

Ramlila in the West Indies

- Faith, folk, community theatre
- Approximately 30 performances in Trinidad where the population is just around 1.2 million.
- Two performances in Suriname
- One performance in Guyana where it was revived in 1985 after a hiatus of 35 years.

○ **Ramila as a metaphor for the fractured memory of the indentured Indians and enslaved Africans remaking new realities in the Caribbean or West Indies**

- **Derek Walcott in his acceptance speech: 1992 Nobel Prize Literature**

-
- **VS Naipaul, 2001 Noble prize in Literature Nobel Prize Winner**
 - **- says the *Ramlila* performance was a living tradition for him and that it was the first big public event that he attended. The *Ramlila* performance lay at the core of his creative consciousness, providing him with the framework for deriving meaning in the western stories that he would later encounter at school.**

- Naipaul :

Ramlila was performed in the open field in the middle of sugar-cane, on the edge of our small country town.

- The male performers were barebacked and some carried long bows;
- they walked in a slow, stylised, rhythmic way, on their toes, and with high quivering steps; when they made an exit (I am going now by very old memory) they walked down a ramp that had been dug in the earth.
-

-
- “Everything in the *Ramlila* had been transported from India in the memories of people.
 - Though crude, I understood more and felt more that I had done during *The Prince and the Pauper* and *Sixty Glorious Years* at the local cinema. Those were the very first films I had seen, and I had never had an idea what I was watching. Whereas the *Ramlila* had given reality, and a lot of excitement, to what I had known of the *Ramayana*.

-
- The pageant ended with the burning of the big black effigy of the demon king of Lanka. This burning was one of the things people had come for; and the effigy, roughly made, with tar paper on a bamboo frame, had been standing in the open field all the time, as a promise of the conflagration.

○ UNESCO

- On November 25, 2005, UNESCO proclaims *Ramlila* one of the 43 new masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritages of Humanity.



-
- **Ramlila dates back to the times of Tulsi Das (c. 1532-1623), the Vaishnava devotional poet, who authored the Ramcharitmanas (RM)**
 - **Ramlila is the folk performance of Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas.**
 - **The performance tradition flowered in the areas where the Ramacharitmanas was popular, viz. areas where Hindi and related dialects were spoken.**

-
- **The *Ramlila* tradition came to the Caribbean toward the close of the 19th century with the indentured Indian workers, or jahajees.**

-
- **It was a major performance tradition that brought the Indian community together.**

Analyzing Ramlila

- Vachik –how speech communicates expression.
- - miming to dialog

-
- Sattwik – how the spectator/listener interprets the moods; the mental message that the performer communicates through his/her eyes to the spectator

-
- Angik – The message that body movements communicate, like action and mime.

-
- Aharya –This refers to the use of external and decorative objects like décor, lighting, costume, makeup etc that are used to assist in communicating a particular sentiment.

Characteristics of Trinidad Ramlila

- 1. Style – ‘Performers’ mime the action suggested by the plot that is narrated (through traditional recitation of the RM) by the narrator/director who also gives an explication.

-
- 2. Space – open Maidan that is organized in a particular way

-
- 3. Timing – usually performed in the Nawratam period.
 - Sometimes, outside of it.

-
- 4. Bhava – devotional bhava in both “performers” and spectator/audience.

-
- 5. Theatre of Faith - performed by devotees who are not “performing” for others but see themselves as vessels housing the divine presence as they re-enact the Lila of Ram; the ‘performers’ are also seeking spiritual goals like Darshan.

-
- 6. Community involvement – a committee drawn from the community for raising funds and organizing the Lila

-
- 7. Central role of the RM text – the text is ritually installed as a sacred object of worship. It is chanted and expounded upon and had a central role in the Lila

Prop for housing the sacred Ramcharitmanas



-
- 8. Grand Ending with the cremation of Rawan – the last day of the Lila culminates in the spectacle of Rawan's cremation

-
- Introduction of Lav and Kush Katha on 11th day.

-
- A major characteristic of a ritual is its timing. Rituals reactualize sacred events of the mythical and historic past and Rāmlīlā does this annually

-
- Some argue that ritual time is not changeable because they reactualize sacred events of the past.
 - The diaspora experience challenges this. In the Caribbean diaspora, certain socio-economic factors have pushed Rāmlīlā outside of sacred time and into ordinary time even as many resist.

-
- In Suriname, for example, Rāmlīlā is performed in August, far outside the traditional sacred period of Nawratam, yet the participants do not seem any less devotional than those who perform in sacred time as in some parts of Trinidad. In Trinidad, several groups continue their performance after the traditional ending time of Dussehra.

Natya Sastra

- The NS describes two broad types of Indian dramatic styles – the Lokadharmā and the Natyadharmā.
- In Lokadharmā, the abhinaya is more realistic, not stylized and codified, and the abhinaya here relies more on expression and movement related to daily life. Abhinaya related to Natyadharmā is more stylistic, codified and adhere to stage conventions.

Aharya

- **6.2 The Body**
- 6.2.1 Costume
- 6.2.2 Masks
- 6.2.3 Makeup
- 6.2.4 Crowns

-
- **6.3 The Ramlila Ground**
 - 6.3.1 Selecting the space
 - 6.3.2 Preparing the Ramlila space
 - 6.3.3 Consecrating the Ramlila space
 - 6.3.4 Demarcating the Ramlila sacred space
 - 6.3.5 The Ground Layout
 - 6.3.6 Natural setting
 - 6.3.7 Jhandi
 - 6.3.8 Puja sthaan

Preparation for Performance

- The swarupa-s and other performers undergo sadhana before Ramlila.
- They indulge in satwik lifestyle
 - - between two weeks to one month.

-
- **Baal Ramdilla Training of performers**
 - 6 weeks training in vacation period
 - **Performers learn by imitation and limited training from the elders – on-the-job training**
 - **Certificate Course in Ramlila Studies at UTT**

Theory and Practice of Ramlila/Ramdilla

- Theory – Vaisnava Philosophy, Indian cultural values e.g. praying before eating, keeping the environment clean etc.; Katha, Darshan, Lila.
- Practicum – Ramayan chanting, abhinaya, script writing, film appreciation, Yoga, Katha style of story telling
-

Pujā Bedī





Pūjā Sthān
Suriname
Ramlila
Maidan

Entrance to a Ramlila

Maidan

The Ramlila Ground Entrance



Photo: Hindu Prachar Kendra

Canopy of small pennants or jhandi-s in Suriname Ramlila



Brahma Gyan Ramlila, Esmeralda, Cunupia (20029)



Open air Ground with bamboo fence separating audience/spectator



Ramlila at Akbarpur, Kanpur Dehat, 2009

(photo courtesy Ayodhya Shoda Sansthan)



Suriname. August 2009



Aamori, Kanpur, 2009 (Ayodhya Shodh Sansthan)



- Ramlila Ground =



Sacred Space of Yajna/Puja

- Ramlila is a Maha-Yajna



Defining the sacred space of the Jhandi Sthaan.

Photo: Vijay Seereeram
Jan. 2010

-It re-animates Mount Meru*, the mythical center of the earth and connects the earth, upper and lower regions. connects the micro-cosmic, meso-cosmic, and macro-cosmic regions of heaven, earth and temple/body

(Singh 1993:239-250).

○ It is like a spiritual pole

-
- In the open air Ramlila setting the jhandi is the axis mundi that anchors the human being in the three worlds, with nature being a manifestation of the sacred.

-
- **In ancient Indian drama – the Jarjara pole of Indra’s protection**
 - **In Ramlila space, the Jhandī is the jarjara pole.**

The Ramlila space is liminal space – a place of crossing, a tirtha.

- **Here humans, devi-s and devata-s play together**
- 4. It is a space of escape – a sanctuary**

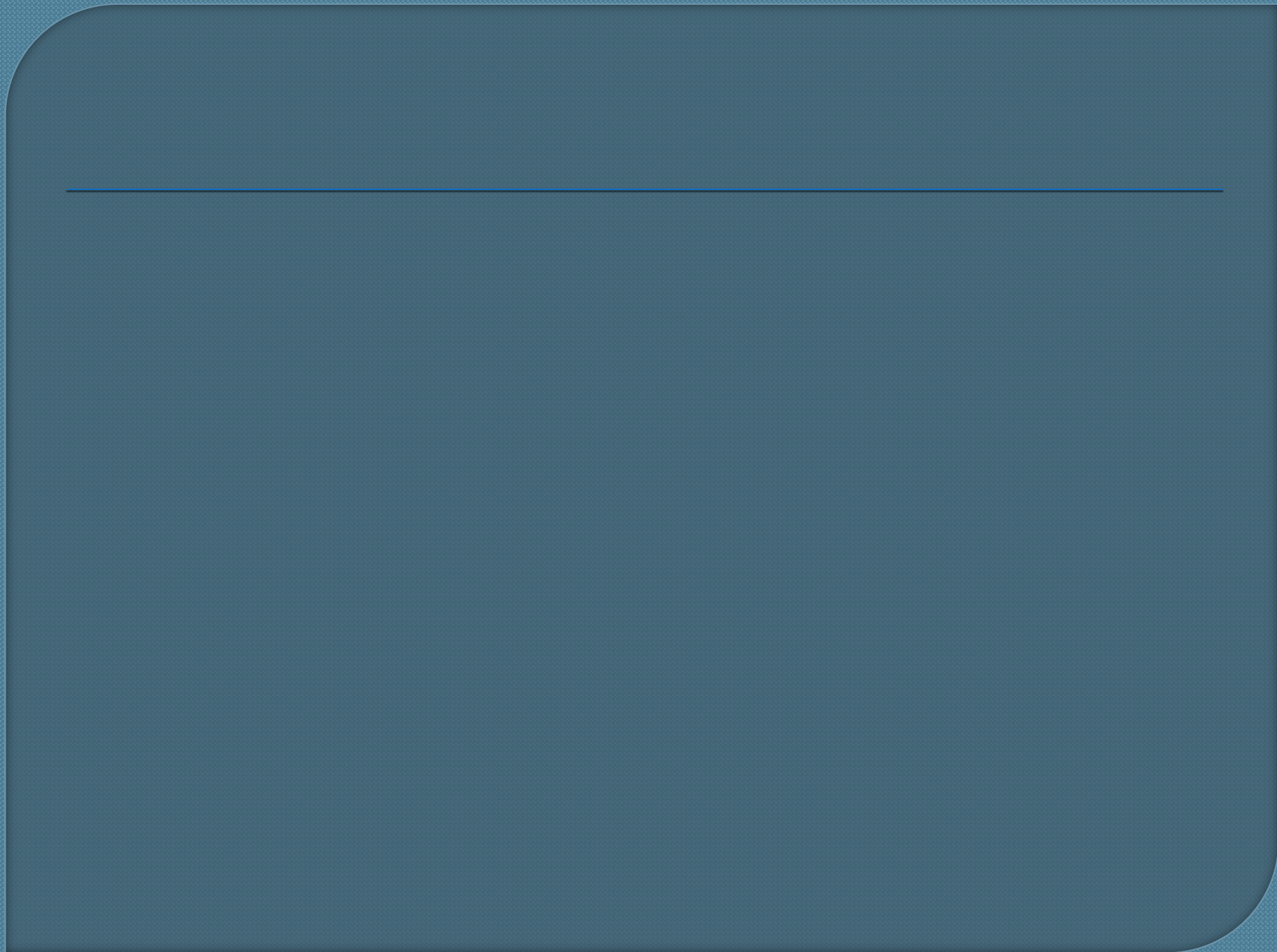
○ **Re-enacts the Lila of Ram**

○ **relationship between Brahman
and atman from the Vaisnava
perspective**

● “Space is sacred, not because it fits into the story of a prophet but because it is the dwelling place of a deity.”

(Cunningham)

-
- Ramlila Ground is traditionally open maidan
 - Not Manch
 - Traditionally miming – no dialogue – only vyas chants and explains
 - Today – introduction of dialogue and manch



-
- In order to create the human-cosmic atmosphere, space is critical.
 - The open-air, natural environment, under the sun, moon and stars has the required influence for creating the mood appropriate to this human-cosmic liminality.

Changes

- Since the 1980's females perform in Ramlila
- Caste is no bar
- Funded primarily by businesspersons in the community
- Little funding from government

Challenge

- How to retain the open air characteristic of the Lila amidst changes
- Is there a need to do so?
- Is the manch as equally meaningful as the khula maidan Ramlila?

-
- In the urban world there is a sense in which technology remakes the world unlike “the bare fields and skies” of the rural folks. The realities of their worlds are different. In the rural world the earth “still grips their boots” (Gaskell: 25-26).

-
- New forms of entertainment challenge the traditional performance of Ramlila
 - Need for more spectacle today e.g. sound and lighting, costuming, dramatic performance