Festival of Ramkatha - 12th - 15th March, 2008

CONCEPT

The Ramayana or Ramkatha tradition is pervasive not only in India, but throughout South East Asia. Stories revolving around Ram, Sita and Lakshman penetrate through rural and urban, mundane and religious, sacred and secular domains. They defy categorization of art as folk or classical, rural or urban, textual or oral. Literary, oral, kinetic and pictorial aspects intermingle to generate multiple renditions of the text in different locales and contexts; each rendition with unique local flavour and linguistic distinction. It is indeed the performative aspect of the text, which makes it fluid, accessible and adaptable. It accounts for its preservation, survival, transmission and mobility, cutting across boundaries of time and space.

Besides the well known literary texts that abound in Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western parts of the country, Ramakatha is pervasive in the oral tradition as well. It appears in multiplicity of forms and artistic expressions. It appears at the level of rituals, festivals, as ballad singing, drama, dance-drama, opera, play, shadow puppets and contemporary modern stage.

Of these the most wide spread is katha recitation by Kathakars known to all parts of India. Every region has its own particular form and style of singing and reciting the story. Kathakars and Ramayanis in the Hindi belt, Daskathias of Orissa, Kathaks and Panchalis of Bengal, Wari leebas of Manipur, Ojapalis and Khongjom parvas of Assam, Verragasey ballad singing of Mysore, Bharat Bhattas of Kerala and

Mask dance, Ramman, Garhwal
Kathakudus of Andhra. Muslim jogis of Mewat sing ballads woven around Ram, composed by Nizaamat Mev, some 360 years ago. The Muslim Manganiyars have their own repertoire of Bhajans based on the entire Rama story.

Ramkatha versions abound both among the tribal and non-tribal communities. One can witness any number of versions among the Bhils, Mundas, Santhals, Gonds, Sauras, Korkus, Rabhas, Bodo-kacharis, Khasis, Mizos, Meiteis and so on. While retaining the structural and thematic unity of the text, communities weave their own plots and sub-plots into the texts. Physical and Socio-cultural landscape acquires a unique native character and defines the sacred geography of the region. Linking the text with local geography and rituals; by incorporating songs and narratives from the native repertoire; and by making the characters follow moral and ethical codes of the community, each group renders its version locally and contextually bound, many a times making it an ancestral tale of its origins.

Apart from tribal and folk versions there are Buddhist and Jain versions. In the Tai-phake community in North-East Ram is a Bodhisattva. Though one of the earliest translations of Valmiki Ramayan in Assamese is that of Madhava Kandali in the 14th century, there is a vibrant popular and folk tradition associated with Rama story in the region.

In Assam, Ram-vijaya, a play composed by saint-poet Sankaradeva, and based on Madhava Kandali’s Ramayan is very popular and is staged in Ankia nat and Bhaona style. Another tradition that of Ramayanganowa ojapalis, incorporates song, dance and drama. Kusan-gan is a vibrant folk drama and derives its name from Ram’s son Kush.

Ram Katha versions exits among the Bodo-Kacharis, Rabhas, Missings, Tiwes, Karbis, Dimasas, Jaintias, Khasis, Taraon Mishmis. Mizos also have tales influenced by Rama legend. In Manipur Ram Katha is performed in Wari-leeba (traditional story-telling), Pena-sakpa (ballad singing), Khongjom parva (narrative singing accompanied by Dholak) and Jatra (folk-theatre) styles.

Coming to Eastern India, Orissa boasts of Bisi Ramlila, a form of dance drama based on Vichitra Ramayana of Vishvanath Kundia in 18th century and dramatized by Sada Shiva. Apart of Bisi Ramilia, another spectacular form available in Orissa is of Sahi Jatra, a processional theatre, performed in front of the Jagannath temple. Orissa formed part of the ancient region called Kosala. Its territory along with Chattisgarh provides for the sacred geography where many episodes of the Ramayana are believed to have taken place. The region abounds in many folk and tribal versions of Ramkatha.

One of the most spectacular forms known under the generic name of Chau has three distinct styles: Mayurbhanj Chau of Orissa, Purulia Chau of Bengal and Seraikela Chau of Jharkhand. Purulia and Seraikela Chau are known for the use of elaborate masks. Ramkatha is part of the popular repertoire of this style. Bengal also boasts of a rich tradition of Jatra plays, Putul naach (puppets) and Kushan Ramayan. Muslim Patuas of Bengal paint the Rama legend on paper scrolls and move from village to village singing the katha. The puppetry tradition uses rod puppets and its story is based on texts influenced by Jatra style. Film music, popular folk tunes and TV serials have also influenced the text and music of Putul naach. Kushan Ramayan is a vibrant drama form available in the region.

Apart from the recited, sung and enacted forms, puppetry has also drawn upon Rama legends. Puppet theatre – Gombbeyattam from Karnataka, Shadow play – Tol pavakuttu from Kerala and Tolu bommalata from Andhra, Ravan chhaya from Orissa, Dang putul from Bengal are just a few examples of this. In the South apart from the puppetry, Yakshagana and Veethinatakam of Karnataka, Terukkattu and Bhagvatmela of Tamilnadu, Kuttiyattam of Kerala have their own repertoire of Rama stories. The well known Kathakali dance drama started its carrier as Ramanattam in the second half of the 7th century.

Folk theatre forms such as Bhavai from Gujarat, Tamasha from Maharashtra, Nautanki from Uttar
Pradesh also use Rama theme in their plays.

Coming to the Central Himalayas Kumauni Ramlila based on classical ragas presents a spectacle comparable to any opera in the world. Ramvarta on Dhol-Dhamaun (dholak) and Ramman (folk-drama with mask) both from Garhwal have distinct local character. Shabad (beats) of Dhol-Dhamaun in their multiple variations are specific to individual deities and episodes of the text Moving on to Himachal, Ramayani or Rameeni is sung accompanied by rituals. Gaddi Rameen, Barlaj in Kangra, Chhari in Shimla, Kullu Ramayani, Ramkatha from Lahul are only a few example of various forms and styles that exists in the region apart from the ubiquitous Ramnilla that is found all over northern planes and hills. Rendition of Ramkatha in Himachal is accompanied by rituals and offerings in the form of songs and dance.

The spatial and temporal canvas of Rama theme in art and literature is very vast and so is the multiplicity of art forms in which this theme is rendered. While retaining a basic thematic unity with the text each version begins, develops and culminates in its own way. Sometimes an episode found in Bhili Ramayan and absent elsewhere, all of a sudden finds its resonance in a Himachali or a Garhwali version. A southern narrative finds its parallel in a north-eastern tale. Stories of birth, marriage, exile, abduction, battle, victory and return are told differently by different communities. Ram may be a nayak or an avtar, a nomadic cultural hero, or a king. Lakshman becomes the main hero in many tribal tales. He is a jati, and therefore the most powerful character of the story. In some, he is a calm, cool and wise young man, devoid of any aggressive behaviour. Among the Baiga tribe in Central India there is an interesting episode in which Lakshmana has to undergo a fire ordeal to prove his chastity. In many folk and tribal versions, Sita takes the avtar of Kali and kills Ravana and other demons.

These are but a few examples of this plural and diverse tradition which combines word, mime, gestures, dance, music costumes, masks, headgears and facial makeup with specific colour symbolism to present hours and sometimes month long spectacles unparallel in the world.

Transmission, mobility, adaptation and concrete expression of the Rama theme among different communities and regions in India and outside, in South-east Asia and parts of Central Asia is the finest example of the power of the 'oral word', that transcends all boundaries, be they geographic, temporal, social or literary. It provides for plurality, diversity and continuity of the tradition. It transcends the rigid boundaries of the text to flow in multiple streams and directions meeting with tributaries and rivulets along the way. In order to explore, understand and comprehend this living and vibrant Rama tradition in Indian culture; to understand the relationship between the texts and its oral, visual and kinetic renditions; to look at the modes of transmission and mobility of the text through a vast geographic area and span of time; The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) is holding a four-day seminar on 'Ram Katha and Folk Performative Traditions in India' from 12th – 15th March, 2008 along with live performances and an Exhibition.

Molly Kaushal