

RAMLILA IN RAMNAGAR

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The annual Ramlila at Ramnagar, twelve miles from Banares across the Ganges, is a spectacular production. Before Independence, Ramnagar State had a Ramlila Department with a secretary-general and under-secretaries. One of the clauses at the time of the merger provided that every year the Uttar Pradesh Government would set aside the sum of one hundred thousand rupees for the Ramlila. Apart from this subsidy, the Maharaja spends large sums from his private purse to celebrate this pageant. The royal armoury, elephants, and courtiers are at the service of the Ramlila.

The acting sites cover an area of a triangle of about three square miles. The holy shrines, gardens, and temples in Ramnagar are named for places in the *Ramayana*: Ayodhya, Janakapuri, Chitrakut, Pampasar, Kishkindha, Panchavati, and Lanka. They are reserved solely for the enactment of Ramlila and are guarded all year.

The Ramlila opens with the birth of Rama and lasts thirty days, ending approximately on the *ashwin poornima* with Rama's coronation. On the last day, Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita enter the courtyard of the Maharaja's palace amidst cheering people, all seated according to class and status. The Maharaja, dressed in a white *dhoti* tucked up at the knees in the style of a common farmer, receives the trio and leads them to the decorated throne where they sit accompanied by Bharata, Shatrughna, and others. The Maharaja squats on the floor and offers worship to the *swaroops* with the assistance of a Brahmin priest who pours holy water of the Ganges from a jar while ringing a tiny bell. During this ceremony the *swaroops*

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are fed on palm leaves from silver bowls. After this, the Maharaja gives *dakshina* to the participants and offers homage to the gods.

The *lila* starts at five every evening and lasts until nine, with a half-hour interval at sunset. The Maharaja retires for evening prayers, and Rama and Lakshmana are carried away on Hanuman's shoulders to the retiring *ashram*, a temple orchard on one side. The congregation relaxes, buying sweet-meats, souvenirs, and masks from the lamplit stalls. Each day's performance concludes with the thrilling *arati*. Burning magnesium wires light up the faces of Rama and Lakshmana. The spluttering blazes heighten the tension of the scene. Some spectators come for the *arati* alone.

No microphone is used even when five thousand spectators attend. The semicircle of the squatting people is hemmed in by a troupe of seven elephants who carry the Maharaja's guests and other important spectators. The royal elephant stands a few steps ahead of the others and is distinguished by a canopied *howdah* on which the Maharaja sits. The singing chorus sits near the elephants. Everyone knows the words of the song. The gold-dusted sky, the serene forest, and the pure air create an atmosphere. Even when the spectators cannot hear the lines or make out the actors clearly, they see the play because it is being enacted in their minds.

Wrestling bouts, sword-fights, acrobatics, and tumbling and excitement add to the pageant. During the final combat, Rama and Ravana stand on two sides of the rectangular arena. Ravana's chariot is drawn by blue cardboard horses and Rama's by milk-white ones. The chief director (*Vyas*) and his two assistants in white dhotis run about the stage prompting and helping the combatants.

Raghunath Datt Sharma has acted as the chief *Vyas* for the last ten years: He said: "Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita do not know when and where to speak. I am here at their service, like the charioteer who guided the valiant Arjuna, telling him when to shoot the arrow and in which direction."

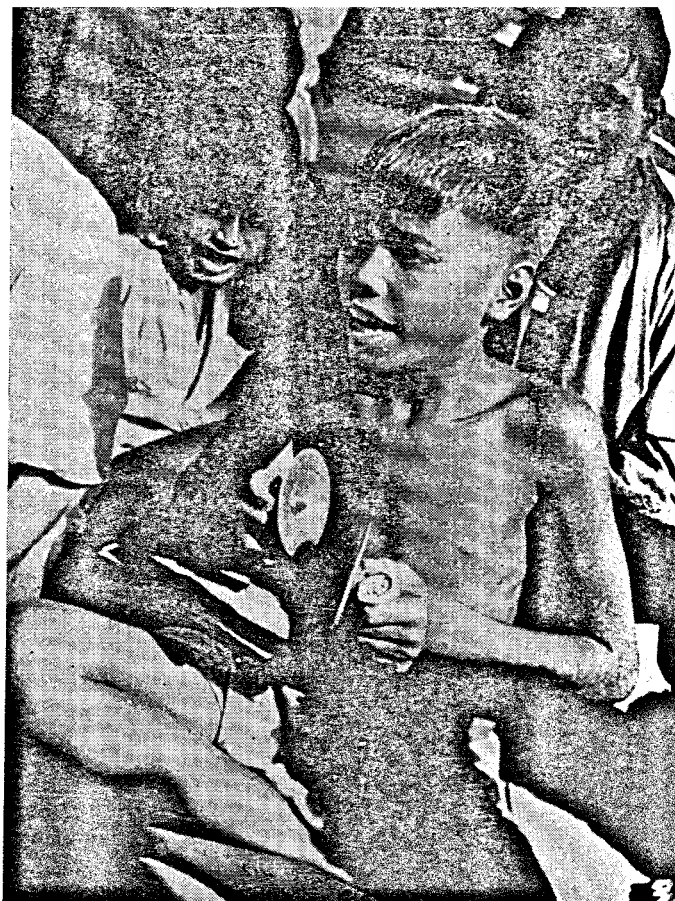
When Rama was asked to take off his crown for a photograph, the head priest thundered a rebuke: "It is not a drama, but an act of faith! Once Rama puts on the crown, nobody can take it off. He is the god. Who are you to ask the god to remove his headgear?"

Illustrations P. 29 "Hanuman" — the mask is 100 years old; the actor, Baba Lakhandas has played this role for 40 years. P. 30 Left: Sadhu's attend "Rama" throughout the celebration, chanting the holy name "Rama". Right: "Sita's" make up; final touches. The role is played by a young boy. (Photographs by the author).









While Hanuman, Ravana, and Jatayu play their role for years, Rama, Sita, and the three brothers are changed every third year. They are rehearsed for about two months by the *Vyas*, but young players cannot memorize a drama lasting for thirty days. The *Vyas* prompts them constantly in full public view. If Rama forgets his lines, the *Vyas* speaks them loudly and Rama takes them up. While speaking his lines Rama does not show any expression. He does not move. He is detached. He does not act. He is unconcerned, lost in the ceremony. He looks like a young prince being crowned. There is so much awe of Rama's god-head that in spite of the noise the boy actor's piping voice is heard by thousands. The spectators have heard these words many times. They have grown up listening to them in the street plays, in narrative poems, in chanting on the *ghats*. The *Ramlila* only confirms what is already familiar. Some devoted spectators sit with eyes shut, "watching" the performance.

This ritualistic presentation, almost dehumanized and devoid of theatrical realism, has glorious spurts of realistic effects. While the scenes of Dasaratha's pangs and the long discourses on religious philosophy are at times dull to watch, the scenes of crossing the river, Sita's marriage, setting the Golden Lanka on fire, and Rama's coronation are pageants of splendour.

Sita's marriage is celebrated in Janakpuri in the Vedic tradition. About ten thousand people attend. At the sacrificial fire sandalwood is burned and clarified butter is poured as the Vedic hymns are chanted. The Maharaja's courtiers attend, dressed in gold-laced turbans and stiff brocade tunics. When Rama lifts Shiva's bow, plucks the cord, and breaks the bow, it is timed with the firing of a cannon, and the thunder is heard for ten miles around. Tulsidas, while describing the breaking of Shiva's bow, says that the sound was so terrifying that the frightened elephants trumpeted and the horses of the Sun God fled in all directions. The realistic enactment is born out of the belief that everything present is the incarnation of a spiritual reality which must manifest itself in the physical.

Similarly, when Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita are rowed across the river by Guha, the king of ferrymen, the scene is enacted by the side of a little stream, just as a film is shot "on location". The *Ksheera Sagar* (Ocean of Milk) takes place in a huge water tank where Vishnu lies in repose on the coils of Sheshanag (the mythical Cobra), shaded by his hood. Setting the Golden Lanka on fire draws more than twenty thousand people. The spectators are devout believers in the celebration.

Illustrations P. 31. Above: Details of "Rama's" elaborate make-up. Below: "Rama and Sita". Note sandal-paste "ribbing" on "Rama's" arms and legs. P. 32. Above: A young street-musician in Varanasi. Below: Coronation Scene. Photograph taken around 1890.

This form of *Ramlila* was started by Maharaja Udit Narayan Singh about 125 years ago. The devout Maharaja used to attend the *Ramlila* celebration at Banares every year. Once the Crown Prince Ishwari Narayan Singh fell so ill that there was no hope of his recovery. The Maharaja was greatly perturbed. That evening, when he went to attend the *Ramlila*, the spiritual head of the celebrations offered him a garland worn by Rama and asked him to put it on the ailing prince. The prince recovered. From then on the Maharaja became a devotee of *Ramlila* and Tulsidas. He decided to propagate the *Ramayana* in two ways: by making available the meaning of the *Ramayana* to the common man through its enactment in the form of a spectacular *Ramlila*, and by having Tulsidas' *Ramacharitmanas* compiled in a massive illustrated book of five volumes 18 by 14 inches. Famous artists of Rajasthan were invited to do the illustrations. They were done in Rajput style, showing many locales and different actions in a single painting. Real sapphires, topazes, emeralds, rubies, and diamonds were powdered and used to colour the paintings, which are still amazingly fresh. The volumes lie in the royal archives.

The Maharaja's son, Ishwari Narayan Singh, perfected the staging of *Ramlila*. He had scholars write a commentary on *Ramacharitmanas*. A patron of art and culture, Maharaja Ishwari Narayan Singh trained students and established the tradition of chanting and enacting. He was the first *Vyas*. Some of his famous pupils were Ram Ghulamji, Bandhan Pathak, and Chhakan Lal. They in turn taught the art to their pupils and carried the tradition further.

The present Maharaja, Vibhuti Narayan Singh, a young man of ascetic habits, maintains the tradition. He talks warmly about this religious pageant. He believes that the festival has bound the people of all castes and creeds into one single body, experiencing the same spiritual joy. When he was asked, "Why does a young boy always play Rama?" he replied: "*Ramlila* is not a play, it is a *yagna*. A *yagna* has a different purpose. It is to propitiate the gods so that the people in Ramnagar shall live in peace and prosperity. A twelve-year-old boy is pure. The god can enter only a pure body. A young boy is detached; so is Rama. Therefore only an innocent boy can play Rama in this *yagna*".

Ramlila in Varanasi is not a dramatic spectacle, it is a ritual. It is an expression of the whole life of the people: their customs, beliefs, crafts, arts, philosophy, poetry, music, even their wealth and valour.