

Second International Conference
On
Ramlila
Epic Processes: Mobility, Patronage and Aesthetics

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The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, India under its ongoing programme *Living Traditions of Ramkatha and Mahabharata* and conceding to the request from the National Ramlila Council of Trinidad and Tobago, which hosted the first International Conference on Ramlila, is organizing a seven day International Conference on Ramlila and Ramkatha *manchan* under the theme ***Epic Processes: Mobility, Patronage and Aesthetics*** from 23rd Nov to 29th Nov. 2015.

In the year 2008, the IGNCA organized an International Conference *Ramkatha – Ankan, Manchan aur Vaachan* where the focus was on folk and tribal traditions of Ramkatha at the levels of text, performance and visual representation. The present conference confines itself to the traditions of Ramlila and Ramkatha *manchan* – traditional and contemporary in India and across the globe.

Traditions of Ramlila and Ramkatha *manchan* are rich in their diversity. Ramnagar Ramlila is a unique aesthetic and religious experience, which has attracted worldwide attention of *bhaktas* and scholars alike. However, along side Ramnagar, exist scores of other styles of presentation; within Varanasi itself we encounter several other forms of Ramlila be it Jhanki Ramlila, Tulsi Ramlila or Nakkataiya processional form. Of equal importance are traditions of Mathura-Vrindavan, Ayodhya and Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh, Almora in Uttrakhand, Sattna in Madhya Pradesh, Swang and Rasdhari Khayal in Rajasthan besides scores of *nukkad* Ramlilas all across north India. Moving east we have Madhubani Ramlila from Bihar, Ram Jatra from Bengal, Daspalla, Bisipada and Boudh Ramlila from Orissa. Chho/Chau dance- drama from Bengal and Orissa weaves into its repertoire popular episodes from Ramayana. Northeast part of the country has

preserved forms of both Vaishnava and Buddhist traditions; Ankiya Nat from Assam, Khamti Buddhist tradition and Aji Lamo performances from Arunachal Pradesh to name just a few. Rama story pervades several performing traditions of the South: Kuddiyattam and Kathakali from Kerala, Yakshagana, Doddatta and Sonnatta from Karnataka, Bhagwatmela from Tamil Nadu and Kuchipudi from Andhra Pradesh. Besides, there is an entire tradition of processional theatre combining Jhankis, effigies, masked performances, dance-drama, martial arts and devotional singing across the country. Arts and crafts associated with Ramlila and Ramkatha *manchan* - from set designs, backdrops, costuming, makeup, masks, effigies, crowns and umbrellas to richly decorated and ornate tableaux, fireworks and other paraphernalia demand a special attention. Different communities and professional groups bring their skill and expertise in the staging of Ramlila making it a unique experience of a composite tradition spread over anywhere between seven days to a month long performance. There is also a rich tradition of performance texts and manuals composed by *kathavachaks*, *Ramayanis* and scriptwriters of Rama stage; Radheshyam Kathavachak being one of the most popular names in the North.

A discussion on performance traditions of Ramkatha *manchan* cannot bypass the tradition of shadow puppet theatre available particularly in Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. Ramlila tradition has been adapted by the modern stage as well- Ramayana play written by Gopal Sharman and played by Jalabala Vaidya, and Shri Ram Bhartiya Kala Kendra's dance-drama to cite two prominent examples of such adaptations. LBT Ramayana of Gul Vardan is another fine example of innovation and experiment in the presentation of this epic.

Leaving the shores of India the tide of Rama spreads across South East and East Asia; diaspora takes it to Mauritius, South Africa, Fiji, Caribbean Islands and else where. Individual creativity firmly establishes the Rama story on Modern stage and celluloid screen across the world. This widespread mobility of the text, which transcends spatial, temporal, linguistic and generic boundaries, testifies to its fluidity enabled by the oral modes of transmission.

There are multiple levels at which this mobility in space and across time operates and negotiates with language, geography, circuits of patronage and aesthetic sensibilities. To begin with, mobility is inbuilt in the text itself. Valmiki hands over the

text to Lava and Kusha and transfers the burden of its transmission to the 'oral word'. Then we have the example of Tulsi's vision of Ramkatha being enacted at Asi Ghat in Varanasi. The entire tradition of transmission through *patha*, *pravachana*, *kirtana*, *katha*, *lila* etc. underlines this mobility through the oral, aural and performed word. It is here that categories of the nature: *shruti-smriti*; textual-oral-aural-kinetic; classic-folk; tribal-rural-urban; hegemonic-subaltern, Sanskritic-Vernacular raise a complex problematics at the levels of epistemologies and aesthetics. It is also here perhaps that all such categories are transcended creating a unique aesthetic experience for the *bhaktas* and connoisseurs alike. Here, the *lila* takes place at the very psychic depths of individual lives, and at the level of the collective psyche. The cosmic, the earthly and the psychic are simultaneous and on the same plane. And that what is happening on the stage traverses all these three levels, holding time and space in abeyance – it is that moment of 'Ahalya Uddhar' – the moment of deliverance, of freedom of soul. Each has the right to perceive this moment, to access it, translate it, and realize it in his or her own way; individually, collectively; religiously, socially, politically or whatever else one may have.

The role of Bhakti movement is of upmost significance here. It not only makes the text accessible to all levels of social strata - from royalty to mercantile classes and, to those located at the lower rungs of social and ritual hierarchy but also enables and indeed becomes a catalyst for the emergence of a new aesthetics- both at the levels of devotion and performance. It is the Bhakti movement and the aesthetic modes it develops to transmit that make the text penetrate deep into Indian psyche.

The text begins to work its way through several layers of patronage circuits and networks; one of these being royal patronage. At this level the text almost acquires the status of a sacred genealogy. The notion of divine kingship plays a major role here to sanctify and legitimize power, authority and social order. An enquiry into the complex circuits of patronage opens up the wider discourse on identity, power and upward mobility. If ever-changing socio-economic equations bring the merchant class into fore, the use of the text by diverse and divergent groups to construct a Kshatriya or a ritual identity is equally discernible here.

During the Independence movement the text becomes a rallying point to espouse the cause of *Swaraj*. Ramlilas of Allahabad, Balia, Rasor, and Jaswant Nagar played an

important role in generating mass mobilization during the freedom struggle. Post – independence, both the Nation-state and the globalizing multi cultural world allow the text to negotiate its way through contemporary identities. Moving through levels of *shruti* and *smriti* the text now translates itself as '*sanskriti*'; to be celebrated, showcased, held on to and, invoked to negotiate regional and national; national and global; local and translocal; diasporic and multi-cultural identities-each level involving intense negotiation between tradition and modernity. At each level the text builds itself into open and fluid structures of aesthetics- from Ramnagar Ramlila to *nukkad* Ramlilas; village based folk and tribal traditions to large-scale technologically finesse Ramlilas; spontaneous expressions to professionally staged Ramlilas; modern stage adaptations to films and T.V. serials; from South East and East Asia to diasporic Ramlilas and Rama Theatre. These are some of the focus areas of the present conference. Suggested topics for the conference presentation are:

- i. Ramlila: Text and its cultural resonances
- ii. Ramlila: Text in performance and performance texts
- iii. Ramlila: Community, identity and aesthetic experience
- iv. Ramlila: Patronage networks and aesthetics
- v. Ramlila: Structures, frames and styles
- vi. Ramlila: Form, diversity and intra and inter generic linkages
- vii. Ramlila: Arts, crafts and communities involved
- viii. Ramlila and socio-economic context
- ix. Ramlila: The carnival and the carnivalesque
- x. Ramlila and Independence Movement
- xi. Ramlila: Contemporary stage and new media
- xii. Ramlila: Patronage systems, preservation and sustainability

Apart from the above topics the conference will have two special sessions:

- (i) Ramlila: Global processes and diasporic experience
- (ii) Ramlila in South East and East Asia