts.

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After climactic battles at Lanka, battles that have looked more or less the same for 150 years, Rama victorious and his party are loaded into a great cart, the *pushpaka* which flies in *Ramcharitmanas* but is pulled with great vigor through the mud and over the better roads by the people of Ramnagar in Ramlila. The return trip is a recapitulation narratively and spatially of Rama's adventures. As Rama says in the *Ramcharitmanas*:

"Sita" said Raghubir. "Look at the battlefield; that is where Lakshmana slew Indrajit, and those huge demons lying on the field were slain by Hanuman and Angad; and here were killed Kumbhakarna and Ravana, the two brothers who discomfited gods and sages. Here I had the bridge built and set up the image of Shiva, abode of bliss." The gracious Lord and Sita did obeisance to Shambhu. Wherever the Lord of Grace had encamped or rested in the forest, he pointed out every place to Janaki and told her the name of each.

Swiftly the car travelled on to the most beautiful forest of Dandaka, where dwelt Agastya and many other high sages; and Rama visited the homes of them all. After receiving the blessing of all the seers, the Lord of the World came to Chitrakut, there he gladdened the hermits, and the car sped swiftly on. Next, Rama pointed out to Janaki the Jamuna (…) then they beheld the holy Ganga. (…) "Next,"he said, "behold Prayag (…) and now behold the city of Ayodhya."
Interestingly, the return trip in Ramlila is much more direct. For theatrical reasons the return trip takes only two days, and there is no retrogressive crossing of rivers, no visit to Prayag or Chitrakut. The pushpaka rests one night near a sacred tree, and another at Nishada’s ashram. During the day local children play on it. And on the third night Milapa is accomplished in the main Ramnagar city square.

Once Rama enters Ayodhya to be coronated a marvellous conflation of time and space takes place. All the Ramlila places become part of Rama’s kingdom, and the whole of Ramnagar becomes Ayodhya. Thus Rama goes to his Rambagh to preach, he travels through the streets of his Ayodhya—Ramnagar on his elephant as a king would proceed through his own capital. And finally he is welcomed by the Maharaja at the Fort: one king receiving another. There, assisted by the royal family, Rama and his family have their feet washed, are garlanded, and fed a sumptuous meal. This feeding takes a very long time, hours, and I mused that the boys who were swarupa-s for the last time during this scene were prolonging it, and deeply enjoying a unique situation where they were being honored, worshipped and fed by the Maharaja of Benares. Thousands of townspeople crowd into the courtyard of the Fort to watch.

Something very powerful theatrically and religiously takes place, creating a unique social, even political, situation. It climaxes during this evening at the Fort, but it has been present and building throughout the month of Ramlila. Since 1947 when India won its independence after a long and bitter revolutionary struggle, the principalities were abolished. After all, not only were Gandhi’s and Nehru’s ideals those of democracy, some of India’s Maharajas were on the British side, less than lukewarm to Gandhi’s populism and Nehru’s secularism. A few years after independence the privy purses were discontinued. (Though the Kashi All India Trust, the Maharaja’s foundation, receives money to produce Ramlila). Despite all this, everyone calls Vibhuti Narain Singh “Maharaja.” And this title is not honorific or nostalgic, though it has elements of both. It is operational: it works in the world of today. Why is this so? The answer, in no small way, is to be found in Ramlila. For the Ramlila season, especially during the performances of the arati temple service that concludes each evening’s show, the murti-s—literally “images” of the gods—the boys playing Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata, Shatrughna—are thought by many in the audience to actually be the gods they otherwise represent. It is a miracle analogous to Catholic transubstantiation.

The presence of the murti-s bestows on their patron, host, and theatrical producer a royalty that might by now be much diminished (as it is with some other former Maharajas). But it’s not quite that simple. There is more like a symbiotic, syncretic feedback going on—a circumstance tied up to the whole physical setting of Ramnagar Ramlila, its function as a pilgrimage center, the particular sanctity of Kashi (ancient name of Varanasi/Benares) and the role in that sacred complex of the Maharaja. For a month, in a whole town, Rama lives and moves throughout the town. The Maharaja of Benares is the only person with enough religious-traditional force to sponsor a great Ramlila—to sponsor it, and participate in it as one of the principal figures or characters. For the Ramlila he sponsors validates his Maharajadom: it gives him a chance to appear on his elephant, displays him before the crowds in a darshan of regal splendor; it allows him to manage a great religious and devotional event, confirming in the popular imagination his own authenticity as a ruler-manager. And, through his daily practice of sandhya puja—where the performance stops, and everyone but the Maharaja rests, eats, strolls—the Maharaja publicly and yet secretly displays his religiosity. For often a temporary enclosure is set up into which the Maharaja retreats for puja: everyone can see where he is going, and everyone presumes to know what he is doing: yet he does it secretly.
Ultimately the climactic visit of mythic-theatrical Rama to the Fort of the actual-mythic-theatrical Maharaja is an intersection of ancient and modern, mythic and theatrical, actual and transformative, extraordinary and ordinary.

The details of the performance of Ramlila also underline the great importance of the environments, of movement, of directionality. More than half of the lilas include journeys, processions, or pilgrimages. Movement from place to place is the most salient theatrical action of Ramlila. The permanent environments for Ayodhya, Janakpur, Chitrakut, Panchavati, the rivers Ganga and Jamuna, Rameshwaram, and Lanka are linked by processions that trace the outline of the story. Instead of ending one day's show in place A and beginning the next day in place B, often the movement from A to B is the start of or even most of the performance. A very short scene in one place will begin a lila, and then comes a long procession to a new performance area. Some of these processions are great events: the marriage procession of Rama and Sita back from Janakpur to Ayodhya; the start of Rama's exile when many spectators, weeping, follow him into the forest; the procession of elephants on Dasara day when the Maharaja rides among the 100,000 or more spectators that line the way and follow him the more than 5 kilometers from the Fort to Lanka. Especially tumultuous is the two-day return from Lanka of victorious Rama culminating in Bharata Milapa.

For the performances of 1976 these were my notes:

Day 27, 7.30 p.m. After Sita passes her fire ordeal, she takes her place on a huge 20-foot-high cart next to Rama and Lakshmana. Dozens of male spectators tug on the two ropes moving the four-wheeled carriage out of Lanka and down the long road toward Ayodhya. Many in the crowd of 100,000 follow, and many go on ahead: the road is all people. After a few hundred yards the cart stops—it is Bharadwaja's ashram, where Rama will spend the night. Arati is performed. The lila is over.

The performers do not actually spend the night on set. They are carried back to their residence near the Fort. But interestingly enough, partly as a practical consideration, and partly to help the boys who play the murti-s to experience their roles, their place of residence changes during the Ramlila. They begin living near the Fort; then during the days in Chitrakut and Panchavati they live at Rambagh; during the days of war in Lanka they live in Lanka; and during the final days of celebration they live, once more, near the Fort. So the performers, too, make a ritual journey that is a model of the narrative. At the end of each night's performance the swarupa-s are carried back to where they will sleep, eat and rehearse. On that 27th day in 1976, I recorded this scene.

One of the last images of the night: five men trotting down the street with the five boys (swarupa-s) on their shoulders. These actors' feet do not touch the ground while they are in costume, while they wear the crowns that confer on them their status as swarupa-s. But this time as they go by, still in the costumes of their gods-characters, but no longer in the lila, there are no shouts of "Jai Ram!" from the crowd: the swarupa-s are noticed but not adored. Like temple ikons they are being put away for the night.

The twenty-eighth day's lila begins with several scenes happening simultaneously in different parts of Ramnagar, preparing for the Milapa convergence in the town's center. Near the Fort, Bharata and Shatrughna sit under a bower waiting for news that Rama is returning. In the Fort, the Maharaja and his court are mounting elephants for a grand procession to the Milapa square. Several kilometers away at Bharadwaja's ashram, Rama and his court are being very slowly rolled toward
Ayodhya. Sitting in their big wagon they look very much like a grand family: Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Jambavana, Hanuman, Sugriva and his nephew Angad, the forest chief Guha, the chief vyasa, several assistant vyasa-s, the old vyasa whose job it is to shout, "Keep Quiet! Pay Attention!" before each samvada—and others who have found their way into the cart. As the wagon rolls over ground covered before, Rama points out the sights to Sita: Here Lakshmana killed Meghnada, here the monkeys built a bridge over the sea...

8.30 p.m. Bharata gets the news from Hanuman that Rama is approaching. Bharata and Shatrughna set out for the high stage near the arch. Meanwhile the Maharaja and his party on elephants ride out to greet Rama and his party rolling along in their wagon. As the Maharaja passes the great crowd roars "Hara, Hara, Mahadev!" As the Maharaja proceeds down the street from the gate of the Fort to the Milapa square, flares are lit to illuminate him more brightly. People look up at him from the street, down at him from the roofs. The Maharaja greets Rama, takes darshana, and then positions himself at the Milapa square to await the reunion of the brothers.

9 p.m. Rama continues his slow advance. It reminds me of a Robert Wilson performance—you know what's going to happen, and can trace out in advance its map; but it takes forever for it to actually physically happen, and in that space of waiting, a certain meditation occurs. At every temple and at many displays of sacred murti-s Rama's wagon halts, he gives darshana, and the white flare of arati is ignited. Much could be made of the continuing importance, from perhaps pre-Vedic days, of fire, the sun, illumination, in Indian worship. Rama himself is scion of the Solar Race, a Sun King, a king of fire.

Up and down the street from the Fort to the arch several blocks beyond Milapa square are colored lights, puppet shows, small temples with groups of people chanting kirtana-s. Walas sell tea, sweets, snacks, temple beads, ochre and yellow powders for making holy marks, betel nuts, cigarettes. The sights, sounds, smells, sense of the whole thing is a perfect mixture, blending, of the sacred and the profane: to such a degree that the distinction is no longer viable. There is the experience. It is whole, total.

Some displays are traditional images rigged with contemporary engineering like the electrically powered figure of Hanuman who opens his own chest to reveal his heart on which is engraved an image of Rama and Sita. Some displays are of old-fashioned painted clay figures.

10.30 p.m. The wagon meets the square stage where the Milap will take place. Rama and Lakshmana step from the wagon onto the stage. Bharata and Shatrughna have been standing there for a few minutes. The four boys rush across the stage and embrace; they kiss each other's feet. The flares burn. The crowd roars. The Maharaja watches in what I suppose is full and joyous approval.

But the Maharaja maintains his mask perfectly. It is not possible to get inside or behind that mask. He is what he performs. Once I asked him:

RS: Do you believe that the boys are gods?
MR: If you see a Christian movie, like The Robe, what do you feel?
RS: I feel it's a representation, done with devotion maybe, but still a great distance from being god.
MR: The same. I feel the same.

But now, writing this some six years after that interview, and having watched the Maharaja throughout one entire Ramlila (1978), I think he misrepresented his feelings—insofar as those feelings are manifest in his actions. His actions speak devotion—and a seeing through the swarupa-s to whatever it is that he feels is divine. In the Hindu context the divine is not a simple thing to define, nor is it radically separable from ordinary human existence. As with so much else in Indian culture, the divine exists as a palimpsest: it is there in ordinary life, it manifests
itself in incarnations and less forceful presences such as rishi-s, sages, sadhus, devout individuals; and it is present in an essential, highly refined, substance as the Ramlila murti-s who are, and represent, what they are presumed to be at the same time.

But not everyone feels—or acts during Ramlila—this way. Many are not watching arati but munching snacks; many come for the show alone, or do not attend at all. Even people of great authority. Ramchandra De, longtime personal secretary to the Maharaja, said in 1978 when Hess and I asked him why he didn’t attend Ramlila anymore: “My views on Ramlila have not changed. It is all play acting. Can you take street urchins and make them gods?” De’s opinion is definitely in the minority. His characterization of the swarupa-s as “street urchins” reflects his ironic sense of things. He knows as well as anyone the care with which the boys who perform in Ramlila are selected. The vyasa-s search for candidates who must be Brahmns, well-behaved, with “good looks” (itself a complicated criterion) and strong voices. Their families must agree to their participation in Ramlila which means giving up school for some weeks. Finally, when the number of possible swarupa-s has been reduced to the top candidates the Maharaja himself auditions them. He talks to them, listens to them recite, looks over them. He makes the final selection. They move to a dharamshala near the Fort in July and begin rehearsals. Although it isn’t much, they are paid for their work. This payment, and the method of its achievement, signal a return to the non-Ramlila world after the cycle of performances is ended. The day after Ramlila ends the swarupa-s and major characters come to the Fort where the Maharaja thanks them for their efforts. In 1976 each swarupa got Rs. 440, a considerable sum, but no fortune—especially considering the work they did over more than three months. Other principal participants—actors, vyasa-s, technical director—are paid too. Many confided in us that the pay was inadequate. And the Maharaja complained that the funds available to him for Ramlila were inadequate. Wealth, which used to flow as from a limitless reservoir for a great Maharaja, is increasingly scarce. The Maharaja knows that this lack of funds threatens the Ramlila. He wonders how his “industries” will do, whether or not his son will be as devoted to Ramlila as he is: what the future of the whole enterprise will be.

There is, on the day before the full payment made in private, a public ritual payment of Re. 1 to each swarupa during the Kot Viday, or farewell at the
Fort. Nowhere is the special place of the Maharaja demonstrated more clearly than on this last day of Ramlila, a ceremony unique to Ramnagar. Although a portion of the Ramcharitmanas remains to be chanted, the events of the “thirty-first day” are outside the Rama story. Late in the afternoon (or at night, as in 1978, when an eclipse of the moon on the second day of Ramlila skewered the whole schedule), riding two magnificent elephants, the five swarupa-s arrive at the Fort. The Maharaja, dressed simply, barefoot, greets them as if they were visiting royalty. They are seated on a platform, their feet washed by the Maharaja, who also applies tilak to their foreheads and garlands them. He performs arati to them as if he were a temple priest (he is a Brahmin) and they gods. Then a full meal is served to them. While they eat the final portions of the Ramcharitmanas are chanted. As they eat the Maharaja is handed a Re. 1 coin by one of his attendants, and he hands this coin to a vyasa who gives it to Hanuman; in this way each of the five swarupa-s is paid. Then each of the Ramayanis and the other principal performers take Re. 1 from the Maharaja via the vyasa. I believe this public gesture of paying the performers is an affirmation, at the end of Ramlila, of the order of the non-Ramlila world: it shows who's king. A nemi (devoted Ramlila goer) disagrees: “It is the dharma (duty) of a king to give money to the Brahmins.” As with so much in Ramlila the two interpretations do not cancel each other out. After the swarupa-s have eaten—it takes more than an hour—the Maharaja performs arati again. Then each of the swarupa-s takes his garland off and puts it on the Maharaja. This gesture is repeated with members of the royal family, each of whom gives and receives garlands from the swarupa-s. (At this time only are the females of the royal family out of purdah.) Then elephants arrive taking the swarupa-s back to Ayodhya where they give darshana, and the royal family retires inside the Fort.

The ceremony of the thirty-first day is trivalent: the Maharaja is paying off his entertainers, welcoming visiting royalty, and worshipping gods. All three events take place simultaneously, being accomplished by the same set of gestures—the meanings radiate outward through three frames, that of Ramnagar, of the mythic narrative, and of the cosmic-religious Hindu system of reality.

![Figure Three](image)

The largest event cosmically is contained within a mythic event which in turn is contained within the social order of Ramnagar. And through this ceremony of reduction, of the lesser reality containing the greater, and the private payment in the Maharaja’s meeting room the next day, a month of extraordinary happening is ended; things are returned to the ordinary. In Turner’s language, a reintegration has occurred.

**Performing Styles, Roles, Rehearsals, Directors, Staging, Ikonography**

Earlier I quoted a spectator who thought that everything at Ramlila was “natural.” This just shows what a slippery, culture-bound concept
"natural" is. From my Western perspective the acting styles and staging are anything but natural. More: they are not directly analogous to what is current in mainstream American acting or staging. The use of Ramnagar itself—both the constructed environments and the found spaces (streets, paths, streams, trees)—have more in common with experiments of the 60s and 70s than with anything in mainstream theatre. Ramlila is like the movies—for Ramlila is staged "on location."

The acting is mostly flat. Words are spoken, or declaimed in a sing-song fashion, and shouted so that the huge crowds can hear. Only rarely—as when Rama laments the wounding of Lakshmana, when Parashurama storms in angry that Shiva's bow has been broken, when Sita complains of her imprisonment in Lanka, when Angad engages Ravana in a spirited and often humorous dialog, when Narada sings his haunting song about Panchavati—does the acting carry emotional weight. Dialogs recited by characters other than the swarupa-s or those named above—and there are more than 30 characters in Ramlila with speaking roles—often mumble, so what they say is inaudible beyond the first few rows of spectators. Sometimes they even appear embarrassed by who they are or what they have to say, as when several teenage boys enact the young women of Janakpur who recite long speeches describing the beauty of Rama and Lakshmana.

The gestures of the actors remain the same scene after scene; these basic gestures do not depend on content. The most typical gesture is a sweeping motion of the right arm from the shoulder, with the hand and arm moving away from the chest making a broad semi-circle that sweeps over and includes the audience. The actors look mostly at the audience and not at the character they are speaking to.

Many big moments are non-acted. For example, the contest for Sita's hand. Many princes have to compete for Sita who will be given to the man who can lift Shiva's great bow. Several princes try, all fail. In their attempts no effort is made to indicate how heavy the bow is, how massive its size. Each prince perfunctorily stoops over the bow, pretends to tug at it, and fails. Then Rama steps up and effortlessly, without hesitation or doubt, lifts the bow, snaps his
wrists, and breaks the bow in two. Instead of this gesture revealing Rama’s incredible strength, it underlines the fact that the bow is made of papier-maché, designed to break at the slightest touch. As Rama breaks the bow the white arati flare burns, a canon goes off, representing the thunder crack as Shiva’s bow snaps, and the crowd roars. This impressive staging is not matched by the acting, which remains flat. Yet, for me at least, the non-acting fits perfectly with the iconography and meaning of the scene. Rama’s playful, even ironic, omnipotence is shown by the way he not only breaks Shiva’s bow but exposes it as a stage prop. In Rama’s—Vishnu’s—lila the great bow is a toy. Then Parashurama storms into Janakpur yanking the mood back to that of conventional and effective drama. Often these two kinds of style succeed each other giving Ramila a special tension—a sense of existing in two worlds at once, that of ritual and that of theatre.

The Bharata Milapa also conveys several levels and kinds of performance simultaneously. On an elevated square stage, something like a boxing ring, set up in the intersection of two main Ramnagar roads, the brothers enact their reunion after Rama’s fourteen-year exile. After embracing and then laying prostrate on the ground and kissing each other’s feet, the swarupa-s stand up in a straight line and face the crowd eight separate times, slowly rotating clockwise. Each time they face a direction the white flares associated with arati are lit and the crowd goes crazy. It is simple, abstract, extended, and moving: a sheer display of the five divine figures united at last showing themselves to all the assembled people. Thus the narrative drama is transformed at this moment into darshana.

So it is also, if less spectacularly, at the end of each night’s lila with the performance of arati. Rama and Sita, and often Lakshmana too, are the “ikons” of the nightly arati service. Different characters wave the camphor lamp, Hanuman usually wields the fly whisk. During arati first white and then red flares are lit, brightly illuminating the scene and flattening the perspective so that it appears that temple murti-s are there, not living performers. The swarupa-s are carefully instructed in the pose they must maintain, their bodies stiff and still, their faces frozen. Spectators surge forward to take darshana. On one occasion, at the start of his exile, after crossing the make-believe Ganga, Rama performs the temple service to a Shiva lingam. This service is particularly exciting to the crowd which mercilessly presses inward to catch a glimpse of the action that brings together these two most powerful gods.

The samvada-s which the characters recite are dialogs in modern 19th century Hindi, but they are far from colloquial either in tone or meaning. The samvada-s repeat or elaborate what is chanted in the classical Hindi of the Ramcharitmanas. Classical Hindi stands in roughly the same relationship to today’s Hindi as Chaucer’s English does to today’s. Thus, as in several Asian traditional theatres, some of the language spoken is not understood by most of the audience. And, as in Noh where the Kyogen tells the story in a more accessible Japanese, the samvada-s in a sense translate the Ramcharitmanas. But often, the samvada-s do much more than translate: they elaborate. The story of how King Janak got hold of Shiva’s bow is not in the Ramcharitmanas, but it is in the samvada-s; the episode between Kaikai and Manthara is drawn out extensively in the samvada-s.

The samvada-s are rehearsed in two different ways. The swarupa-s change from year to year, though boys are encouraged to stay with the Ramila for several years and move up the ladder of roles so that frequently enough a boy who plays Shatrughna or Bharata one year will “graduate” to Lakshmana or Rama in a year or two. Still there is much turnover, and extensive rehearsal. Training begins two months before Ramlila for up to ten hours a day (including a two to four hours
siesta). For the first month the boys work just on memorizing the dialog. Then they learn how to speak and move. This practice is sheer imitation. One vyasa works only with the swarupa-s. He says a line, they repeat; he shows a gesture, they do it exactly the same. Everything is learned by imitating the vyasa: pronunciation, intonation, projection, rhythm, gestures, movement. During the performance itself, the vyasa, samvada book in hand, stands behind the swarupa-s making sure that all the words are said correctly, all the gestures acted precisely. In fact, if one is close enough to the action, you can hear the vyasa pronounce every word quietly into the ears of the swarupa-s: in an actual sense, the dialogs are twice done. Rehearsals are not over when performances begin. Each day the swarupa-s practice for several hours. Then another hour or two is spent in putting on costumes and make up. All the boys attend all the rehearsals. In 1976 the father of the boy
playing Lakshmana died in the middle of Ramlila month. It was not possible for the performer to continue to play Lakshmana because the death in his family polluted him. The boy playing Shatrughna took over the role. "I was at all the rehearsals, I knew what to say." The training pays off.

Within the conventions of flatness and ikonographic rather than naturalistic staging, the over-all effect of Ramlila at Ramnagar is very powerful. I remember from the 1976 Ramlila especially Sita’s lament on day 25. After Rama fails to defeat Ravana, the whole vast crowd moves to where Sita sits imprisoned under the Ashoka trees. There, in the clearest voice of the Ramlila, Sita spoke and moaned, a formalized moaning that extended certain final vowels, their sound diminishing slowly, vanishing like smoke in the air. Her voice was clear, her moans moving without being sentimental. Still, the chief vyasa thinks the quality of acting has gone down:

In the past more rupees were spent. They get the same amount now but it buys less. If they do a good job, it is out of faith and love, and if that is lacking, the performance gets worse.

Hess and I spoke to the assistant vyasa who played Sita when he was young.

RS: When you played Sita were you possessed by her, or was it "just a role"?
Vyasa: I get the feeling in my heart that I am Sita. It is written: Whoever is a true devotee becomes absorbed in God. When you’re absorbed you behave as that person. If you cry it is a real crying. When the actor believes “I am the character,” then he really cries.

This is very much the same kind of reply Jane Belo got when interviewing people in a Balinese village about their experience of being in a trance and performing various beings (animals, gods, household things like a broom). We asked the same question of the chief vyasa and of the boy playing Rama.

Chief Vyasa: If in the play it says “it’s raining,” and you look into a clear sky, still it is raining.

RS (To Rama): When people come and touch your feet, what do you feel?
Rama: The feeling of God is in me.
RS: Why did you audition for Ramlila?
Rama: I have the desire, the respect for all the important people involved, and my faith. If you come from a poor family it is a good chance; and if you come from a rich family, it gives you a good reputation.

Earlier I asked the Maharaja how the swarupa-s are selected early in July. The chief vyasa—a temple priest at the Fort—has searched the neighbouring communities for candidates; about fifty boys are invited to the Fort to meet the Maharaja.

RS: How do you choose the performers?
MR: Voice, good looks, family bringing-up.
RS: What happens to the boys after their experience in the Ramlila?
MR: Some become sadhu-s, one became a vyasa and gives discourses on the Ramayana. This particular vyasa played all four roles (except Sita). For many years his voice didn’t change so he could continue to perform.
I suspect there is some romanticizing here in regard to the lives former swarupa-s live. Hess and I tried to track down a few. One man was a journalist and he said that his experience as Lakshmana, his work "in the theatre," opened up for him the possibility of a career in "communications." Another young man had played Rama in the early 70s, and had earned a great reputation for his sincerity in performance. It was said that he shed real tears when Lakshmana was wounded. This boy, very poor, was attending a religious school, though his widowed mother was finding it hard to pay the tuition. His ambition was to be a scholar. Most ex-swarupa-s had vanished into the population.

There are more performers in Ramlila than the swarupa-s. Some roles are hereditary—Ravana has been in the same family since the time of Iswari Prasad Narain Singh who ruled from 1835 to 1889: the time that Ramnagar Ramlila developed its present form. At present Ravana is played by both father and son. The scenes that are not physically demanding are played by the frail father, the rest by his more vigorous son. The son tells how Ravana came to be in his family:

The story is people were being selected there in Ramnagar (the Ravana family, called "Ravanraj" by all the neighbors, live in Surauli village about 15 kilometers from Ramnagar). My baba reached there in Iswari Narain Singh's time. His name was Ayodhya Pathak, and the king's minister was Bhau Bhatt. My baba reached the place where they were choosing among 18 men. Yes, an open selection. My baba's age was 35 to 40 then. So they heard the voices of all 18 men. My grandfather's voice pleased Iswari Narain Singh. He asked Bhau Bhatt, and Bhatt said, "Your Highness, he is Maharavana (Super Ravana)." The other people around said that for the other candidates you could have hopes—they were all younger and lived nearby. You may hope for them, but this one has fulfilled all hopes. The Maharaja gave the order. That was it. They gave my baba the book to study. He memorized it. Since then the part of Ravana has remained in our family. By now it's been about four generations. Ayodhya Pathak, Jogeshwar Pathak, Narayan Pathak—he's the one you see here, and his son, me, Kaushal Prasad Pathak.
RS: So Sri Narayanji has played Ravana for a long time?

Narayan: I have said the role for 58 years.

The man playing Parashurama has performed it 34 years. He says the role is already being passed on to his son.

Some people literally grow into their roles so that their physical being appears to be a reflection of their Ramlila identities. The man playing Brahma is 96 years old, with a feeble voice and very delicate gestures. He has played Brahma more years than he can remember. Other performers play several roles. The man who plays Vishvamitra also plays Valmiki, Atri Muni, Agastya, Lomas-rishi, and Trijata. Some of the best actors, such as the man who plays Angad, are young—and they came into Ramlila by accident. The family of the vyasa who rehearses the roles other than the swarupa-s, and who is in charge of all technical arrangements, had come into possession of a number of key roles, including Hanuman, Angad, Sugriva, and others; a total of 11 roles. Then, in 1977, a death occurred in this family during Ramlila season. This meant that a number of key roles had to be replaced immediately, causing a great strain on the performance, and perhaps even a decline in its quality. Through this crisis, the Maharaja recognized that too many roles had been centralized in one family. It was during the rush to find replacements that the man who now plays Angad was brought into the Ramlila. The process of decentralization continues.

In one case at least a Ramlila role has had a deep effect on the performer's non-Ramlila life. The man who plays Narada with great force is the mahant of two temples in Mirzapur, about 75 kilometers from Ramnagar. He is a relatively wealthy man. He moved to Mirzapur in 1957. But he was not always a mahant. He's been in the Ramlila for 30 years, since 1948. When he lived in Ramnagar he was "in the service of the Maharaja." He did various jobs: "I used to be the priest of the shaligrama for the Rani in her palace. I did all kinds of work. I did puja-patha (a general term for priest's work)." But with Independence "many people had to be let go, that was in 1952." I asked Narada—he is known by that name in or out of Ramlila—how he got involved:

My own story is this. When I was first at the Maharaja's, I was just a child, 13 years old. During the time of Ramlila my job was to stay with Ramji. Every year I was sent there, and since there was never any complaint about me, there was no objection. From 1929 to 1951, I stayed with Ramji for a month, and looked after all the arrangements. I was in charge of all their studying, training, teaching. You know the Ramlila books? Well, besides me you won't find anybody who has them.

RS: You have the whole samvada?

Narada: The whole samvada. If you come to my place I can show it all to you, the dialogues of all four swarupa-s. Then from 1951 to 1958 I was the vyasa for the swarupa-s. There was a baba there too, Baba Kamala Saran. He was very old. So I said to him, you just sit there, I'll do all the work, but you'll get the credit, don't worry. He, poor thing, was 80 years old. It was then that the Maharaja gave me a copy of the samvada-s. It took me three years, working an hour every day, to make a copy. I gave the copy to the Maharaja and he showed it to a German lady and she ran away with it. Now I'm helpless. He asks me for another copy. I say, "Look, I live in Robertsganj. My brother is old and sick. How can he write it?"

RS: After 1958, when Raghunath Datta took over the vyasa work, what did you do?

Narada: I became a projectionist in the cinema in Benares. I went to Calcutta to pass an
exam to be a projectionist. I was a projectionist for eleven months, and worked in the Ramila for one.

RS: And since when have you played Naradji?

Narada: Always, for 30 years.

RS: So you played Narada all the time you were doing these other things?

Narada: Yes. Narada's part comes only for five or six days. The other days I spent with the swarupa-s.

RS: Who played Narada before you?

Narada: He also stayed with the Maharaja. When he played I used to stay near him. Nobody explained anything to me. I just listened to him and did it the way he did it. One day he said to me, "Listen, you do this work now." He went to the Maharaja and said, "I won't do this work now; my body has reached the state, my age, where I can't." The Maharaja asked who should do it. I was a vyasa at the time so he said to me, "You do it."

RS: We like your acting very much. How do you do it so well?

Narada: My experience is this. When I put on the crown and before Ramji, then I feel sure that I am really before him, only before him, I don't see him as a man. I see him as a bhagwana. At that time, if anybody tries to talk to me, I don't want to talk. At that time, everything appears extraordinary. What people call tanmaya (completely merging, losing a sense of the self). It's like when you're in love. Whatever exists, it's only Ramji, only he.

RS: Could the same feeling come to any good actor playing any role? As a projectionist you've seen lots of actors.

Narada: No. the same feeling couldn't come. Acting is done for money. When anybody works for money he just says, "All right, let me do my duty." But for him who works in a feeling of love, there is no question of money. Didn't I tell you before that the Maharaja can't make me work for money? It is my love, and only because of that I've reached this condition. By God's grace I've arrived here.

RS: What do you mean?

Narada: Imagine. I used to live with the Maharaja like an ordinary man. I got Rs. 50 a month. Now I have reached a high position. Everyone in the city respects me. A mahant is like a king. I get Rs. 1000 a month.

RS: When did you become mahant?

Narada: In 1970 my guruji passed away. And this is 1978. In 1970 it all came into my hands.

RS: Have Narada's words and personality influenced your life and your work as a mahant?

Narada: There is a proverb: "Whatever anybody does, it's only Rama. Man can do nothing by himself. The doer is only Rama."

Very few people know Narada by his actual name, Mahant Baba Omkar Das. The role of Narada he has played in Ramila has come to define his ordinary actuality. And this, I'm sure, is due largely to the quality of his acting—his projection of deep sincerity, his demeanor which is imposing and authoritative, and his gifts as a singer.

Thus in Ramila we are presented with an incredibly complicated aesthetics. At one extreme is the flat acting, at the other a role so powerfully performed that the player is absorbed into it, his whole present life is defined by it. The iconography of key scenes, and nightly arati, project Ramila into the realm of the Hindu temple service with its manifestation of divine presence. Hereditary actors perform side by side with those who audition for roles on a yearly basis. Certain roles are
not hereditary but still are controlled by families. The Maharaja, as producer, oversees the whole thing but it is too vast for him to know everything that's going on. This is in keeping with what seems to me to be perhaps an unconscious but still all-pervasive intention of Ramnagar Ramila: to be more than any single human being can take in. As I wrote in my notebook after Dasara 1978:

No one, not even the most knowledgeable, not even the Maharaja, the vyasa-s, Atmaram the carpenter, the most diligent scholars, the most faithful nemi-s (who attend every performance)—no one knows it all. Even at basic level of what's being done day by day by everyone involved. No one even knows how many are involved. Where do you stop counting? With the direct participants? With the man who takes a month out every year from his work to fashion with his own hands the garlands that the swarupa-s wear each night for arati? With the nemi-s or sadhu-s who travel great distances to attend? With the spectators who attend irregularly? With the operators of the tea and chat (snacks) stalls who never see any lila at all, but who keep the mela going night after night? No one can see every scene because so many are simultaneous and occur far removed from each other in space.

Thus Ramnagar Ramila creates its own model of the universe.

The Future of the Ramila of Ramnagar

There's no doubt that Ramila will continue to be celebrated in Northern India. But about Ramnagar Ramila there are some problems which I can only touch on here. Money is getting tighter all the time, and tradition is wearing thin. Even given the fact that it is normal for people in India to speak of the "old days" as having more splendor, more piety, more devotional intensity (paralleling in everyday discourse the devolution outlined in the yuga-theory of history), it seems that Ramila of Ramnagar is less opulent and less lavishly produced than earlier. A large part of this is a question of budget. Subsidy is given to the Maharaja by the Government of Uttar Pradesh, but it is not enough to keep Ramila going. The Maharaja puts in his own money too. But he is in a difficult position. If he, or his heirs, become full-scale industrialists
they will sacrifice some of the authority they earn by virtue of their apparent "disinterest" in "the world." The Fort could be turned into a tourist hotel, but much will be lost that is intangible. For the Maharaja of Benares exists to some degree at least as a mystery. A mystery in the medieval European sense: an event whose causes and effects are merged. He is the causer of the Ramlila, and he is caused by the Ramlila. On the other hand, if some economically productive scheme is not found the sheer production elements of Ramlila—the effigies, the environments, the costumes—will grow shoddy. Already, there are Ramlilas I have seen that have better costumes. The Maharaja seems trapped, and with him the Ramlila: he can't be a Maharaja through and through and an industrialist through and through at the same time. The special situation of Kashi-Benares-Ramnagar-Ramlila precludes this double role. Thus he faces the contradiction of supporting a ritual superstructure by means of a modern infrastructure.

But the Maharaja of Benares is special because the Ganga and Kashi are special. Even as India has become a modern secular state, the ritual aspects of its culture, especially in the villages and in the village-like neighborhoods of the cities, remain resilient and alive. The Maharaja of Benares is able to maintain his identity as Maharaja purely on the basis of ritual: tradition, pomp, public religious devotion, Ramlila: theatrical activities. In Ramnagar Ramlila we have a fundamentally folk art perfected during the colonial phase of India's history, in a “princely state,” continuing to exist in the modern era and reflecting the special qualities of Benares. This theatrical-religious-social event is of great interest to me as a theatre person, and I recommend it to Indian theatre workers. If Kathakali, and like forms, have developed meaningful and powerful aesthetics based on classical norms (reinterpreted to be sure), then Ramnagar Ramlila has developed its own aesthetics based on folk norms. These are even more appealing to me than the classical dance and drama. Ramlila uses myth, audience participation, political allusion, constructed and found environments, performers at all levels of skill and involvement, and even the existing socio-political circumstances to develop a performance of great diversity and power. Ramlila cannot be imitated, but it can be learned from.
References:

1. Research on Ramlila was carried out by Linda Hess and me in 1976, 1977, and 1978. Portions of the article here are adapted from our co-authored article, “The Ramlila of Ramnagar,” TDR, Vol. 21, No. 3, September 1977: 51-82.
2. The distinction between “Great” and “Little” traditions was first made, I believe, by anthropologist Robert Redfield. I am using the application and elaboration of that idea as expressed by Milton Singer in his When A Great Tradition Modernizes, London: Pall Mall Press, 1972.
3. I am using the term “stations” as it is applied to “stations of the Cross,” or the stations used during medieval cycle plays in Europe. Christ stopped at 14 stations on his way to the Crucifixion and down from it (carried to his grave). Easter processions frequently move from station to station with stops at each. This pattern of movement and stopping followed by further movement is typical also of Ramlila. I am not suggesting any connection between Ramlila and the Christian celebrations—just a parallel solution to analogous narrative situations.

Illustrations:

1. Lakshmana, Rama, Sita with Hanuman, Sugriva and others. Ramlila (circa 1920). From the Maharaja’s private collection.
2. Ramayanis singing the Ramcharitmanas.
3. Rama worshipping the Shiva lingam.
4. Ravana’s effigy atop Lanka on Dasara.
5. Hanuman carrying the mountain containing the herb which will revive Lakshmana. The two-mile trek continues for full two hours.
6. The Durga tank and temple near Rambagh.
7. Rama’s party on the way back in his pushpaka.
8. The maharaja with sadhu-s.
9. Rama holds Shiva’s bow before breaking it.
10. Sita.
11. Old Hanuman rests as behind him worshippers of Rama take his darshana.
12. After the coronation the great crowd takes darshana of the swarupa-s.
13. Ravana’s fort in Lanka. (The same structure—of earthwork—is in use today.) Ramlila (circa 1920 or earlier). From the Maharaja’s private collection.

*The two pictures in colour represent the transformation of a young boy into a swarupa.