

RAMLILAS

The city of Banaras is considered to be the holiest city in the Hindu tradition. Millions of people make pilgrimages to the holy city every year in hopes of fulfilling their spiritual desires. The religious importance of the city is not only recognized by the people of India but also by scholars, anthropologists, sociologists and the likes from all over the world. Many come to study the city while others come to bask in its spiritual and cultural offerings (Kapur 209). The city itself is actually considered by believers to be the dwelling place of all Hindu deities (Hertel and Humes 1). For pious Hindus this grants enormous importance to many of the city's major festivals. It can be said that Banaras is most proclaimed for its festivals and traditions, one of the most notable of which is the Ramnagar Ramlila. The Ramlila at Ramnagar is an event that takes place every year and is the celebrated victory of Ram over Ravana, from the epic *Ramayana*.

There are many Ramlilas in Banaras. Ramlilas (play) are a way in which a Hindu tales are recreated for audiences in the city. The during the Ramila season there can be up to sixty neighbourhoods that participate by hosting the play on their block (Parkhill 104). The importance of these plays is immense because it sets out to recreate the "epic story of Lord Rama" (Eck 269). Rama is a highly regarded figure in Hinduism. He is considered to be the reincarnation of the deity Visnu. Visnu is one of the highly regarded deities and is widely worshipped across Hindi speaking northern India. This makes the Ramlilas an important and integral element of the city. Many of the roles in the Ramlilas are played by children (specifically boys). This also has an underlying spiritual connection because when the children are playing the role of Rama, or his wife Sita or Hanuman his devotee [For more information on Hindu deities, see Hertel (1998)], they are said to become temporary residence for the deities, during the presentation of the Ramlila (Parkhill 104). During this time there are many pilgrims who also come to the city hoping for a

chance to view a Ramlila. Their visits add to the reputation of Banaras as a site of pilgrimage, which already attracts many because of its large number of deities and their temples.

The grandest Ramlila is the one that takes place at Ramnagar. It is a thirty one day theatrical event that attracts hundreds of people from all across the country (Schechner 20). The immensity of this Ramlila is greater than any other in terms of the crowds it attracts and its longevity. Despite its popularity the Ramlila is not strictly meant for entertainment purposes, as we in the west might go and see a theatrical event. It has significant spiritual importance that is not compromised, because all Ramlilas especially those of Ramnagar are “celebratory performances tracing the footsteps of Vishnu” (Schechner 20). The Ramlilas typically enact how Rama suffered when Ravana the demon kidnapped his wife Sita and took her away in hopes of wooing her into marriage. The Ramlilas use ritual and drama to demonstrate how Rama rid the world of Ravana and finally returned to Ayodhya [The city or kingdom to which Ram returns after his victory. See Schechner (1998) for more information] in triumphant victory (Schechner 41). The significance of the story and victory is displayed not only by its performers but also by the spectators who take part in their own rituals that they deem an important part of the Ramlilas. For example, some spectators will not walk on the ground where the Ramlilas are being held in their shoes, because they consider those sites to be like temples, and one would not walk into a temple with shoes on (Schechner 32). The Ramlilas therefore are not merely plays put on by the town people simply for entertainment. They have a strong religious significance for most Hindus. Particularly because Rama, who is regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu, is held in high regard. As one scholar remarked, the Ramlilas are “carefully crafted enactments of a narrative transmitting information and values concerning sacred history and geography, social hierarchy, ethics and the personalities of god, heroes, and demons” (Schechner 22).

The epic story and the Ramlilas are significant because of their importance in the Hindu tradition. However they have also been significant in the shaping of Indian life and culture. The Ramnagar Ramlila has been shaped by many years of influence from the Maharajas [Maharajas were the ruling royalty in India until its Independence in 1947; they still exist but have no ruling power. See Schechner (1998)] of Banaras who gathered scholars, poets and theatre practitioners and guided the Ramlila (Schechner 24). The first of these was Maharaja Balwant Singh who ruled in the seventeenth century. Later on Maharaja Ishavari Prasad Narain Singh who ruled in the eighteenth century also played a significant role (Schechner 24). The present Maharaja of Banaras has had no political power in India since its independence in 1947. However he is highly active in his role and participation in the Ramnagar Ramlila because it has been such a tradition for previous kings that his royal identity is now dependent on his involvement in the festival drama (Schechner 37).

Since the kings' roles in the Ramlila have evolved, it raises the question of how the Ramlila itself has evolved through the ages? Of course the text from which the Ramlilas' performance is derived has been mostly unchanged for centuries. However, there are some significant changes that have occurred in India culturally and structurally. For one, the power and grandeur of the Maharaja has declined which has led to far less glamorous shows, with only half the materials once used in previous Ramlilas (Schechner 51). There are also some more obvious changes that have occurred as well. The most significant of these is the growth in population of India. This has limited the theatre space available for the Ramnagar Ramlila; in an area where there were once trees and grass, there are now vast amounts of housing and people. Another shift has been in some of the innovative advances that have been introduced in staging the drama. Circumstances now allow production officials to use electrical lighting and other technical innovations (Parkhill 108). However, this creates a split between those who want to keep the

Ramlila traditional and those interested in using modern innovations. The issue is emotionally charged; many consider the innovations improvements while others see them as tools for corruption (Parkhill 111). Still some feel that the message and value is in the rituals and practice themselves and not the aesthetics of the presentation.

Even with such changes over the centuries in the Ramnagar Ramlila, the sheer magnitude and importance it enjoys today has still not diminished. The story of Rama and Sita is one that has been told for centuries by Brahmins [Brahmins are the priestly caste in Hindu society. See Parkhill (1998)], scholars, and parents to children and will certainly continue. The Ramnagar Ramlila is an event that can only grow in stature. No matter what elements are introduced to enhance its performance the ritual enactments will continue as they have for centuries. As one scholar notes the “Ramlila is not reducible to single meanings or experiences” (Schechner 48). Rather it is an event that can offer something to everybody, from the performers to spectators and even the poor of the city who benefit from offerings by the Maharaja.

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