

Ramlila as a folk theater in Bihar- A descriptive study of its performance and relevance

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ABSTRACT

The art and tradition of Ramlila in Bihar' is the subject of my dissertation. The reason behind such a proposition is that though Ramlila in its purest form is a way to celebrate the epic of Ramayana and deals with a folk presentation form but the staging and performance is on a decline due to lack of funds, organising committees and mass exodus from villages to towns. Till the 80s, Ramlila was widely and popularly performed in all the districts of Bihar ranging from lavish sets to symbolic ones. Although the interest of audience is still there but there are not enough ways to retain it in this folk form because of the newer means of entertainment. The purpose of this study is to establish the relevance of 'Ramlila' in today's times as well as its expansion in future.

1. Introduction

Ramlilais any dramatic or theatricalpopularre-enactment of the life of Ram according to the ancient Hindu epic *Ramayana* or secondary literature based on it such as the *Ramcharitmanas*. These verses are used as dialogues in traditional adaptations. Open-air productions are staged by local Ramlila committees, and funded by the villagers or local neighborhoods or Dussehra Committees in urban areas. The core team of performance artists train for the dance-drama, but the actual performance attracts impromptu participants from the audience and villagers.

The Ramlila festivities were declared by UNESCO as one of the "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" in 2008. Ramlila is particularly notable in historically important Hindu cities of Ayodhya, Varanasi, Vrindavan, Almora, Satna and Madhubani – cities in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. In the 19th and 20th centuries, with the movement of Asian diaspora into European colonies as indentured servants, the cultural celebration of Ramlila is now found in many parts of the world.

Ramlila is an ancient tradition of India because it is generally accepted by scholars that written manuscripts emerged later in Indian religions, and ancient texts were a product of oral tradition. Thus, not only Ramalila, but all ancient epics of India must very likely have been recited and transmitted by bards and students in Ramlila-like manner, verbally from one generation to another, and consistently staged across a wide geographic region by many teams. The Hindu epics are too vast, with the *Ramayana* containing 20,000 verses and the *Mahabharata* with 100,000 verses, to have been preserved over two thousand years without being written down and without reciting and acting out. It is therefore unlikely that the Ramlila tradition emerged only in the modern era.

Today, several regions have developed their distinctive form of Ramlila, Uttar Pradesh itself has numerous variants of presentation styles, most prominent among them is that of Ramnagar, Varanasi which is a 31-day event, while most

Ramlila elsewhere are typically an abridged 10 day event climaxing in Dussehra.

The climax of this Ramlila is the scene of Ram's return and reunion with his brothers. As many as 300000 spectators shout their praise and throw flowers on the platform on which Rama embraces his brothers. The action is frozen into a still tableau, which serves as a kind of temporary altar for the ecstatically worshipping crowds of pilgrims.

Over the centuries, Ramlila has evolved into a highly venerated art form, and has travelled to far corners of the globe, through Indian diaspora, not only as acts of "cultural recovery", rather as fresh expressions of a persistent faith.

Current Scenario in Bihar

In Bihar, there is a rich tradition of Ramlila during the 9 days of Durga Puja and it has been a widely staged, watched and liked folk form in the areas of Buxar, Patna, Munger, Jamui, Gaya and especially in the districts of Mithilanchal which have the most Ramlila mandalis because of its fame as the birth place of Sita. Till the 70s and 80s, Ramlila was a common tradition in Bihar but slowly due to the advent of electronic media, especially TV, the focus of entertainment shifted to such platforms. The other very significant reason behind this decline was the mass migration of people from villages to towns in search of a livelihood. They would return during Durga Puja and they came back with new and modern ways of entertainment which was symbolic of the urban lifestyle.

During the 90s, the advent of VCR changed the definition of entertainment. The shows of films on projectors was alluring the villagers during Durga Puja and after the year 2000, regional cinema started becoming popular and thus the tradition of Ramlila performances started to decrease. Where the villagers would spend full night engrossed in the Ramlila performance, now their interest shifted to watching Bhojpuri movies all night long.

2. Literature Review

Ramlila is nothing but a stage representation of Epic Ramayana. Epic Ramayana is based on the life and times of Lord Rama, the Maryada Purushottam or the 'The best among the dignified'. The story of Lord Rama and his entourage is so popular in India that it has become a part and parcel of Indian psyche. The story of Ramayana injects ethics to the Indian mainstream.

Ramlila or Ram Lila as it is written some times, is the stage adaptation of that very Ramayana. This play is generally staged during the annual Dussehra festival in Uttar Pradesh that culminates to Vijayadashmi; the day Rama became victorious by annihilating Ravana, the symbol of evil. The play is staged in 10 segments where one segment is staged everyday. Most of the times, all the actors are male even the one representing female protagonist.

Ramlila of Uttar Pradesh has a charm of its own. There are as many as 4 different schools of Ramlila in Uttar Pradesh only. The first one is the pantomimic style with a predominance of jhankis - tableaux pageants. The second one is the dialogue - based style with multi - local staging. The third and the fourth one are the operatic style that draws its musical elements from the folk operas of the region and the stage - Ramlila of the professional troupes called "mandalis", respectively.

Anuradha Kapur states that "Bigger *ramlila* spectacles employ several stages, on which different sequences of the Ramayana are enacted simultaneously. In fact, in Varanasi several *ramlilas* may be performed at the same time. They are, however, started on different days so that the spectators may criss-cross between various performances according to their taste".

The most spectacular of all *ramlilas* is, without doubt, the 30-day mega-performance in Varanasi. Every day a new episode is shown in a particular location appropriate to the episode of the day. It can take place near the river, in a public square, in a forest etc.

3. Hypothesis

Hypothesis is a proposed explanation for a phenomenon. It is the essential assumption which the researcher has to formulate about the possible causes, findings and ultimate output of the issue under research. A research hypothesis is the statement created by researchers when they speculate upon the outcome of a research or experiment. Every true experimental design must have this statement at the core of its structure, as the ultimate aim of any experiment.

Hypothesis

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In the current scenario, where the social media has captured all the attention of people across all ages, it is a matter of research that how Ramlila which is a tradition of Indian culture can be incorporated with the tools and techniques of modern technologically advanced society to bring back the charm of Ramlila in the rural and semi urban areas.

4. Research Methodology

Topic- 'The Art and Tradition of Ramlila in Bihar'

Research design:

Descriptive research is a study designed to depict the subject in an accurate way. More simply put, descriptive research is all about describing people and circumstances which form a part of this study. There are three ways of descriptive research, and they are:

- **Observational**, defined as a method of viewing and recording the participants
- **Case study**, defined as an in-depth study of an individual or group of individuals

My tools of study were observation and case study research methodology.

My research methodology included primary data as well as secondary data.

- **Primary Data**-When data is not available, and must be obtained through some form of data collection.
- **Secondary Data**-When data exists and is available through a variety of sources (i.e. internet, publications, government records, etc.)

Case study of different other folk forms in comparison to 'Ramlila' were also helpful in the research program as it can establish the relevance of 'Ramlila' in the contemporary theatre.

5. Outcome/ Significance of the Research

The purpose of my study is to establish the relevance of 'Ramlila' in today's times as well as its expansion in future. It is observed that in some other parts of the country like Delhi, Mumbai, Varanasi etc, the performance of Ramlila during Durga Puja is still popular because of the innovation in its presentation, the addition of celebrity presence and use of latest technologies. Similarly, in Bihar also, a research is required to understand the drawbacks and limitations and attempt to work towards devising ways to popularize the staging and performance of Ramlila without losing its cultural essence.

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